

“Remember Your Congregation”

Psalm 74:1-23; Luke 1:67-80

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 3, 2017

Beloved Congregation of Christ: Do you remember seeing images of Muslims in the Middle East celebrating the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11? In addition to that, there were reports, not televised, in New Jersey of a few Muslims who also celebrated the terrorist attacks.

Our text today is a psalm of lament by Israel after the Babylonians invaded their land and destroyed their cities and their fields. They also destroyed their capital city Jerusalem and the temple there. After this destruction in 586 B.C., they took most of the inhabitants back to Babylon as slaves. The exile lasted 70 years before they were allowed to return by the Persian king to rebuild their land and their temple. They too mocked the Jews after inflicting so much suffering on them.

In this song, the psalmist laments what has befallen Israel. In verses 1-11, he pleads for the LORD to deliver them from their enemies, because it seemed that God had forgotten them “forever.” Then in verses 12-17, he confesses that God is the Almighty Creator. And as the Almighty God, why is he not able to destroy Israel’s enemies as he did in Egypt and in the Promised Land of Canaan? Finally, in verses 18-23, he shows how their enemies scoff and revile his holy name. So he pleads to the Lord to vindicate his own name and his own congregation, his chosen nation Israel.

And since we are in the Advent season, we will see how this relates to the coming of Jesus as an infant. In his first Advent, he came to save his people from their sins. But in his second Advent, he will destroy his enemies and vindicate his name and his congregation, the church.

A Lament and Plea for the Congregation (verses 1-11)

The psalmist was lamenting about the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:8-12). Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was burned. The temple’s gold, silver and bronze furnishings were looted. The leaders of the kingdom were put to death, while the most educated, the wealthiest, and the workers were taken as exiles to Babylon. Only the poorest were left in the land. The destruction was complete. For Israel, this would have been like the end of the world. The temple, the center of their lives, with its priesthood and morning and evening sacrifices, was gone. For Old Testament Jews, there were only two major historical events in their nation: the Exodus from Egypt, and the Babylonian exile. So even in the most disastrous event in their history, Jews appeal to the glorious Exodus.

The psalmist pleads to God to remember Israel, whom God has called his “redeemed” and “purchased” “sheep,” “congregation and “tribe.” He remembers Exodus 15:16, when Moses praised the LORD who dried up the Red Sea, *“till the people pass by whom you have purchased.”* He pleads to God, *“remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt,”* because it laid in ruins for many years, which seemed for him

forever. So the psalmist's question and lament to God was, "If we are your chosen nation, why did you allow us to be destroyed?" It's as if he did not know the warnings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and many other prophets. For many centuries, they warned of God's judgment against them for violating the laws of the covenant God made with them way back at Mount Sinai. They became so idolatrous, unjust and adulterous that the LORD's patience and persistence ran out. We read about this in 2 Chronicles 36:15–16, "*The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.*"

Still, even under this judgment, the psalmist appeals to God's covenant promises to their forefather Abraham. What happens now with his covenant promises to his redeemed and purchased congregation? Has the LORD rejected them forever?

"Why?" is an age-old question. We don't usually ask "Why?" when good things happen, but only when bad things happen. But is it wrong to ask God "Why?" when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer, or has an accident, or lost a job and is in dire straits? No, it is not. We see many examples of "Whys?" in the Bible. When David was in trouble, he asked God in Psalm 22:1, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?*" Our Lord Jesus used these very same words as he hung on the cross (Matt 27:46). Therefore, asking "Why?" is part of human nature, even our Christian nature.

Seeing the signs and banners of the pagan Babylonian army hanging on the ruins of the temple saddens Israelites, because they desecrate the holiness of the temple (verses 4, 9). The psalmist also laments the absence of prophets who used to reveal God's Word to them (verse 9). This is the worst! Who would now tell them how long they will endure this disaster? How long will the enemy scoff at and revile them and the name of the LORD? How long will the LORD hold his right hand of power against their enemy? The psalmist then pleads to God to destroy their enemy! (verse 11)

A Confession of God's Almighty Power (verses 12-17)

But when our "Whys?" and "How longs?" seem unanswered by God, the answer he gives is, "Who?" That is, "Who is the Almighty Creator who is sovereign over all creation?" "Who is the Almighty King who is sovereign over all kings?"

In verses 12-17, the psalmist affirms his confidence and assurance in the LORD. This disaster did not happen because the LORD was not powerful enough to prevent it. This is the same God who divided the Red Sea; the same God who can crush powerful sea monsters, even the dragon-like Leviathan of Canaanite mythology, if it was real; the same God who separated the waters from the land, hung the sun, moon and stars, and established all the seasons. Therefore, how can this God not have control over the puny Babylonians?

