

Sermon – Your King is Coming
Sunday, July 17, 2016
Scripture Readings Psalm 137:1-6 and John 12:12-16
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Our first reading is a cry of lament, from the time of conquered Israel's exile in Babylon. Hear now these words from Psalm 137, verses 1 through 6.

1 By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Our second reading is often heard at Palm Sunday, and it relates a tale from near the end of Jesus's life, as he rides into the very city for which the Psalmist wept in our first reading, Jerusalem, also often referred to as Zion. He goes there in a kind of triumph, but he goes there to where he will meet his crucifixion. Listen now for the word of the Lord to you in these words from the twelfth chapter of John, verses 12 through 16.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!" 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Title of the Sermon: Your King is Coming

*The Text: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"
John 12:15*

By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. O Zion! O, Jerusalem! That place where God is, that land of milk and honey! That blessed city, where we can prosper and be right with God and at peace with one another. The voice of a people in exile, taken from their homeland and not allowed to return.

The Babylonian exile is one of the most tragic events in the Biblical history of the people of Israel. It is a devastating occurrence for a people who understand themselves to be chosen of God and given a land in which to dwell forever. The descendants of Abraham, children of the covenant, defeated in war and carried off to a distant place in a foreign empire, Jerusalem sacked, the temple destroyed.

How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? How can we *believe* the songs of the LORD while in an oppressive place, a place of evils and suffering? The Psalmist struggles with this question; the whole people of Israel struggles with this question. The whole *world* struggles with this question, for the whole world is an oppressive place, a place of evils and suffering. Who of us has not sat and wept when we thought of what should be, and how it is not? Of what should not be, but is? Will we ever see the promised land?

This, their time in Babylon, was not even the first time Israel had to endure exile. Before their presence as a nation was even established, before there were twelve tribes of Israel, when there were only twelve sons of Israel, they found themselves taken away into Egypt, seemingly removed from the promise before it was even fulfilled.¹ And even as they were being delivered from Egyptian slavery, they found themselves in exile in the wilderness.² How can we believe the songs of the LORD while in a place of hardship and suffering?

The journey chronicled in the Exodus story, after leaving Egypt, is full of that question. And all through it, a hope is held out: the promised land. Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. A land where they will be established by the LORD, and where the LORD will dwell with them and give them safety and prosperity, where they will be the LORD's people and the LORD will be their God. Someday, we will arrive. Someday, we will be there. Someday, all will be well. All will be right. All will be just. All will be good. All will be perfect.

So built up are the expectations of this place, the promised land, in fact, that when the Israelites get to its border, they are not sure what to do with actually arriving there. They even have a false start; they can't quite believe this is real. They are afraid, they fear the land's current inhabitants, they aren't confident enough to obey God's command to enter in, and they end up having to spend forty extra years in the wilderness before they get another chance.³ The second time, they make a huge pause at the brink of entering to collect themselves and think about the magnitude of what is happening. Moses reminds them of where they have been, where the Lord has brought them from and brought them to, and what their covenant with God means, before they take that big step of finally crossing over Jordan.⁴

The strangest thing, though, is what they find when they do. If their history were a movie or a novel, it would end with their crossing that river, because that is the storybook ending, the moment right on the border between the past full of problems and the future full of promise. Where the threats and the dramatic conflict have just been resolved, and nothing remains to hinder the future. This is the place where we seem to have reached the end of the dramatic arc and at the same time to have reached the beginning of an unending sameness of good. This is the "...and they lived happily ever after" moment.

But "they lived happily ever after" is how *fairy tales* end, not real tales from this world. And the Israelites did no such thing as to live happily ever after. Their story goes on; it does not end with a "happily ever after" here. They go on into battle and struggle. There are moments of success, times of greatness and prosperity, but there is always strife, always failure, always evil, almost never

¹ See Genesis 42 through Exodus 1.

² See the entire story of the Israelite people as chronicled from Exodus 16 on through the end of Deuteronomy.

³ See Numbers 13 and 14.

⁴ See the entire book of Deuteronomy.

peace, and ultimately they fall completely; they succumb to the might of the Babylonians and find themselves again without a homeland, in exile, with their homes and their temple destroyed, sitting by the rivers of Babylon and weeping for the memory of Zion.

