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Date: November 22, 2020
Sermon: "By the Rivers of Babylon"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture from Psalm 19 and Psalm 137

Leader: By the rivers of Babylon—Babylon, can you believe it? Right there we sat and wept in a hostile land. And we remembered Zion. Israel. The good old days. We remembered home.

People: There on the trees we hung our musical instruments, because that's where our slave masters, our captors, our oppressors, made us sing songs—can you believe it?

Leader: They demanded—yes, demanded—songs of joy. "Sing us some of your songs from home—you remember your home," they laughed, mocking.

People: How can we sing songs of joy in such a place? I refuse to forget Jerusalem; home is my highest joy.

Leader: So I will sing. Even in my sorrow, even in my hurt, even in my worry, even in my anger, I will sing.

People: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord: my rock and my redeemer.

How can you celebrate Thanksgiving when you don't feel up to it, but you want to, yet you're not in the mood, but everyone expects it, yet you're down in the dumps, but you don't want to be in the dumps, and you love Thanksgiving, but right now, you're having trouble being upbeat.

I remember once driving to my parents' house in Brooklyn, very excited to be home for Thanksgiving, but not feeling too good on the drive down from Boston. But "stiff upper lip" and all, I got there, hugs all around. I'm feeling worse but didn't want to show it. Get up Thanksgiving morning, and my mother wants to hear stories about my life, my father wants to go for a run. I do both, feeling worse and worse. By 3 PM the turkey is cooked, pies baked, all the traditional

fixin's ready. The dining room table is set beautifully. And I'm on the living room couch, sicker than a dog. I can't move, smile, talk, or engage in any gratitude at all. The worst Thanksgiving of my life.

The Scripture you just heard is perfect for a miserable Thanksgiving. It's a holy lament, a spiritual whine, a very realistic complaint. The Jewish people of Israel had been conquered by the brutal dictatorship of Babylon, ancient Iraq. They had been carried off as slaves, forced out of their homes, their nation left in ruins, made to become Babylonian in every way, abandoning their religion and culture, losing their freedom and identity.

And then the Babylonians demand, like in those old cowboy movies when the bad guys ride into town, get all liquored up, pick on some weaker person, start shooting at his feet, demanding, "Dance, boy!" Well, like those cowboys, the Babylonian bullies, tormentors, oppressors of the Jewish people, they want a song for their amusement. "Sing, boy," they mocked, "put a smile on that face." And that leads directly to our Scripture.

I used to have a radio show in New York City, on the NBC-FM station. I recorded at 30 Rockefeller Center, my studio right next to Don Imus's. I rode the elevator with the "Saturday Night Live" folks, but my claim to fame, I was told, was I was the first to play a reggae song.

Reggae music was born in Jamaica, and a lot of early reggae songs were songs of faith and songs based entirely on Scripture. "By the Rivers of Babylon" was one of those first big reggae hits, taken straight from Psalm 137 and Psalm 19. We're going to play a bit of it for you, so you get the flavor. Here are the lyrics:

*By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept
in a hostile land . . . and we remembered Zion.
By the rivers of Babylon
Our captors demanded that we sing songs of joy
But how can we sing of joy?
Yet, all right, then, may the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord, my rock and Redeemer.*

So here we are, four days before Thanksgiving, with the Christmas season just around the corner. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade isn't happening. Jolly old St. Nick isn't that jolly. Shopping mall Santas are behind Plexiglas, if there at all. We are advised not to go to Grandma's house and not invite Grandma to our house. States are mandating small holiday gatherings. Turkey farmers have purposely grown smaller turkeys. Kids are home from college . . . for months.

And here's the honest truth: nerves are frayed everywhere. You see it out in public. You see it in your own family. We see it in Church. "Enough already!" O.K., that's our holiday greeting this year! "Enough already!" We got through the late winter and spring. We all adjusted to the craziness of the times. We made sacrifices. We normalized the normal. We did our part. We all found "silver linings," not made-up stuff, not "fake-it-till-you-make-it" stuff, but real silver linings. We all ended up having a pretty good summer.

Now, here we are . . . It's like a gigantic nationwide step backward. Short tempers. Harsher words. Depression with a small 'd,' maybe headed to a Big 'D.'

