

Remember

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 2, 2022
based on Nehemiah 8:1-10, Psalm 137:1-6*

A year ago I delivered a sermon discussing how the Hebrew Bible came to be written. I said that, speaking chronologically, our Bible did not begin with Genesis chapter 1. That, in fact, it began with the Psalm we heard today, Psalm 137.

It all began around the year 586 B.C. at the place where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers still come together in the ancient city of Babylon. “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” the saying goes, and what made that generation of Hebrew people as strong as they were had a lot to do with a catastrophe of immense proportions.

The people had lost a war to the great military power of their day, and the ruling class, the scholars, priests, and artisans were taken into bondage. They were marched forcibly 600 miles to Babylon. That’s like walking to San Francisco from here. We have in scripture a picture – a photo, if you will, that captures what they went through prior to the writing down of their holy texts.

*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? (Ps. 137)*

What had God been thinking, letting this happen? Not only had they been marched forever. They also had to bear the humiliation of having their religion made fun of. *"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" said their tormentors. How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?"*

“How could we sing out of our hymnals anymore,” they wondered agonizingly – those songs spoke of how God would guarantee their safety, guarantee it forever. What happened? Those songs spoke of the sacredness of their holy temple; a building that now lay in ashes.” That’s what was running through their minds.

How could they worship as they had before? They couldn’t.

Well, they could become Babylonians? That possibility was open to them. They could assimilate. They could just forget who they were. Cut their losses. Move forward. But we know from the Psalm that this, too, was an idea that was torture for them.

Well, some among them rejected it out of hand.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

*let my right hand wither!
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.*

So, how would they survive as a people consecrated to a God they called Yahweh? They decided that they would write down their stories, stories as precious to them as they were to their parents and grandparents before them.

They would not give up their idea of a God who created the whole universe, But they *would* give up the idea of having a worship center that was a gilded building.

Instead, they would become a people of a book, a long story that began with the creation of a good world, and by one God only.

Certainly some of the young among them were bent on assimilating. They saw no advantage in remaining Hebrew when there was so much more to be gained if one became like the conquering people and pledged allegiance to the Babylonian flag.

But surely there was a lot of pressure exerted by the Hebrew elders to keep as much of the body of captives together as possible, for the good of the whole. Safety in number. Somehow a critical mass of them came through.

Well, fifty years later, wonder of wonders, another power, Persia, defeated the Babylon empire and a wonder more wonderful still, happened. The Hebrew people were told by King Cyrus of Persia that, if they wanted, they could go home – all of them who could travel – to Jerusalem from whence they had come.

He would, in fact, give them travel money, yes, and funds to build roads, even a temple if they wanted one. It was a remarkable offer.

Of course, Cyrus had his reasons. With the absence of the ruling class of Judah, the country once ruled by the Hebrews had become a place overrun by thieves and petty warlords.

Merchants could not travel safely through it, and, look, what makes the nation of the Hebrew people unique, located as it was at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, was that it was, and still is, a landbridge joining Europe with Asia and Africa. It was a very important spot on the globe, commercially speaking, and Cyrus wanted it made civil once again. He wanted it policed and he wanted it stable.

Well, the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruin when they first came back. The people had their work cut out for them repairing the watchtowers, rebuilding the gardens, reopening the markets, restoring the gates. It was a task they set about with eagerness.

In time the walls were repaired, the neighborhoods were patrolled and made safe, new vines were planted. Fruits and vegetables they had discovered in Babylon were brought west with them and introduced. Some thrived, some didn't. Some of the highways and bi-ways were still controlled by bandits, but the city, formerly Zion, seemed finally to be at peace.

Then something else remarkable occurred. A scroll was found buried somewhere under the precincts of the former temple grounds. Now, no one is sure what it was exactly, though it seems sure that it was at least a part of what we now call the Old Testament.

The best guess is that it was part of a scroll that would become the Book of Deuteronomy, a text that held much of the law, the ten commandments, and the story of the death of Moses -- some of the most precious parts of the people's story. So, what to do with it? Well, the leaders of this small but mighty band of returnees decided it should be read aloud to everyone.

So, it was announced that the citizens, all of them, should assemble on an appointed day in the morning to listen as the scroll was read aloud. Here is how Nehemiah describes the day.

The people gathered before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses.

Now, the Water Gate was a good place to meet because of what it was not. It was not the old broken temple, nor the grounds of the old temple, and because it was not, they all could come, men and women and even children could gather there, the holy and unholy people, the priests and the paupers, the washed and the unwashed. They all could come because there was no Holy of Holies where they would be forbidden to enter, no temple precincts to set the clean apart from the unclean.

No, by the Water Gate they all could stand together and listen to the ancient stories. And that's what they did. We are told that they read till noon and all day long there by the Water Gate. And standing with him, Nehemiah says, were Mattithiah, and Shema, Anaiah, and Uriah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right. Along with Mishael and Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left. They stood up for the reading, and bowed their heads in worship, and some mumbled "Amen, Amen" every now and then. That's what the notes left by Nehemiah say.

And while Ezra was reading, some of the priests were explaining things to the people, offering a commentary -- background history, and interpretation. Among these were Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, all Levites, the priestly families of Israel.

Nehemiah says they gave the sense of the reading to the people so that they could understand it. He named all of them and remembered that they were there, tongue

twister names and all. Nehemiah concludes, they read from the book, of the law of God, *with interpretation*. ... And that was the birth of preaching.

From that moment on, Israel would be defined not by statehood, nor by ethnicity, nor by its Temple worship, but rather by its claim and commitment to its own holy story; the story they began to assemble while they were in captivity in Babylon.