What happened? How could this be? Where did the promise of the promised land go? All this expectation, all this anticipation, and they enter in and find... what?— that the land has cured nothing, for they have brought their evils with them. Greed, hatred, lust, idol worship, the ambitions of power and wealth, a nation has only as much perfection as its inhabitants, and so strife and sorrow will follow a people who are fallen, even into the promised land.

This is easy to see, perhaps, when we think about the past story of Israel as we find it in our Old Testament chronicles. It is not so easy to see, I think, when we look at the future hopes in our own lives. For we all have “promised lands.” We all have places on which we fix our happiness. Sometimes we believe the obstacles between here and there are insurmountable, and sometimes we think we’re almost there, but either way we think and act and live as though the life we desire is just around one more bend, not quite in reach, but out there, and just held back from us by one or two things. Life would be good, if only... Or; we’ll finally arrive, and life will be as it should be, once... If only I were healthy, everything would be okay. Once I get married, life will be right. As soon as I get through the tough times financially, or when the kids are old enough that I don’t have to do everything for them anymore. When they leave for college. When I retire. If I could get a little more confidence, or get a new job that doesn’t demand so much of me.

What is your promised land? I know a man who had a dream of living out West, where the country was open and the life was different. Someday he was going to retire out there, whatever it took. He was driven and determined, and he worked hard to this end for years, and he was so skilled at setting goals and sticking to them that he managed to work out an incredibly ambitious timeframe for getting there and carrying out his plan. Over the last couple of years prior to moving, as the days grew short until he could go finally be in the place he regularly called “home” even before he got there, he found himself growing increasingly impatient with everything in life. He started drinking hard, and blaming everything that was wrong with his life on the place where he currently lived. He just wanted to drown out every annoyance and problem and mishap, everything that was wrong, until he could finally be done with it all, go, and live in his promised land.

Of course, you can probably guess what happened. He got there and found that nothing had changed except his location. His problems with his marriage, with his drinking, all of the things he had refused to deal with, because he expected moving there to solve everything, it all followed him. And all of the everyday things that go wrong, all of the regular, day-to-day sufferings and misfortunes that exist in life, there were no less of these in his promised land than there were anywhere else.

And so he found himself terribly depressed. Here he had worked his way out of tremendous debt, bought the property he wanted, built his dream home, owing nothing on it, and moved there into semi-retirement by an age when many people would just be starting to take seriously the need to prepare for retirement; he was in a situation most people would look at with envy and admiration, astonished at the notion that he would have anything serious to complain about at all. But complain he did, more bitterly than before he had left, because now this wasn’t the problems of the 40-year journey in the wilderness, where you expect plenty of hardship. He had crossed the Jordan into the

promised land, found it to be a nice place as promised, but no less full of problems than anywhere else, and because it was the promised land he blamed God. Never mind that he was the one who had brought many of those problems with him. Never mind that there is no rational reason to expect that we ever get to arrive at any place in this world where we can just kick back and live, happily, ever after.

He did finally come to understand this, although it took him several years to do so. But even if we can see this happen in his story or in that of the Israelites, we still keep doing it ourselves. We keep expecting that all we have to do is attain some goal, solve some problem, reach some place or time or environment, and all will be well, but as soon as we do, the good life is still just out of reach, just one more goal or problem away.

It isn't. Whatever expectations we can reasonably place on reaching our goals, on entering our promised lands, arriving at a state of paradise is not one of them. Things are not fully right, free from strife, worry, and loss anywhere, or in any phase of life.

The scripture we heard weeps for Zion, it expresses a wrenching longing for that homeland that is now lost. We might even ask, "Is the psalmist making the same mistake as the Israelites did before, of idealizing life in the promised land, believing that all they must do is arrive there once more and everything will be perfect?" Maybe— that certainly is a mistake we make over and over again— but it also may be that the author is simply expressing the Jews' sadness for their incredible loss and their need for God to put things right.

