

When We Are Lost and Want Revenge
Psalm 137
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

What do you do when you feel desperate? What do you do when you have lost control of your life? What do you do when someone, or simply when the world, asks more of you than you can bear? What do you do when all of this culminates in anger and a drive for revenge that you never expected to be part of *your* human experience?

The psalmist says, you can go to God.

The psalmist even seems to say something we don't often say to each other - that rage can be holy.

Here the people are in exile in Babylon. They who had known freedom, who had known privilege, who had even known power, are now under the control of their captors.

Not only are they aching for their home, for the lives that they knew, but the last thing they want to do is share themselves and their identity with their captors. The last thing they wanted was for the songs of their hearts to be gifted to those who captured and controlled them. Under these circumstances they wanted to keep for themselves anything they could, any piece of their identity.

And so we hear their deep grief in those verses that were read for us today.

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4, NRSVUE).*

The people were lost. They were afraid. They were experiencing what it means to lose control of your own life and they were trying to find a way to remain themselves, to hold on to their history, to be true to their faith, even as their captors were taunting them, were trying to take what did not belong to them.

The song of the psalmist goes on with a commitment to remember, a commitment so strong that the psalmist cries out for their very ability to sing to be taken away should they forget their home, their history, their identity.

They will not give in no matter how much they are tormented and taunted, no matter how cruel and careless their captors may be.

We hear their pain in their song. We relate to their pain. Because even if we have never been carted away from home into a foreign land of someone else's choosing, too many of us know what it is to have our identity stripped of us, to have our contributions be claimed by others, to have people control us, to have people taunt us. And too many of us know what it is to watch these atrocities happen to our neighbors.

And then, the psalmist gets really brave.

Because even though we say that God loves everyone, no matter what...even though we issue invitations for people to come to God regardless of their perceived worthiness...even though we say we believe that there is nothing that can put us outside the reach of God's love...still, we often come with barriers up. We often come with our gussied up selves. We often come ready to impress rather than to confess. We often come to God only willing to show the parts of ourselves that we have deemed presentable and proper. We often come with our edited, perfected, overly positive, looking-good-on-the-outside selves.

But the psalmist pushes us further.

And perhaps it is because of what the psalmist is experiencing that they feel free to speak the words that are building deep down inside of them. Perhaps it is because of their own pain that they recognize within themselves a rage, even a desire to hurt someone else.

And so this psalm ends there...with rage and with a desire for revenge...in fact, with a proposal so heinous that some of us struggle to even imagine it. In verses 7 - 9 we hear this:

*Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!*

And then the psalmist says the unthinkable:

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137:7-9, NRSVUE).*

And rather than sitting with the psalmist in their own pain, many of us hear this final verse and are so shocked by it that we can hardly engage this psalm at all. This last verse is the reason that so few of us ever read or hear this psalm read...the reason so few of us even know it is in the psalter.

And yet, perhaps far more than any other psalm we have read in recent weeks, *this* psalm invites us to find freedom, not only in the songs of faith, but in our relationship with God...freedom to come exactly as we are, honestly even in the midst of our pain, even in the midst of our anger, even in the midst of all of our uncomfortable emotions.

The reality is that we are a people who are often telling ourselves and each other that we are not allowed to feel certain things, that certain feelings are bad or that we cannot admit to them because then we will be seen as bad. And yet this psalm gives us the freedom to be fully honest before God even in the midst of our rage.

As J. Clinton McCann, Jr. reminds us, this psalm, “including its shocking conclusion, has much to teach us about prayer, about ourselves, and about God. One thing it teaches us...is the lesson that in extreme situations, grief and anger are both inevitable and inseparable. The worst possible response to monstrous evil is to feel nothing. What must be felt - by the victims and on behalf of the victims - are grief, rage, outrage. In the absence of these feelings, evil becomes an acceptable common place” (“Psalms” in the New Interpreter’s Bible, 1228).

So, what if our rage really is important? What if learning to express anger and rage and even a desire for revenge is actually something that we need to learn? What if rather than refusing to acknowledge these feelings or pushing them deep inside ourselves so that no one knows that we have these feelings, what if there is a safe place to take them?

What if God is big enough to receive everything we feel and to love us in the midst of it? What if there is room to express our rage, even our desire for revenge, to God and in doing so to find a productive way forward?

McCann also reminds us that “There is no evidence that the psalmist [acted] out the expressed desire for revenge. Rather, the psalmist expresses these feelings to God in prayer and apparently leaves them with God. Thus the cycle of violence is broken by the psalmist’s honesty with God. Psalm 137...then, is an ‘invitation to a kind of prayer that is passionate in its utter honesty” (McCann, 1228).

What if our relationship with God gave us a place to recognize the holiness of feelings like anger and rage?

In a recent post on *Piloting Faith*, Cameron Trimble wrote, “We cannot afford to tell ourselves that rage has no place in spiritual life.... Sometimes rage is what protects the vulnerable. Sometimes rage is what clears the field for something new to grow.

She goes on writing, “I believe that kind of rage—the rage born of deep love—is sacred.

“This rage does not call us to destroy for destruction’s sake. It calls us to defend what is holy. It asks us to stand between those who wield power and those they seek to erase.

It demands that we open our eyes, raise our voices, and refuse to be numbed
(Cameron Trimble, “Holy Rage” on *Piloting Faith*, August 8, 2025).

What if we learned to live with all of our feelings and what if we felt safe sharing them with God? What if we learned to listen to all of our feelings and to seek to discover what they are teaching us and where they are pointing us? What if we created safe spaces for rage to be expressed and to move us forward so something new could grow?

Now is the time when we respond to the psalm. Today I am going to invite you to write a psalm. And you may not complete this exercise today. Perhaps you just start with listing ideas or free writing. But you are encouraged to be honest with God about your pain, about your enemies, even about your desire for revenge. It doesn't have to be nice or neat or tidy. What if you really said what you felt to God? What gifts might that bring? What new things are waiting to grow?