We are surrounded by confusion, chaos, grumbling, and worse. Happy Thanksgiving. Merry Christmas. Ho Ho Ho. And, like the ancient Israelites stuck in Babylon, we are supposed to sing. Like those great Thanksgiving hymns, "Now Thank We All Our God," "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing." "Come Ye Thankful People, Come!" And in a couple of weeks, we break out the Christmas carols: "O Come, All Ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant." "Joy to the World!" "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright . . ." Oh, except we are not supposed to sing! Scratch that. Plus, all is *not* calm, and joy in the world is in short supply. Or, maybe not!

Because, well, when it comes to joy, we are the supply chain. I was listening to some political folks explain why problems aren't their fault, and they kept repeating, "It's the supply chain! It's the supply chain!" Not enough toilet paper on the shelves? Not enough computers for low-income kids to do remote learning? Not enough of this, that, or the other thing? It's the supply chain. It's someone else's fault. Not enough joy? Well, that's not some outside vendor's supply chain. *We* supply the joy. Same with gratitude. You don't go on Amazon or Stop & Shop and order "Joy" or some "Gratitude," only to discover they're out of it, "supply-chain problems, you know!" Uh-uh. We bring the joy, we supply the gratitude.

That's why I picked that reggae song. Like most of you, I knew the opening lines, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." That gets repeated over and over, it's so powerful, so emotional, and it so fits what many are feeling. Especially now.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are always times for nostalgia, for memories. At our Thanksgiving table I swear half of the sentences begin with, "Remember when . . . ?" And whoever is speaking will go off on a riff about some person, some happening, some particular food, some funny memory, some loved one who has passed, and there will be laughter and tears, till another person says, "Remember when . . . ?"

That's what the Israelites were saying in Babylon, "Remember when . . . ? Remember home . . . ? Remember the good old days?"

Believe you me, this year everyone is going to be remembering those "good old days." When we could see Grandma. When we could cross state lines. Fly across America. Hug. Kiss. Hi-five.

For Alida and me, one of our Thanksgiving traditions is, after our 10 AM Church service, we'd go to Fairfield Prep, Ludlow, Warde football games. They were always packed to the gills, and we'd get to see hundreds of Church families, 50, 75 college kids home for the holiday, big embraces all around.

So much is lost this year, from the simple to the profound. But it is still Thanksgiving. It is still Christmas, peeking around the corner. It is still time for gratitude and joy.

That reggae song starts with Psalm 137, and we hear the sorrowful part, "We sat down and wept," it repeats. But here's the switch. Psalm 137 in the Bible goes on to be bitter and angry, even vengeful, but *not* the reggae song. The song, after admitting, "Yeah, it's hard; yeah, I'm sad," but then it switches to Psalm 19, which glories in joy, which is filled with optimism. It's from that Psalm that the reggae song finds its strengths, and so they are able to sing surprisingly and faithfully: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord."

"Yeah, I'm down," "Yeah, it's tough, yeah, I wish 2020 was over, dead, and buried! But I'm still gonna sing, and I'm gonna sing in a way pleasing to God. I'm gonna put a twinkle in my own eye and a smile on everyone's face."

In 1976 my life changed forever. I went to Africa, to the Congo, where my mind was exploded every hour of every day. It was tough. It was hard. It was spell-binding, nerve wracking, exhausting, mentally, spiritually, and physically. At the toughest point we were deep in the bush, as far from home and life as I knew it as a person could get. I was lonely and tired in a "foreign land" beyond my comprehension. Still, there was work to do, so this one day I jumped in a Jeep, drove for hours, and landed in an even more remote village. There, in the middle of the village, to my surprise, the villagers had set up long table with a festive tablecloth, and they had prepared some kind of pie to look like apple, some kind of bird to look like a turkey, and some kind of white stuff to look like mashed potatoes. They had heard it was Thanksgiving in America and knew that it must've been hard for me to be so far from home, so far from the normal, so they pulled out all the stops to give me Thanksgiving.

Let's draw lessons from those villagers in The Congo and those reggae singers from Jamaica. Let's pull out all the stops to give one another a good Thanksgiving. We may feel as though we're weeping "by the rivers of Babylon," but let's turn "the words of our mouth" and "the meditations of our hearts" into joy and gratitude "acceptable to God," and fun for us.

Yes! Happy and blessed Thanksgiving to you!
Amen

Rocky Dawani - "By the Rivers of Babylon"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHsH_4MDuqc