For part of the sadness that drives one to such despair as this is coming to the realization that everything is not right even in Zion. The holy city of God became corrupted and it didn't last. It contained sin and evil, oppression and suffering and wrong, and it fell to its enemies who destroyed it. What horror can we imagine beyond this? What hope can we possibly find anywhere, if even Zion does not turn out to be holy and impenetrable by the enemy?

This troublesome question haunts our own lives. What holy cities have fallen to the enemy, been sacked and destroyed in our lives? We've seen holy matrimony fall apart in lives all around us. We've seen discord, sin and abuse, and irreconcilable rifts in the church. Our Christian families are damaged in ways for which we can't even see cures. We've found evil and hypocrisy and suffering, and lack of fullness and perfection, in every place or community where we've expected to find God and Godly people. Is there an answer to this? Is there hope anywhere, then?

We turn to the New Testament passage. By the time of this story, the Jews have returned to the promised land— only to see it once again become a place of loss, oppression, and subjugation, now under occupation by another foreign power, Rome. Does this ever end? Is it always doomed to be the same? The psalmist wonders how we can sing the songs of the LORD in a foreign land, but the Jews of Jesus' day must have wondered how they could sing the songs of the LORD in their own land, when life there had proven to be so unlike the promised land life they had expected.

The house of Israel has found life in Jerusalem to be in many ways little better than life anywhere else. Who among us has not found life and people in our churches and vocations and relationships and anywhere else God has led us to sometimes be little better than life or people anywhere else, and wondered at whether this was truly God's promised place for us?

And yet the crowds line the streets and wave the palm branches with hope. John quotes Zechariah to tell us why. “Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming.”⁵ For the promise is bigger than the land, or the place. Truly, there is no *place* where everything is right, no time or conditions or community, city, or nation where you can go to be free from the things that plague the world. Even Zion itself, without the promise of God’s presence, is nothing. For it is not the promised *land* that will make things right. It is not in the land promised that you can put your hope and trust, but in the One who promises. And that One who promises is a King who does not remain far off, but who comes to us.

Your king is coming, O Israel. Your king is coming, O church. He might not be quite what you expect, for he is a servant king, and he comes riding on a donkey. And just when you expect him to overthrow everything and take up his kingship, he offers himself up in death on a cross. But has his promise failed? No, Jesus goes there seeking after us. Even in death, an exile from which we could never return, even there our king comes to us.

This is how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land. This is how we can sing the songs of the LORD in our own land, when we find that life there is not what we may have expected. Our hope sometimes falters because the places we are most sure are God-given: our Christian families, our Christian communities, our Christian Church, fall to pieces and our homes are destroyed, our temples are violated, our children and our brothers and sisters go into exile. But even in exile and destruction, yes, even in death, we can remember that promise: your king is coming.

Just a few lines away from the Psalm we heard today, over in Psalm 139, we hear the writer addressing God and asking, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”⁶

If this is true, then one can sing the songs of the LORD while in *any* land. We know that every land in this world is subject to what is wrong with the world, Zion no less than anyplace else. Every place can be a desert and a wilderness. But of those places Isaiah 43 says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”⁷ For wherever we find ourselves during the course of this life, whatever place we are given, whatever place we are meant to be, it is not a place free from trials and tribulations; nor should we expect it to be so; but it is a place where God comes to us in the midst of it all. “Do not be afraid, O daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming.”

And so it is that our Lord is called Immanuel, “God with us.”⁸ With us from the moment of our creation, with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,⁹ with us when we welcome

⁵ John 12:15, paraphrasing Zechariah 9:9 (translation quoted is the *New Revised Standard Version*).

⁶ Psalm 139:7-12 (*NRSV*).

⁷ Isaiah 43:19 (*NRSV*).

⁸ See Matthew 1:21-23, quoting Isaiah 7:14.

him and with us when we flee from him, with us even to the depths of the grave, and back up again. And so alongside the people who lined the streets of that promised land in that long-ago time, knowing they needed to put their hopes not in the land promised but in the one who promises to be in it with us, we say, “Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest.” Amen.

⁹ See Psalm 23 (in the *NRSV* this is translated as “the darkest valley,” but the alternate and traditional translation is “the valley of the shadow of death”).