Today, too many people – even Christians – question the power of God when disaster strikes. They would say that God had no control over 9/11, or Katrina, or Harvey, or even ISIS. They would say that

God had nothing to do with all the bad things that happens in their lives. This is even taught in most churches: “God is good, all the time!” This is absolutely true, because God cannot be anything less than perfectly good, loving, merciful, and just. But when pastors and people in prosperity gospel churches say this, they mean something else. For them, it means first that God will always bless them with good things in life. Second, it means that when bad things happen, it is not God who sent them, but they happened because they lacked faith! This is a terrible thing, condemning even faithful believers for unfaithfulness.

A Call for God to Vindicate His Congregation (verses 18-23)

After affirming the LORD’s sovereign power over all things, the psalmist calls for the LORD to vindicate his name and his people Israel, his congregation. The two key words are “remember” or “do not forget” and “deliver.”

Remember the mocking and the uproar by the enemies and the scoffers. Remember your covenant promises to Abraham. And when the LORD remembers these, he will act to vindicate his name and his people. How will he vindicate his name and his people? He will do this, first, by delivering them from their enemies. His needy, shamed and downtrodden people are now like doves that are fed to the beasts, the Babylonians. The land is dark because it is full of violence. He will rescue his people from the ravenous beasts, and he will send light to his people in darkness.

Second, he will vindicate his name and his people by rebuilding the temple. Now, the only signs in the temple ruins are the pagan banners of the enemy. There are no more priests and sacrifices for sins and thank offerings; no more feasts to celebrate harvests, because there are no more harvests. There is no king to lead them in battle. Where will the King – the Son that the LORD promised to King David – come from who would be King over an everlasting kingdom?

How did God accomplish this seemingly impossible task? He set up Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king, to allow the exiles to return to Israel and rebuild the country and the temple in 536 B.C. (2 Chr 36:22-23). Isaiah foresaw Darius as the LORD’s “servant” who would rebuild the ruins of the city and the temple (Isa 44:28). So the temple was finished in 516 B.C. under King Darius, 70 years after its destruction in 586 B.C.

The prophet Daniel has the answer to the “Who?” in Daniel 9:25–26, where he prophesies that the city of Jerusalem and its temple shall be rebuilt by Jews who will return from the Babylonian exile. But after this restoration, Daniel says, *“an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.”* But after this “anointed one” is “cut off” or put to death, there is a prince who would come and *“destroy the city and the sanctuary.”* This “Anointed One” is our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember that the word “anointed” in Hebrew is *Messiah*, which is then translated in Greek as *Christos*. So in Acts 4:26, Christians gathered in Jerusalem affirmed that Jesus is this “Anointed One” in their prayer, *“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.”*

After John the Baptizer was born six months before Jesus was born, Zechariah his father then recognized that his son John will be the forerunner of Jesus the Anointed One, *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high”* (Luke 1:76-78). This Jesus is also *“the Lord.”*

This child John will preach to all Israel, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt 3:1-2). He was the one of whom Isaiah prophesied, *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight”* (Matt 3:1-3; see also Isaiah 40:3). The LORD that Isaiah was prophesying is Jesus the Messiah, born as a baby of the virgin Mary, because he was conceived by God the Holy Spirit (Isa 7:14; 9:6-7). The longing of Israel for comfort is now fulfilled (Isa 40:1).

Listen again to the prophecy of Zechariah concerning the birth of Jesus in Luke 1:68-75 and hear the echo of the words of our text in Psalm 74:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

This Jesus will be the “Sunrise” who will “visit and redeem his people.” He is the Son of David, the true heir of God’s everlasting kingdom, who would save us his people from their sins. He will deliver us his sheep from the hatred of Satan the enemy.

Dear brothers and sisters: Through the Child Jesus, God will remember his holy covenant promises that he made to their forefather Abraham. God is now doing these things because he is rebuilding the ruins of his old covenant temple into a new covenant temple: the church made up of all who believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ. That is why when we sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” we are not waiting for him to be born, for we celebrate in this age his First Advent. But we sing this song longing and looking forward with anticipation to his Second Advent when he will complete our salvation, and turn our mourning into joy, our darkness into light. In Revelation 6:10, the saints in heaven ask, *“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* Our “How long?” will finally be answered.

So beloved friends, when you open those presents this Christmas, remember that God has given you the most precious gift in the whole universe throughout all eternity: the Child Jesus. And the most precious gift he gives is forgiveness of all your sins now and forever. You may have all kinds of sufferings now, but all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places await you in the end. Therefore, let us continue to pray, *“Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly!”* (Rev 22:20).