

Lectionary 21 A 2020 (Modified)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 23, 2020

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11

“To Run and Not Be Weary”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

There is this psalm in the Bible that says, “I am going to hang my harp on the willow tree.” Actually, it says, “*We* hung up *our* harps on the willow trees.” I picture this giant willow tree with all of these harps hanging from it. We hung up our harps on the willow trees. This is an expression of sorrow and self-pity and anger. A lament. A lament uttered in the midst of the great trauma of the Jewish people in ancient times. The Babylonian captivity. *By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept.* And there we wept.

The Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem and deported and enslaved its citizens inhabited what may well have been the largest city in the world at that time. A city lavishly irrigated by canals that flowed from the mighty Euphrates River. And so the Jewish exiles, the captives, perhaps on their day off, are sitting by the banks of the river or that great system of canals. “*By the waters of Babylon.*”. *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.* We sat down, we remembered, we wept. We hung our harps on the willow trees. Have you ever heard of a weeping willow? Do you know what the scientific name for the weeping willow is? *Salix babylonica*. The Babylonian willow, the weeping willow. It turns out that it actually comes from China, not Babylon. But the guy who named it *thought* it was the Babylonian willow made famous in psalm 137. Who would make such mistake? Oh... a Lutheran. A Swedish Lutheran Carl Linnaeus, a great scientist, a Swedish Lutheran. Smart guy. But got it wrong. But the name stuck. That’s how famous this sad part of the Bible is. *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.*

So that psalm, number 137– not our actual psalm today– is the voice of the people. And Jeremiah’s guidance *TO* those sad, broken people was this: *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce... ...give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there. Seek the welfare of the city where I*

have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [Jeremiah 29:5-7] Jeremiah basically said, “Get used to it.” “This is your new normal.” Settle down, plant a garden, build a home. This is where you’ve ended up. Get used to it.

See, the particular misery of the people sitting by the willow trees along the river bank—their particular misery is that this calamity is something they have brought upon themselves. They were warned early and often, by the minor prophets Micah and Zephaniah, and by the major prophets, Jeremiah and Isaiah, and by others that their collective turning away from God and from his simple principles of justice and kindness would not end well. They have collectively brought God’s judgment upon themselves. And that makes the calamity more tragic for them. And they are rueful in psalm 137. And Jeremiah has told them this is how it is, and they need to adapt to the new normal. No wonder they want to hang up their harps on the willow trees. Joy and beauty cannot flow. “*How could we sing?... the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” the psalm continues

Psalm 137 is the voice of the people. Jeremiah is one prophet who addresses the people in this circumstance. But it is also to this situation of collective calamity and trauma that chapter forty of Isaiah was written. Isaiah chapter forty is a profoundly hopeful message that the writers of the New Testament connected with John the Baptist, and that Christianity later drew upon for our season of Advent. George Frederick Handel’s *Messiah* Oratorio begins with the beginning of Isaiah Chapter 40: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.” Those great Advent carols, “Prepare the Royal Highway,” and “Comfort, Comfort, Now My People,” and “There’s a Voice in the Wilderness Crying,” all come from Isaiah Chapter 40. But it’s about 30 verses into that chapter that we read,

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

It’s a popular and upbeat couple of verses, that lends itself to posters and to greeting cards. Eagles are always handsome creatures. So it’s understandable that people take this verse out of its context and embroider it on a pillow.

But these words were actually addressed to the people who wanted to hang up their harps on the willow trees. They sat down on the river banks in Babylon and wept. It’s important to note that this isn’t just happy thoughts for happy people. Moreover, it’s important to note that the promise is not made to good people or to smart people. The promise is for those who *WAIT* for the Lord. Not those who kiss up to the Lord, not those who memorize their catechisms, not those who speak in tongues. The promise is for those tired and discouraged people who nevertheless *WAIT*. The Hebrew verb *qavah*.

To wait for, to expect, to watch for, to hope. Very much an Advent verb. Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. They will be like eagles. And they are contrasted with the young. The ones we usually think of as energetic and strong. Even the young will faint, will get weary, will fall. But those who wait for the Lord will soar like eagles.

Although that promise was made to the exiled Israelites, in some ways it continues to be a promise to you and to me. It's a promise that when we grow weary, when we have given up, when we have sat down on the banks of the river and just wept— when we are ready to hang our harps on the willow tree because we can't make music any more— God asks us to wait longer. To wait. We will be renewed. But for now we wait for the Lord. That's the choice we have. Wait for the Lord..

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, I may not be young. But I am weary and I am exhausted by social distancing. I'm weary and I'm exhausted by political ads. If you watch the local news for fifteen minutes, you will see the same ad by the same candidate five times. Sometimes it will play back to back. I'm weary. I'm exhausted. Are you? I'm weary and I'm exhausted by screen time. Computer screen, smart phone screen, TV screen. I'm weary and I'm exhausted by conspiracy theories. *Here's* a conspiracy theory. There is no such thing as the monsoon! Every year Arizonans say, "Oh, it's hot now!" "But don't you worry, the monsoon is coming." And it never happens. This past July was the hottest month in Tucson in the 125 years of recorded weather history. There's no monsoon. It's a lie Arizonans tell themselves so they can get through the summer. I think it was part of the marketing of the Gadsden Purchase. By buying the Gadsden Purchase the United States was going to get monsoons and rainbows and unicorns and gumdrop trees. That's *my* conspiracy theory. And you know why I'm turning to conspiracy theories? Because I'm hot! I'm weary. And I'm exhausted. Are you? I want to sit down by the river and weep and hang my harp on the willow tree. Only the river is dry (because there is no monsoon.) And I can't weep because my tears might spread coronavirus. And I can't hang my harp on the willow tree because it already has political signs hanging on it.

Isaiah says to wait for the Lord. Why? What IS the Lord going to do? We don't know. That's part of the Biblical meaning of wait. You watch, you expect, you hope. Because you don't know. And we are not Israelites in Babylon. What the Bible says happened for the Israelites is that God raised up Daniel to speak for his people and defend his people while they lived in Babylon. What the Bible says happened is that God made a way— a figurative highway in the wilderness— so some of the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild. What the Bible doesn't say is that the Jewish community thrived in Babylon for two thousand years, and it was mostly in Babylon' that the Hebrew Bible— the Old

Testament— began to be assembled from all the bits and pieces that until then had not been drawn together because it hadn't been necessary or possible. Those tired people who wanted to hang up their harps had their strength renewed. And they soared. And soared and soared! Like eagles.

We are not the Jews in Babylon. And it would be foolish and disrespectful for me to claim that my personal problems are on that level. But we are exiles. What unites conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans, is a sense that the country I live in now, the nation that we are all and each of us a part of is *not* the country that I thought it was. All Americans are exiles. Not all Americans are Christians. But all Americans are exiles.

What the Church knows is that sometimes we must wait on the Lord. That doesn't mean we refuse responsibility for our circumstances or that we give up on loving others. We have work to do in the meantime. But in some things— usually the most important things— we must wait for the Lord. A lot of things are phony and empty and disappointing. A lot of the monsoons that we wait for never materialize. But Christians know to wait for the Lord. *“The grass withers, the flower fades,”* Isaiah said, *“but the word of our God will stand for ever.”* [Isaiah 40:8]

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, But not you. You wait for the Lord. Amen.