A quick word before we dive in on the next few weeks. We will wrap up our Advent and Christmas sermon series “Hope” next Sunday to close out the year. Then the Sunday following that, January 5, we’ll begin a shorter series called “Real.” Quick blurb on that series. Earlier this fall, Rachel, Mark, and I gathered responses from our deacons, elders, and staff as far as what they sense are some spiritual needs and burdens facing us as a church and community. I’d say the one that came up the most was this: that there’s a distance we have between each other. Not just us here, but in general. We put up walls, we separate ourselves. As a result, we can go for years as friends and acquaintances, and never really know someone, never truly open up to someone and this can be really destructive. Why is that? What holds us back? What should we do about it? We’ll see what Scripture says, starting January 5.

This week, on this final Sunday in Advent, we are in our sermon series “Hope,” hope for Christ’s coming, hope for the kingdom he ushers in, hope that no matter how dark things may look, the light of the world still comes. If you’ve been with us, you can attest that the passages we’ve read have not been the most uplifting. They’ve dealt with some of the hardest chapters in the story and Scripture of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and that’s been kind of the point: that Advent is not cheery news in a cheery season, but rather desperate news in our darkest hour. And in the same way that Christ’s coming in Bethlehem all those years ago was the sign of hope and fulfilment of all the longings and letdowns for Israel, so too can Christ be that hope for us as well, no matter how dark the hour may be. This week, we come to a heartbreaking and ultimately disturbing response to a disturbing chapter in Israel’s history: their torment in exile. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

There’s really not an easy way around it. This psalm starts off sad, but then gets downright unsettling by the end of it.
The backdrop for this psalm is similar to last week’s but in a different location. It is during the Babylonian conquest and exile of the people Israel. But whereas last week’s reading in Psalm 74 was from the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem with the remnant of people left there, this week follows those who were taken away. To recap, in the 6th century BC, the Babylonian Empire controlled what we know as Israel, but Israel rebels, so Babylon comes and destroys Jerusalem, burning down the Temple, and taking much of the population away into exile, mostly to live as slaves or, at best, as second-class citizens within the cities of the empire. This psalm comes from one of those exiled communities of Jews, living as second-class citizens in Babylon.

Their words are heartbreaking, starting in v. 1: “By the rivers of Babylon—we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. [Zion’s another way of saying Jerusalem.] On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”

They’ve been taken into exile, wrenched from their homeland, cast into this marginalized existence in a strange land, and they’re heartbroken. They’re traumatized. And the very memory of their home makes them weep by the rivers of Babylon.

In a similar way, are there memories for you that you’d rather not touch? Things you’d rather not remember. I’m not talking about that stupid thing you did when you were a kid that when you think about it it still embarrasses you. I’m talking about memories that bring you pain. We’ve all got them. But some sadly have more than others. And sadly some of them hurt more than others, and so we try to leave them alone, because once they get raised up again, it’s like we relive them, it’s like we’re right back in it.

The Jews in exile didn’t have the choice of whether to leave painful memories alone. Their captors, their tormentors, the Babylonians taunted them, forcing them to sing songs from their homeland for cruel entertainment. Imagine what that was like. To a crowd of mocking Babylonians, these Jews in exile were forced to sing their songs, and what songs did they have? Well, we’re reading them! The psalms. Not all of them were written by then, but a lot were. Imagine being summoned to offer the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters,” only for the amusement of a crowd to laugh at you for it. That’s what they were enduring. Being forced to relive the pain of their exile over and over again.

It’s the reliving of painful torment that can twist and warp us into something we don’t recognize anymore, and the damage can extend beyond ourselves.

I knew a military couple a while back, and I’ll be vague on some of the details just for privacy’s sake, and the husband had served a couple of tours in the
Middle East and was getting ready to go back, but the prospect of going back had been taking a toll on his family. The wife had shared that some nights her husband would become verbally belligerent and quick-tempered with her and their kids. Other nights she would wake up to him screaming on the other side of the bedroom, reliving the trauma of encounters during his military service. And to his credit, he recognized that he needed help with post-traumatic stress and sought that help, but nevertheless I remember him sharing that the man that went over to the Middle East was not the same man that came back.

Trauma and torment like that truly can twist us beyond even our own recognition. Happened to Israel too, to these Jews in exile. This was a people who, in the very fabric of their identity, knew themselves to be a people delivered by God from bondage, by a God who said on the banks of the Red Sea, “The Lord will fight for you, you have only to be still,” by a God who told them in the law he gave them, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay,” meaning it was the Lord who would set things right; they had only to be still.

