

## **“Rivers of Babylon”**

**Psalm 137:1-6**

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: June 28, 2009**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden    Copyright: 2009, I. Peden  
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

---

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” Rivers of Babylon . . . Can anyone name the rivers that the psalmist sings about in Psalm 137? The rivers are named Tigris and Euphrates. And why do they sound so familiar to us today? They have a familiar ring because these are the rivers in present day Iraq. The cities of Baghdad and Mosul are on the Tigris River, while Basra is just south of where the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers meet before their waters flow into the Persian Gulf, and the city of Karbal is slightly west of the Euphrates River.

The Tigris and Euphrates are biblical rivers. In fact, they are mentioned as early as Genesis 2:14 where we are told that there were four rivers that flowed out of Eden to water the garden. Two of the four were named Tigris and Euphrates. When the psalmist composed his song, “By the rivers of Babylon,” many centuries later the geographic area, dominated by these two great rivers, was known as Babylonia. The major city of the Babylonian Empire – situated close to the location of modern Baghdad – was called Babylon.

In the 6th century BCE the Hebrew people of the Southern Kingdom called Judah – with Jerusalem as its capital city – were conquered by the Babylonians to punish them for supporting Egypt against them in a war. The “cream of the crop” - all the educated people, and successful business people, and political leaders were taken to Babylon where they were kept captive for some years. More likely than not, the psalmist who wrote the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm was among these deportees. This unnamed psalmist sang a song that has touched the hearts of captive peoples the world over, telling us how it felt to be homesick, to be among strangers speaking a

strange language.

There is a parallel between the experience of the Hebrew people taken into exile in Babylon over 2,700 years ago and the coalition forces in Iraq today. Both groups – the Hebrew people of old and our American troops today – are “by the rivers of Babylon,” that is, in the same territory . . . in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Both have found themselves there under adverse circumstances. Both groups represent strangers in a foreign land. Other similarities include being cut off from their homelands, being homesick, and being temporarily removed from their culture and religion.

No doubt our troops – like God’s people of old by the rivers of Babylon – have wept when they have considered those among their number who have lost their lives. Those in military service in Iraq are being challenged – as the Hebrew people were – to keep their faith in the face of danger and persecution. They will have to find ways, as they tread the same soil as this psalmist in exile trod, to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.

The Hebrew people experienced the captivity of exile by the rivers of Babylon. In a sense, our American forces experience a type of “captivity” created by a war by the rivers of Babylon. The beauty of this parallel experience and its outcome is this: a day dawns when both groups are released from their captivity and return to their homelands. Some, sadly, didn’t make it back to Judah; some, sadly, have not . . .and some will not . . .make it back to the United States.

What do the “Rivers of Babylon” symbolize for us today? We all, from time to time, find ourselves by the “Rivers of Babylon.” And seeing ourselves in Babylon, we weep when we remember Zion – Zion, the symbol of all that is familiar, all that comforts, all that strengthens, all that uplifts us. What is our Babylonian captivity? It is those times when the familiar is suddenly transformed and we find ourselves in a strange land. It can happen in the doctor’s

office when we receive a negative and unwelcome pathology report. It can happen at work through a memo from the head office. It can happen when there is a midnight call from the police.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.” It is the place we experience loss and find ourselves longing for the familiar, the comforting, the reassuring patterns of life. It is where we find ourselves grieving. “Rivers of Babylon” can be a hospital room, a nursing home, or a treatment center. “Rivers of Babylon” can be the house of the other parent where a child is taken to visit every other weekend. Some have found themselves being transported to the “Rivers of Babylon” by way of a simple declaration: “I don’t love you anymore,” or “I’m sorry, we did everything we could for your loved one.” Suddenly the common, the familiar, the comfortable zone is transformed: the city’s streets, the neighborhood, the sanctuary, the living room - it’s all become a strange land.

The “Rivers of Babylon” is that place that symbolizes our loss and causes us to weep. That’s the first thing, but it is also that strange place where we are challenged to keep the faith ... to keep trusting the God of grace ... to keep singing the Lord’s song. That’s why the ancient Hebrew people eventually took up their harps again. Picture, if you can, the willow trees on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Picture the musical instruments hanging from the limbs of those trees. Now picture the Hebrew people taking up those instruments again, strumming them, and singing their hearts out. Why, even in this strange land of Babylon, they begin to sing the Lord’s song again. They know that “going on” is not dependent upon the much-loved Temple in Jerusalem, and other familiar surroundings.

The same is true for us at the “Rivers of Babylon.” We’ve got to crank up the organ, take down that dusty guitar from the shelf where it’s been stored, start ringing those hand bells like they’ve never been rung before, and begin beating the

kettle drum to get God's foot a-tapping! In the words of Dr. Richard Crowder, a distinguished minister with retired status in our Conference, we've got to "Keep On Keeping On." It's a matter of faith, a matter of discipline, a matter of all that we've learned over the years: all that we've read in the Scriptures and studied in Sunday school and shared together in prayers and celebrated together in worship. Keeping the faith and singing the Lord's song means taking all that and making it real, now.

Remember, God has prepared us for these experiences by the "Rivers of Babylon" so that we might live wisely and generously and faithfully in difficult times. The decision is clear: to be faithful to what we've said we believe, to put one foot in front of the other and, step-by-step, day-by-day, one day at a time, to proclaim our faith in the way we live.

A minister, preaching the Sunday after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, told about receiving an e-mail from a friend stranded in Brussels. "I feel like I'm in exile," the friend wrote, "I'm frightened and I want to come home." Part of the resource of our faith as Christians is the promise of homecoming when we are dispatched to a strange land, or when we are lost, or separated, or exiled, or captured. And insofar as the violent and tragic events of 9/11 have put so many of us in a new and different place – some geographically, some emotionally, some spiritually – that promise of homecoming is God's good and healing word for us this day. It is that word that empowers us to keep the faith and to sing the Lord's song in a strange land by the "Rivers of Babylon."

May we commend to God's love all who are in Iraq near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers: those who have perished; those whose grief is profound; those who are working to relieve suffering; those who are ministering to the dying; those who are bringing and administering humanitarian aid; those who are confused about what is happening; those who are gripped with fear; and those who must lead

us and the people of Iraq into the future.

May we today commend to the love of God our own lives and our dear country, commend it all to the God who ultimately brings all God's people home from the "Rivers of Babylon" to "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree .. for the healing of the nations. There shall no more be anything accursed ... And night shall be no more ... for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:1-5).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.