

Wade in the Water 4: The Waters of Babylon  
June 29, 2008  
Dr. Charles Curley  
State College Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 63:16-64:8  
Psalm 137:1-6

"By the waters of Babylon,  
there we sat down and wept"  
Psalm 137:1

The waters of Babylon are the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which border on two sides the fertile Mesopotamian plain on which this most renowned city of the ancient world was built.

All that remains today of the ancient famed city of Babylon is a mound, or tel, of broken mud-brick buildings and debris about 55 miles south of Bagdad, in Iraq.

The beginnings of Babylon go back five thousand years, to the dawn of recorded history. At its height, it ruled an empire that stretched from Turkey to Egypt. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

But the Hebrew people were not tourists, and they were not impressed by the wonders of Babylon.

They were exiles, captives, prisoners -- hostages is the modern term.

Hostages taken from Jerusalem when it was captured and burned to the ground, temple and all, by the mightiest of Babylonian kings, Nebuchadnezzar.

Hostages carried from their Judean homeland to far off Babylon in order to keep them from rebelling against their conquerors, the Babylonians.

There, by the rivers of Babylon, they wept for all they had lost.

They had lost everything: a nation, a city, a temple, a way of life.

It seemed they had even lost their God.

For in the ancient world a struggle between nations was thought to be a war between the nation's gods as well.

And the God of the Hebrews, the God of Jerusalem and its Temple obviously must have been defeated by the gods of Babylon!

They were totally humiliated.

So they wept.

And as they wept, their conquerors tormented them: "Hey, sing us one of those quaint Hebrew songs to amuse us!"

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Out of the humiliation came determination – not for all of them – but for some.

"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither."

In spite of the humiliation, in spite of the depressing state of affairs, the writer of Psalm 137 was determined to hope in God. God who was not defeated and dead. God who still lived with the Hebrew people in exile.

All the pressures pointed the other way.

Babylon was a sophisticated city. Most of the captives had gone over to the other side, married foreign wives, believed in the sophisticated gods, loved the urban culture, which was, after all, one of the wonders of the world!

But in spite of the despair, in spite of the pressure, the writer of Psalm 137 was determined to remain true to God.

"Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you."

Could I?

If I were humiliated and depressed, could I have remained true to God who seemed to have failed and deserted me? How did they do it?

That is a hard question!

To seek an answer we turn to another text, the sixty third and sixty fourth chapters of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah also weeps by the waters of Babylon.

Your holy people possessed your sanctuary a little while;  
our adversaries have trodden it down.  
Our holy and beautiful house,  
where our fathers praised you has been burned by fire,  
and all our pleasant places have become ruins. (63:18; 64:11)

Isaiah speaks of the agony, hopelessness of his whole people.

There is no one that calls upon your name,

that bestirs himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hid your face from us, and have  
delivered us into the hand of our iniquities. (64:7)

And then.

After a whole litany of humiliation and despair, comes a one word affirmation of faith.

That word is "yet."

The most important word in the whole passage is at the end, in verse 8: "Yet."

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. (64:8)

An affirmation of faith made in spite of the fact that there is absolutely no external evidence to support it. There is no hope in sight. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. There is no suggestion that their exile would end in their lifetime.

There is not one single thing in the life of this people to suggest that they could possibly be cared for by a loving, patient God.

I can't think of any equivalent in our communal life as a people which would help us relate to what they experienced.

In far away places – yes.

We also might weep today like the Hebrews did by the waters of Babylon, if:

We lived in Mianyang or Ngawa destroyed by earthquake in China.

We lived in Yabutta or Bogalay destroyed by cyclone in Burma.

We cannot imagine what it would be like to live in Gaza, Darfur, Somalia – lived with fear, deprivation, death every day!

In comparison, we have so much, yet we complain about how bad things are!

Consumer confidence is at an all time low. The nation is in a slump. There is a vague feeling that things are not as they should be. A malaise that we can't quite put our finger on.

How can we understand what Isaiah felt by the Waters of Babylon?

How can we compare our discomfort to their despair?

Not only had God's back been turned to them, worse – it was as if they had been mistaken about God being with them in the first place:

We have become like those over whom you have never ruled,  
like those who are not called by your name. (63:19)

This is more than a passing depression, a dark night of the soul, which will vanish with the dawn.

This is more than a downturn in consumer confidence.

There is nothing left!

We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (64:6)

There is nothing left!

Nothing but that one little "yet" in verse 8.

That "yet". . . . "yet, O Lord, you are our Father," that yet shouts: "Yes!!" We are indeed nothing." But we are "nothing" in the hands of the creator who fashioned an entire universe out of "nothing."

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand. (64:8)

In God's hands we are never lost, in spite of ourselves.

It is the skill of the potter alone which can see in a glop of mud the lovely creation that mud will become when it is worked upon the potter's wheel with care and skill.

It is the love of God which can take the deepest darkness and despair life can bring, and yet remold our lives into new creations.

Yet.

When you are sitting hopeless, weeping by the waters of Babylon, that "Yet" is there, even if you can't see it.

When God calls us to wade in the waters of Babylon, it is a call to take a long, hard look at our lives and our faith.

The problem with such a look within is that it can expose a substantial amount of darkness and can push us further down into the hopelessness of despair, unless we remember that it is not our action but God's action which powers the potter's wheel.

There was no darker, more humiliating, more distressing time in all history than the first Good Friday.

On the cross, even Jesus cried out in despair at the absence of God:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!”

Yet . . . . in that cross is our salvation. As God worked in the darkness and with the despair to redeem humankind.

As then, so now.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand. (64:8)

Even in spite of ourselves, in the “yet” is our salvation.

Amen.