This people with that in its heritage is driven by its own torment to the point of hoping for the following in v. 8: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Understand what that’s saying. It’s saying that the hope of these Jews in exile, in a song unto the Lord, is that the children of the Babylonians would be dashed against the rock.

There’s more we could say right now about how the psalms truly do capture the full scope of human emotion, but for right now, I think this is really disturbing. Disturbing not just because they’re talking about infanticide, but because a people who were called to live not according to vengeance have now been reduced to this being the sum of their hope. Because notice, the psalm doesn’t go anywhere after that. V. 9 is the last verse. There’s no venting of frustration only to see a turn to faithfulness and submission to God’s will. Only the twisted hope that their captors’ children would be dashed upon the rock.

The point is, there are some memories, some pains, some abuses that can leave us twisted versions of who we used to be, that when we look in the mirror we don’t recognize the person staring back. They can warp us so much that even our very hope becomes twisted, dominated by a desire for vengeance. They can leave us without even the words for a hope that is pure and righteous.

An aging World War II POW named Eric Lomax was left without hope for much of his life. He was a British soldier captured by the Japanese toward the beginning of the war and forced to work constructing the Burma Railway. If you’ve ever seen *Bridge on the River Kwai*, it’s the same conflict, different story. Lomax while in prison was caught having made a homemade radio and was taken away to another prison. For three years he was interrogated and tortured, being
waterboarded, his bones broken, and among the men who were inflicting this pain on him was a Japanese interpreter, who was consistently there translating the questioning and even instigating the torture.

This continued until the end of the war, but it wasn’t the end of anything for Lomax. Though he was sent home, he didn’t recognize where he came home to, he didn’t recognize who he was either. All he had were the memories of his torture and hatred for the men who did it to him. Causes one marriage to collapse and estrangement with two of his children.

He later learns that one of his tormenters, the Japanese interpreter, was still alive, and he actually reaches out to him, but not to reconcile. For years all he could think about was traveling back to Asia, hunting him down, and killing him. These were his thoughts. That’s what he hoped for.

Until he was given a glimpse of something better. Took years to get to that point and lots of counseling, but eventually Lomax in fact travelled back to Thailand, revisited the prison camp site, the site of his torture, and met the interpreter again, who himself had been haunted by the guilt of his sins during the war. The encounter wasn’t an easy one, and didn’t feature an immediate catharsis, rather lingering guilt and uneasiness, but they were eventually reconciled, and Lomax came to know a better hope, one he couldn’t have even imagined in years prior.

Because it is in that dark hour of pain and torment and suffering that there can come a glimmer of something better.

That ultimately is the good news of Advent: that in our darkest hour, when we can’t imagine a different reality, when we don’t even have the words to speak of it, hope still comes, and a different world is still possible, one that God can and will usher in.

We see a glimpse of that hope in this psalm, only a glimpse, and even that hope is twisted into a hope for vengeance, but a glimpse of a better world is still there. It is in the exiles’ hope and painful memory of Jerusalem. They say, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.” Remembering Jerusalem. That was the glimmer of hope.

For them, Jerusalem meant that God was with them. That’s where the Temple was. That’s where God lived. And even though that hope was twisted into a hope for vengeance, it was still a kernel of light in the darkness, a light that could one day shine upon a brighter world.

So much of Advent is both looking back and remembering Christ’s birth and looking ahead at Christ’s coming again, and for some of you, the message of Christmas, of Christ being born, is a familiar one, it’s one you can remember. But you look at your life today, and you look in the mirror and you don’t recognize the
person you see, even your hopes have been twisted, and any stock you put in Christ or in Christmas just gets twisted too.

If this is where you are, remember Bethlehem, and by that I mean remember this story, this Christmas story, this message of God with us, in the same way the Jews in exile remembered Jerusalem; set it above your highest joy. This may take some time. But even when you’re at a loss as to how the torment and abuse and scars you’ve suffered could ever turn to hope, remember Bethlehem, where one was born who would forever be a declaration that God is with us in our darkest hour, one who would go on and for our sake endure all the torture and abuse and pain and vengeance and cruelty and malice the world could dish out, take it all, and redeem it, turn it to new life.

Remember Bethlehem, for lying in a manger is hope for a brighter day.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.