Now you would think that they would have had fireworks that night; a big barbecue, dancing and a celebration. After all, they had been exiled for fifty years, and this was the first time that the new generation of Hebrews had heard this particular story read from the scrolls.

The people were now defined by that book and rooted in it, but some of them had not heard it until that day. A whole generation had grown up without it. A celebration would be perfectly understandable if they had had one. But instead, the reaction of the people was to cry, to weep at the story they heard.

Now, I wonder why they cried?.

Maybe they cried for the same reason that we cry when we see a movie that moves us, a scene of pathos that touches our emotions or something that so engulfs us in a wave of memory that we see ourselves in that situation and know that feeling, or remember something touching our own experience.

I remember a story of a woman named Janette who was pulled out of the wreckage and debris of a supermarket in Port au Prince after an earthquake.

Her husband, Roger, was watching the backhoe dig through the cement pillars and rebar that stuck up out of the ground. With each shovel full of debris removed from the area of the collapse, the husband would rush in to dig with his fingers and look and listen for the sound of his wife. He would call into the pile of rubble and wait ... and then step back. Another dig of the shovel would clear a break in the debris, and the husband would rush in again and dig with his fingers and repeat the ritual all over again.

Finally, after one particular dig, there was an air hole that was created and a noise was heard. The husband leaned in and called his wife's name. And he thought he heard her. Six days she had been buried, and he thought he heard her! Everyone hushed to listen and he called her name, "Janette", and she answered. She had a message for him, "Even if I die," she said, "I love you so much; please don't forget me."

There remained a danger that the back hoe, in removing debris, could very well have caused a collapse that would crush her if things went badly, and she knew this, so she wanted him to know before anything else happened that she loved him.

I watched that story unfold on the news, and I saw the fear on that husband's face, and I thought of the way we all share that predicament of needing to say to someone that we love them, not knowing when and how and by what circumstance we may or we may never get to say that again and have it heard. And I heard her say it again "No matter what happens, "Don't forget me." And I felt the tears forming in my eyes.

"Don't forget me."

That may be why they cried there at the Water Gate. Because the story of Israel, the love story that they were hearing, was their story and God's story, lives and stories intertwined. A story that started in a garden and led them to a desert, and offered them a covenant, and sustained them in slavery, and led them to a promised land, and upheld them in captivity and now was restoring them to Jerusalem, such as it was.

How many of them had been lost on the way there and the way back? Who were they?

They cried because they knew that story. They had lived that story. They were themselves the embodiment of that story. And maybe the people's tear stained faces that day at the Water Gate expressed the hope that their frail efforts at faithfulness in the shadow of exile, rebuilding the city, and mending its walls, and replanting its gardens and restoring its gates meant that there would be names yet to come long after Ezra and Mattithiah; names like Matthew and Mary Magdalene, and Thomas the doubter, James the son of Alpheus, Peter who had been known as Simon, and Mary who went to the tomb, and John who was the beloved disciple.

There are a lot of difficult names in the Old Testament story I shared today. I knew before I read them I would botch some, if not all of them, but I felt that they needed to be read out loud, and that what we lack in accuracy, we could make up in conviction.

Names. Remembering the names. The Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel: grew up in a little village in Romania called, Sighet. In 1942 he was deported along with his father, mother, and little sister. Wiesel survived, but all those he loved perished.

Twenty years after the war, he came home to that little Romanian village. The little wooden house they lived in was still standing – and a watch that had been his most precious possession, that he had buried in the front yard like the Hebrews had buried the book of the law, was still there, too, right where he had placed it in the ground. But not one Jew lived there anymore. All were gone. All of them.

Worse, he said, it was as if the Jews of Sighet had never been there at all. There was no sign that any of them had ever walked those few streets, slept in those houses, had babies there, or buried their loved ones there either. There was no mention of them, written or oral.

"I was not angry with the people of Sighet . . . for having driven out their neighbors of yesterday, nor for having denied them. If I was angry at all it was for having forgotten them. So quickly, so completely. . . Jews have been driven, not only out of town but out of time as well," he wrote.

To forget -- to forget is the outrage according to Wiesel. You know how important remembering is to human beings? I'm told that a huge percentage of the people who use the internet use it principally to do geneological study.

Someone once said that if he were ever asked to put the message of the Bible into one word he could do a whole lot worse than the word: "Remember."

Well, I didn't want any of the names **not** to be read today just because they are hard. We shouldn't forget the names. Even if we never knew them; maybe especially for that reason, even if they twist our tongue.

There are so many people buried in the debris of so many catastrophes today in so many places; so many people, and all of them have a name, and those names mean something.

Think of Charlotte Bacon, and Dylan Hockley, just two of the 20 children taken from us at Sandyhook Elementary. I mention them because of the man *whose name I will not mention* who is being sued for using his hate-fueled podcast as a platform to say they shouldn't be remembered and that Sandyhook was a hoax.

Think of Heather Heyer who was murdered by a white supremisist at Charlottesville, and Brian Sicknick who was died as a result of a beating he received by January 6th conspirators.

These times are so fraught. The powers standing against freedom and democracy everywhere are so hell-bent. They may win , but only if we forget the names, the names of those who have courageously stood instead for justice and truth.

We could mention thousands, of course, but finally, let me mention the 22-year-old Iranian, Mahsa Amini, who only last month died in police custody following her arrest for "improperly" wearing a hijab.

In response, thousands of Iranian men and women have filled Iran's streets and set fire to their head coverings that have, for many, come to represent a collective loss of freedom. So many Iranian women are filling the air there with the chant, "We are all Mahsa Amini."

Let us never forget the names, and may we be strive to be remembered with the best of them. Amen

