

December 3
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Isaiah 64:1-9

A Place Called Babylon

In the Bible we hear about all kinds of places. We hear about faraway cities, countries, regions, and lands, many of which are unfamiliar and hard to pronounce. And from where we are in our lives, they hardly seem to matter much. Places don't matter much if you aren't familiar with them and they don't mean anything to you. That was true when I moved to KY 11 years ago. I had to learn about a whole new set of places that I had never heard of before. And I learned that different places meant different things. That going to Keeneland was not the same as going to Harlan. Going to Eddyville was not the same as going to Rupp Arena. But you probably know those places and what it means to be there. The places in the Bible mean something too. During this season of Advent, we will be exploring the places of Advent that are mentioned in our Christmas story. Nazareth, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, they aren't just names. They are places that mean something for this story about Jesus. They mean something for us.

Today, we start in a place called Babylon. It's not specifically mentioned in the Nativity story, but it's part of the bigger story of people of Israel, Jesus' people. You will notice on your map that it is pretty far from the land of Israel. It's about 900 miles. It would take a couple of days for us to drive. But it would have taken months to walk there. And that's what the people of Israel had to do. They had to walk from Jerusalem to Babylon after they were defeated by the Babylonian armies. The Babylonians came and waged war against Israel and destroyed their capital city Jerusalem. And the temple was burned to the ground. And all the leaders, priests and teachers were rounded up and marched into exile. 900 miles down the road. To the completely foreign place called Babylon.

Babylon was a place that meant defeat for Israel. It was the place of their enemies. It was the place of their conquerors who had overrun their country and captured their people. They never thought it wouldn't happen to them. Though the prophet Isaiah had warned them. He had warned Israel's rulers that it would happen. But they wouldn't listen. They didn't want to listen. OK, so it had happened to the northern

kingdom of Judah, just 120 years before, when the Assyrians attacked. But it wouldn't happen to Jerusalem. Even with the Babylonians knocking on their door. They were God's people. They were God's chosen. God would protect them.

But it did happen. The Babylonians marched in. And they besieged and they laid waste. And everything that Israel believed God had put there permanently was destroyed. All of it was gone. And the people were taken away as captives. Imagine living in that place of captivity. The place called Babylon where you are surrounded by those who defeated you. Constantly reminded that you lost. You lost your freedom. Your friends and your family. Your community. Your sense of security. Your sense of privilege. Babylon was a place of defeat.

It was also a place far from Home. Babylon was the kind of place where they don't speak your language. And you don't speak theirs. Instead of your native Hebrew, they spoke Akkadian. It was a different culture with different holy days and different foods. Babylon was a huge city compared to Jerusalem. It had a population of about 200,000 people.

Jerusalem had had only around 3000.¹. Instead of being on a high rocky hill like Jerusalem, it was on a flat river plain, surrounded by farmland as far as the eye could see.

Babylon was encircled by huge brick walls with enormous gates at 8 different points. One of the gates was called the Ishtar gate. It was about 4 stories tall and included a processional approach about ½ a mile long. It was covered with bricks glazed in bright blue and yellow and red, with lion and dragon and cattle motifs sculpted into the walls. It would have glowed in the sun.

Then in the city's center was the Etemenanki Ziggurat. A seven-storied pyramid- shaped temple, 300 feet tall,. That's almost as tall as the Capital Plaza Office Tower in Frankfort. Large staircases climbed every level. It would have been painted in bright colors, and adorned with plants and shining objects of brass and copper. Nearby some scholars say were the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world; an amazing palace full of trees and gardens, with flowers and

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic_history_of_Jerusalem

vines spilling out over its multiple stories, watered by an ingenious plumbing system.

This place called Babylon was not Jerusalem. It was a place far from home. Maybe you can imagine being in that place. That place where nothing feels familiar. And you feel out of place. Maybe you moved to a new town or entered a new school. Maybe you took a new job. Maybe your home is different because someone you love is gone. A parent. A spouse. A child. Things aren't the same. You are in a strange place that doesn't understand you and you don't understand it.

The Israelites were living in that place called Babylon. It was a place of defeat. And a place far from home. And it was a place far from God.

Because the people of Israel, God's people had been defeated, because their home had disappeared, the people now felt God had disappeared too. The new gods of Babylon surrounded them. Marduk, Enlil, Ishtar, Dagon, Nabu and thousands of minor deities besides. Gods upon gods for the sky and the rain and the earth; gods of love and fertility and harvest and war and death. All of their temples and shrines filled the city. Their processions and celebrations echoed through the air. Their

stories of creation and purpose and the meaning of life infiltrated everything. These were secretive gods. Gods they had to decipher. One of the main ways they did that was by studying the stars. Through astrology, they tried to figure out what the gods were up to. Because one never knew what the gods were up to and how your life might be affected. Later some of their astrologers or magi, will figure into the story of Jesus. But more on that later...

Their many gods were so different from the God of Israel. Who was the Only God. Who was Creator of all things. Who made the world and called it good. Who fashioned people and wanted to be in relationship with them. Who hoped that life would be a blessing for all. The Lord God of Israel is a shepherd, it says in Psalm 80. A shepherd caring for a flock; a shepherd who comes to save the people in times of trouble.

And these were times of trouble for Israel. Isaiah admits it. The Psalmist admits it. The people of God messed up. God had been faithful. But the people had not. They had forgotten about God, so God had forgotten about them. At least, that's what it felt like. The people of Israel don't blame God though. They blame themselves. For being arrogant and

proud. And stubborn. For believing they had built their own success and THEY made their own way in the world. And they didn't need God. But they had made a mistake. So many mistakes. And they knew they were far from God and they wished they could get back to God again.

Maybe you have been in that place too, where you have felt far from God. That you literally felt God-forsaken. And you were empty and lost. And there was nothing to hold you together. There was a distance, a barrier that kept you from God. In the words of Isaiah, it felt like God was hidden from you. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, says Isaiah, so everything would shake with your presence and we would see you and know you again!"

But in this place called Babylon, where we feel that we are far from God, we learn to appreciate God. We learn the urgency of looking for God and depending on God. It's funny but as human beings, sometimes, we have to be away from something to know how important it is to us. Like the Prodigal son, who leaves home only to discover how much he needs it. The same can be true for us. At those times, when we don't have a place to belong, or a place to rest, or a place to call home, we

know how important it is. And when you see how important it is for us, we see how important it is for others. We learn mercy. We learn compassion for the foreign and the defeated and those who feel far from God.

In the place called Babylon, we learn to wait. Because God is about to do something great. We learn, like the people of Israel, that even in a foreign place, God is there. We learn to trust, that even there, God is at work in us and around us. And that we won't be in that place forever.

The story doesn't end here in Babylon. Israel was allowed to return home about 50 years later. And they eventually came to see this journey as a witness to God's light that shines in the darkness. The story doesn't end in the nowhere place. It doesn't end with death and despair. It ends with resurrection and hope. In this place called Babylon, we wait on the Lord. And we trust in the Lord. Because the Lord can take even the most terrible situations and transform them into miracles of grace.

In this place called Babylon, we may feel defeated, and far from home and far from God. But this place is just one place on our journey. A place for us to have patience. A place for us to have compassion. A

place for us to depend on God. And remember what is important and what truly matters. Here we ask the questions: What barriers are keeping us from God? What needs to be forgiven? What needs to be restored? Where does God's face need to shine that we may be saved? In this place called Babylon, we wait on the Lord. We have hope. We trust that even in this place, God is with us.