

Before we do anything else, we need to talk about that psalm. For whoever wrote it, their grief was real and raw. After years of siege and puppet rule, the Babylonians broke through the walls and laid waste to Jerusalem. They burned the Temple to the ground. The invaders publicly executed leaders from every cultural corner. What few remained they split into groups, one remained in slavery and another exiled across the expanse of the empire. Whoever wrote this psalm was in that exiled group driven across the desert. To the tune of their captors' insults and mockery, in that despair, the psalmist prays their deepest pain, sorrow, and loss. Keep in mind, at that time, they didn't know if they could even access God outside of Jerusalem. They also didn't know what was next, if they'd be sold, tortured, killed, or simply abandoned to the elements. That's who's weeping for Jerusalem, the one unsure of how to continue, the captive, the oppressed desperate for God to hear their heartbreak. And in that heartbreak, as so many of us have done, they name the deep pain behind their anger. Their captors did horrendous things to them. Lamentations puts words to Jerusalem's bitter lot, and that awful desire at the end of the psalm is nothing short of payback.

The Babylonians brutally killed even children. And so, the psalmist calls into the void for revenge. I'm not saying it's okay; I'm saying I understand where they're coming from. That last line's meant to be shocking. It's meant to remind us how awful the initial attack was and show us where the desire for vengeance leads. It's also a prayer, but not in the "Dear God, please make this happen" way. 'Cause it's part of a larger grouping of psalms that all do the same thing: put words to the deepest, most awful, most honest emotions in the context of prayer. God already knows them, but this is a safe place to give voice to the worst parts of our nature so that we can hand them over to God and release them. This prayer isn't "make this happen;" it's "God, you know this is where I'm at. Save me from the worst of myself."

These days, we see the mirth of mocking captors in videos of arrests and deportations with cutesy soundtracks. We see destruction at the hands of an unfathomably large invader in Ukraine's defense against Russia. And we see what happens when vengeance replaces venting prayers in Israel and Palestine. I know there's an immensely complicated history there. The short version though, is that, historically, Palestinians have borne significantly more casualties than Israel, even including October 7th. And the Israeli government just keeps on poking the Palestinian bear. I've been there. I've crossed the wall, I've seen water shut off, I've photographed the Israeli military preventing Palestinians from worshipping, I've walked the glitzy promenade of an open-air shopping mall in Jerusalem, and I've breathed the heavy dust and debris of a refugee camp. October 7th was atrocious. But Israel wants to ignore everything that happened before to justify its actions since. And by evoking the shadow of Hamas and the specter of antisemitism, many are willing to give Israel a free pass. A friend of mine insists that everything Israel does is justified and claims that any news that paints them in a bad light is propaganda. No amount of evidence will change his mind. And besides, in his mind, the cost of civilian lives is worth it because there's no such thing as a civilian in Palestine.

It's gotten so bad that the denials of reports, photographs, murdered journalists, children used for target practice, doctors decrying the atrocities they witness, those denials make one side appear spotless in their brutality and the other deserving in their suffering. This is what happens when a prayer turning anger over to God shifts into a prayer endorsing genocide. Now yes, there's lots in scripture about the Promised Land and various iterations of God's People fending off and succumbing to enemies, but the Hebrew Scriptures simply do not justify what Israel is doing. This is not anti-semitism. This is anti-genocide. Okay, but what can *we* do? We're just 62 people 5,000 miles from Gaza. If Jesus has anything to say about it, though, even a mustard seed can change the world.

Do y'all know about the Global Sumud Flotilla? About 500 volunteers, activists, clergy, and others attempted to deliver aid to the people of Gaza and to encourage an end to the genocide unfolding there. People the world over've watched from the moment they launched the first boats, to the arrival of an Italian naval escort, to Israel's drones setting fire to the flotilla's ships. Some've cheered their bravery and compassion. Others've written them off as attention seekers pulling a political stunt, which is funny 'cause attention is exactly the point. No one expected them to arrive unmolested, and while they didn't carry enough aid to save all of Gaza, that they only carried aid without weapons makes their approach nearly unimpeachable. In spite of some reports from Israel, the flotilla heavily documented what they were carrying well in advance. The point wasn't to save Palestine by themselves. The point was to get the world to see that Palestine needs saving.

In the middle of last week, an enormous portion of Israel's naval force intercepted and detained these folks out in international waters. They boarded with guns drawn while the seizure of boats, aid materials, and people was livestreamed around the world. Attention landed on them, on the injustice of targeting helpers, and on the plight of Palestine. But miracles don't always go according to plan. The Flotilla never reached shore, but in a way, they still managed to feed the people. See, Israel's blockade's been so stringent that even fishing's become a luxury of times past. So when the military's ships left to stop the flotilla, they left Gazan waters unattended, and local fishermen leapt at the rare chance to cast their nets into the sea. When they pulled those nets ashore, there was great rejoicing for the nets were heavy with an abundant catch. A child holds a fish to the camera with a look of pure joy. Men heave the enormous catch ashore. It's no exaggeration to say this catch saved lives. No, the flotilla didn't deliver the supplies they brought, but they did deliver something. They delivered opportunity, millions of eyes around the world, a message to regular people that they aren't alone, and proof that hope can triumph over despair.

We talked about moral gaslighting a few weeks back. If there ever was a manifestation of moral gaslighting, it's the mental gymnastics that lead us to a place where genocide is justifiable. It is not. It never is. Never. We cannot lose sight of the humanity of even those we oppose. And we cannot let vengeance rule our hearts. If Lamentations and psalms like 137 have taught me anything, it's that yelling at God can be a kind of prayer. God can handle it. But just 'cause we pray it, doesn't mean we get to do it. We can't afford to justify the worst of humanity with misused lines from scripture. We are the aid bringers, the ones who lift people, the ones who stand for truth and justice and love, the ones who stand against hatred, destruction, and the horrors humanity is oh so capable of.

We may be small, but these little mustard seeds will change this world. At coffee hour today, we're doing this ministry fair, and at the risk of overselling it, this may be how our little mustard seeds start growing. I don't think we have a sign up for a flotilla, but we've got lots of ways you can serve people here in our corner of humanity. The world is on fire, and that fire's not limited to what we see on the news. This place needs our mustard seeds, too. I don't know what our miracles will look like. To be honest, I'm afraid to plan for 'em, 'cause miracles are wily. Truthfully, we can't plan for miracles, but we can work for the benefit of those in the greatest need. Look, we're not a global flotilla, but we still feed the hungry. We're not world leaders, but we still sow peace. We're not Jesus, but we still seek justice. We're Christian, and where we plant our seeds, we pray we'll reap the miracles of God.