

Trust That Survives Tragedy

From the sermon series on the biblical story of Israel

Text: Habakkuk 3:17-19; Psalm 137:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;...yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.
Habakkuk 3:17-19

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. Psalm 137:1

Israel's story—we have been following in broad strokes the story of that people. We have been following the story of the people of Israel because it is *our* story. The Christian movement that follows in the wake of Jesus is a movement that comes out of the womb of Israel, for Jesus never intended to be more than an observant Jew. The God of Israel was his God. The scriptures of Israel were his scriptures. The hope of Israel was his hope. So for us to understand ourselves, we need to understand that story. For it is that story that has shaped our identity as well. We have followed in broad strokes that story, seeing the beginning of Israel created in the exodus event, when under the leadership of Moses, Israel was set free from the oppression of Egypt's bondage. We followed them through the wilderness and into the promised land, into Canaan or Palestine, as we would call it. We saw them move from a loosely connected tribal confederacy to a monarchy in order that they might be a nation as other nations. But there was a difference because, with the rise of the monarch, there was also the rise of the prophetic word, the prophetic voice that was spoken into the social, economic and political arena of the life of Israel. The king of Israel was reminded ever and again that he was not really absolute, not really sovereign, for he served by the grace of God and under the sovereignty of God, who alone is the sovereign of heaven and earth and the course of human affairs.

We find them now after that kingdom had gone on for a couple of centuries with a moment of glory, a golden age, and then downhill all the way. We find them in 722 B.C., the northern kingdom dispersed by the great Assyrian empire, the

southern kingdom, Judah, remaining yet for a time. But in 587 Judah too, is ripped from her roots, the temple burned, the walls of Jerusalem thrown down, and the cream of the crop of Judah brought in exile to Babylon.

That's where we find them today. And, it's not the end of the story. But with Advent Sunday coming next Sunday, the season of Advent, I'll have opportunity to tell you more of the story. For the Advent hope is really a reflection of the hope of Israel. The amazing thing is that, although Judah is in exile in a foreign land, what might have been the end was not the end, for Judah survives and indeed Israel survives. And that is the amazing truth that I would have you focus on today. The fact that out of the tragedy and disaster, the natural catastrophe that overcame this people whose sorrow and sadness was expressed so plaintively in Psalm 137, there is yet a continuing people because, paradoxically and surprisingly, it happened as it happens so often that, in the midst of tragedy, trust is kindled, and out of trust hope is born, and hope lays hold of newness. That's an amazing truth. It is one of the wonderful learnings from the whole Biblical story - that tragedy rather than being the end so often becomes prelude to a new beginning. That in tragedy trust is born, and from trust hope springs, and out of the hope, newness arrives. It is really an amazing paradox. It is one of the great values of learning the Biblical story, of being steeped in that Biblical tradition.

There's nothing there that denies the darkness. There's nothing there that denies the tragedy. The plaintive tone of Psalm 137 expresses the despair of a people who are being mocked by their conquerors, who say, "Sing us a song." And they say, "We can't sing a song in a foreign land." Then they begin to remember Jerusalem. And isn't it often the case in our experience that we begin to remember and to value what we have lost? It was in the tragedy of the exile that they began to remember, and caused them to dig deeper into the spiritual depths of that tradition that had shaped them as a people. Psalm 137. The last verses were not sung for you, for how can you sing expressions of raw anger. The last couple of verses of Psalm 137 are verses that those of us of delicate taste would wish were not even in the Scripture. They are expressions of anger and hatred so violent that they could hardly be duplicated, the hatred and the anger focused at the conquering Babylonians. The awful expression that chills us. "I would that your little ones were dashed against a stone." But, it's there and it is true to human experience. No, don't hear me saying this morning that the darkness isn't really so dark, or the coldness not so cold, or the tragedy not so bad. That's not being faithful to the Biblical story.

Habakkuk, for example. Habakkuk looked about him also. He was living right at this hinge-point also. He looked about and he saw the chaos and the corruption and the violence. He cried out to God, as we have done as well, have we not? "Oh God, how long... how long?" The mystery of the world is the absence of God when all goes wrong. Where is God? How long, O Lord, will you cause me to see this violence? How long will you withhold your hand? Where are you? in other words. Then there comes to the prophet this consciousness: I am doing a work in your

day that you wouldn't believe if you knew it. I am doing a work in your day, invisible, unknown to peasant and king alike. But be sure that history is not simply unraveling apart from my presence. So the prophet says, "I'll go into the watch tower of faith and I will wait to see the vision. The Word of the Lord comes to him saying, "Write this vision large so that one running will be able to read it. Wait for the vision for it will surely come. Know this that the unjust will fail, but the righteous one will live by faith."

Then the vision comes and in panoramic view he sees, as though the film is flashing through his mind, the history of his people. In response to that vision we have that marvelous expression of devotion and praise: "Although I am stripped bare of everything, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will exalt in the God of my salvation." How do you figure it? How do you figure it?

Will you note this morning that I am not trying to explain it, but I am pointing to it. I am pointing to a phenomenon concrete in history, Israel's history. As I said a moment ago, Israel survived. And then I added, "and survives." Israel survives. When there was no human reason for it to survive except that it remembered and began again to believe and to hope and to grasp a new beginning. Ah, a conviction that somehow or other there is some presence or some power engaged with this whole historical process which we cannot discern or explain, and yet in which we trust. Was that it? Wasn't that it for Habakkuk? Wasn't that it when he was able to say, "Take everything away - the crops from the field and the herd from the stall - take it all away and I will yet rejoice in God, my strength. I will exalt in the God of my salvation."

How do you explain it? That indomitable trust that issues in hope, that waits for newness. It is not naive. A faith that has as its center a cross on which one was crucified cannot be naive. Israel that survives cannot be naive when it looks back in its own recent history to the cremation of six million of its number in the Holocaust, standing there as a hard knock in human history. Who can believe after the Holocaust?

Who could believe after the son of God was crucified? Who could believe? That's the mystery of faith. I can't explain it. But it's not head-in-the-sand stuff. It's not pie-in-the-sky stuff. It's the stuff of human experience out of which amazingly the human spirit yet trusts and hopes and grasps the dawning of a new day. That's the miracle, which I cannot explain, but to which I point you and why it's so important that we know that story.

That's why some weeks ago I began this whole tale, because I remember my old professor Berkhof who told me that he couldn't speak to the younger generation in secularized society because he said, "They are not prodigals." The prodigals still knew there was a home and a parent. They are not prodigals; they are the children of the prodigals. The children of the prodigals don't even know there's a home or a father. They have no center — homeless. The sign of the end of the end of the twentieth century, masses of people homeless, adrift, estranged and

alienated, exiled. One of the Biblical images that best bespeaks our own day is homelessness. No rootage. No place to stand. The story, which continues to be told, doesn't explain, but it points us to a reality and that is there is no night so dark but what the dawn will follow. Trust is that which enables one or a people to survive tragedy, to experience loss, to come to total despair only to find indomitable faith rising, hope springing, newness dawning. That's the wonder of the tradition, which has shaped us and given us birth and which we keep alive by telling the story to those brought to the baptismal font today, in order that with us they may place their trust in the God, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus.

Next Sunday, Advent I, we'll sing, "O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here." And it will be our cry. We'll speak the Advent word, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people says your God." And we'll find our faith renewed and our hope restored that that same God will surely bring us home.