

## *Singing the Lord's Songs*

Psalm 137:1-4 (and later Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11)

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon—  
    there we sat down  
and there we wept  
    when we remembered Zion.  
<sup>2</sup>On the willows there  
    we hung up our harps.  
<sup>3</sup>For there our captors asked us for songs,  
    and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
    “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
<sup>4</sup>How could we sing  
    the Lord's song in a foreign land? (NRSV)

*[Note to the worship leader:  
I prefer to have the Psalm text read before the sermon,  
and the Jeremiah text read in the middle of the sermon.]*

I

Sometimes you just don't feel like singing.

I once knew a young man—a college student—who was in a car accident. At the end of the fall semester he and three other college students hopped in a car to go home for Christmas. They decided to drive all night. Around 2:00 AM, the driver fell asleep and smacked the side of the car into a pole. My friend was riding in the back seat, sleeping peacefully, but after the accident he never walked again. For the rest of his life he moved around in an electric wheelchair, a quadriplegic. For months afterward, he didn't feel like singing any songs. How could he sing with those useless legs and almost useless arms?

I once knew a woman whose husband died. He had a heart attack in the bathroom, went down and died, just like that. She and he had grown up on neighboring farms in Kansas, became best friends in third grade and sweethearts in high school. They had known each other for 70 years—and just like that, he died early one morning in the bathroom. For months afterward, she didn't feel like singing any songs. How could she sing when half of her was dead?

## II

During the days of Psalm 137, the Jews didn't feel like singing songs either. It happened this way. In the year 598 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar II, the Chaldean king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, led an army of seasoned warriors west and south to the tiny nation of Judah. You could hardly call it a fair fight. Nebuchadnezzar and his Neo-Babylonians were then the most powerful army in the eastern Mediterranean world, and tiny Judah was overwhelmed. Over the next 10-15 years, Nebuchadnezzar deported roughly 10,000 Jews from Judah and sent them to live in his new capital city of Babylon.

As far as we can tell, the 10,000 Jews deported to Babylon were not treated as slaves who were forced to do hard physical labor. Instead these Jews were like most of us here in this room. They were people who had considerable skills and abilities, and in some cases, excellent educations. Back in Judah, they had been accomplished merchants, skilled craftspeople, and competent teachers. In a word, they were people who knew how to get things done. They understood finance, small businesses, communication, engineering, administration, and education—which is why Nebuchadnezzar wanted them in his capital city. He needed talented people who could collaborate with people from other places in the empire to strengthen Babylon's economy. These 10,000 Jews were perfect for the job, not only because of their considerable skills, but also because many of them already spoke Aramaic, which was then the primary international language for politics and commerce. Oh yes, Nebuchadnezzar was mighty glad to have these Jews in Babylon.

But the Jews were not glad to be in Babylon. In fact, they were despondent about living in Babylon. Stuck there on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, they sat down and wept at their wretched fate. Psalm 137 hints that their native Babylonian captors knew exactly which buttons to push in order to torment them. "Sing us some songs from your homeland," they taunted. "Come on, such long faces! Be happy! Dance!" But the Jews could not. They did not feel like singing and strumming their harps. How can you sing the songs of Jerusalem in an alien place like Babylon? How can you sing

songs to Yahweh in a huge city filled with temples to gods like Nabu and Marduk and Şarpanitum and Nidaba and Anu and Shamash?

### III

Into this despair, enter the prophet Jeremiah. At some point after 598 BCE, Jeremiah wrote a surprising letter to the despondent Jewish community in Babylon. The tone of his letter was both sobering and comforting. It begins in Jeremiah 29:4 and continues through verse 28. Let's listen as \_\_\_\_\_ reads the first portion of the letter, from verse 4 to 11:

*These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

*<sup>8</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup>for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. <sup>10</sup>For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

When you and I talk with people who are in despair, we often try to gloss over their pain. We sometimes make light of their suffering and assure them that things will be fine. Even though we mean well, this approach might actually make things worse. The man who lost the use of his legs knows very well he's in a new reality, because those legs simply are not going to work again. The woman who lost her husband to a heart attack knows perfectly well she'll never see him again in this life. People in pain usually have a much clearer idea than we do of how irrevocably their world has changed. Pretending otherwise rarely helps the situation.

In his letter to the exiles, Jeremiah did not do what we often do. He did not try to coat the situation with honey. Instead his letter starts off with a sober realism that the recipients in Babylon might have found oddly comforting. Let me paraphrase the content of the letter.

Settle down and get on with your lives, because Babylon is now your new reality. Don't think you're coming back here to Jerusalem anytime soon. In fact, most of you will never come back. Eventually God will make it possible for you to return to Jerusalem, but that's at least 70 years in the future. Maybe your children, your grandchildren, or your great-grandchildren can leave Babylon and return to Judah, but not you. Babylon is your home now. That's where you live and that's where you will die. So build houses. Plant vegetable gardens and vineyards. If you want, find a life partner and get married. Have some kids. When your kids grow up, let them get married so they can have kids of their own. Do whatever you need to do to make a decent life for yourself in Babylon. That's part one.

Part two is to work for the *shalom* of Babylon. The NRSV uses the word "welfare," as in "seek the welfare of the city," while the NIV uses "prosperity," as in "seek the prosperity of the city." However, the Hebrew word here is actually *shalom*. Jeremiah uses *shalom* 4 times in his letter, 3 times in verse 7 and once in verse 11. Seek Babylon's *shalom*, he says, because in Babylon's *shalom* you too will experience *shalom*. Help it to flourish. Help it to thrive. Help the people in its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious culture to get along with each other. Seek the peace of the city.

Jewish eyebrows surely arched up and Jewish jaws surely dropped when they heard this. From a Jewish point of view, Babylonians were the enemy. If they could, Jews would have preferred to get vengeance on the Babylonians, to make them suffer, to get even. But that's not what God wants you to do, writes Jeremiah. God wants you to work and pray for the *shalom* of Babylon, and by extension, for the *shalom* of the entire Neo-Babylonian Empire. You have a unique missional opportunity by being in Babylon, so make the most of it. Your calling is to work and pray for *shalom*, because *shalom* is the main thing God wants for the world. Your vocation is to pursue *shalom*. Go for it!

The recipients of the letter followed Jeremiah's advice. They settled down in Babylon for what turned out to be a very long time. Yes, the exile formally ended in 538 BCE when Cyrus the Great gave Jews permission to go back to Jerusalem if they wanted to. Some did, but many others chose to stay in Babylon. For the next thousand years, the

Jewish community in Babylon flourished. It became so large, prosperous, and influential that many Jews recognized it was just as important to their faith and life as Jerusalem was.

#### IV

Jeremiah's letter remains as relevant today as it was 2600 years ago. Pursuing *shalom* continues to be our primary missional work. *Shalom* is God's big vision for the world. It's the main thing God wants, the main thing God pursues. As God's people, you and I are invited to join God in this pursuit.

So, people of God, sing the Lord's songs of *shalom*. Sing them in your boardrooms and bedrooms, your factories and assembly lines, your classrooms and lounges, your operating rooms and waiting rooms, your kitchens and restaurants, your businesses and banks. Sing the Lord's songs of *shalom* to the city. Sing them to statehouse and the courthouse. Sing them to whatever nation you happen to be living in, because your own *shalom* depends on it.