

Title: From the Rivers of Babylon to Living Water – A Sermon

Good morning, everyone.

I'm from Thornhill United Church of Canada. Thank you for inviting me today. Thank you, Peter, for making this happen.

Today is Pride Sunday. I'm not here to talk politics. I'm here to preach God's Word. And I'm here to share my story — because God's Word became real in my life.

The theme today is **water**. Tears. Rivers. And living water that never runs dry.

Part 1: The Theology of Exile – Psalm 137:1-6

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

I loved this song when I was young. My mother played the Boney M version. But back then, I didn't understand what it really meant.

Now I do.

This is one of the most painful psalms in the Bible. It is not a happy song. It is a lament. A cry of exile.

The people of Israel had been taken from their home. Their temple was destroyed. Their city was burned. They were dragged to Babylon — a foreign land with a foreign language, foreign gods, foreign ways.

And they sat down by the rivers. They wept.

They couldn't sing anymore. They hung their harps on the trees. Not because they forgot how. But because their hearts were broken.

How can you sing worship songs when everything you loved is gone? When you feel abandoned by God? When you are surrounded by people who mock you?

There is a deep theology here. Exile is not just geography. Exile is a spiritual condition.

To be in exile means:

- You are far from home.
- You are far from God.
- You are surrounded by voices that mock your faith.
- You cannot sing. You can only cry.

This psalm teaches us something important: **Lament is a form of worship.** The Bible is full of tears. God is not afraid of your questions, your anger, or your grief.

In fact, the psalmist makes a vow in verses 5-6: *"If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. May my tongue stick to my mouth."*

That is not a curse. That is a **declaration of identity.**

The psalmist says: "My identity is tied to my people, my God, my home. I will never forget. Even here, in exile, I remember who I am."

The rivers of Babylon are rivers of tears. But they are also rivers of memory. The people didn't stop being God's people just because they were in a foreign land. They remembered. They held on. And that act of remembering — even through tears — was worship.

Part 2: My Exile – Sitting by My Own River

Now I want to be honest with you. I know this psalm. Not just from reading it. I have lived it.

When I first came to Canada from Hong Kong, everything felt strange. Cold weather. New language. No family around. I felt lost. I felt like an exile.

But the hardest part was this: Back in Hong Kong, the church told me, "You are gay. You cannot be a Christian. You must break up with your partner. Throw away your ring. We love you, but I don't want to see you in the fire of the hell."

I sat there crying. The pastor was crying too. My heart broke.

I thought, "If God's love is like this... maybe God doesn't love me at all."

I sat by my own river and wept. I couldn't sing. I felt pushed out by the very church I loved. That was my exile.

But here's the theological point: Even when I was crying by the river, God was still with me. The Bible doesn't say God left the people in Babylon. It says they sat by the river and wept. And God was right there with them.

The rivers of Babylon were not just a place of sorrow. They were a place of God's presence. The people didn't know it then. I didn't know it then. But God never leaves His people — even in exile. Even by the river.

Part 3: Living Water – The Woman at the Well (John 4)

Now, there is another water story in the Bible. A well, not a river. A woman, not a nation.

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well. She had five husbands and was living with another man. People looked down on her. She was hiding. She came to get water at noon, when no one else was there.

She came for ordinary water. But Jesus offered her something different.

He said: *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty again. It will become a spring of living water inside them."*

Living water isn't a thing. It's Jesus. He fills the emptiness nothing else can fill.

Jesus knew everything about her — all her pain, all her shame. But He didn't push her away. He didn't judge her. He spoke truth to her. And then He revealed who He really is.

She left her water jar behind. She ran back to town. She told everyone, *"Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!"*

She stopped hiding. Her brokenness became her story. Because Jesus saw her completely — and still loved her.

The rivers of Babylon were tears. The living water Jesus gives is joy.

Part 4: From Tears to Living Water – My Story

I have lived both stories.

The rivers of Babylon — I know that river. The Samaritan well — I know that well too. I was thirsty. And Jesus met me.

I sat by the river in Toronto, crying, rejected by my church, feeling like an exile forever. I thought God had turned His back on me.

But God found me. He sent kind people and welcoming churches. They said, "You are welcome here. Just as you are." No conditions. No "change first." Just love. Living water.

Like the woman at the well, I left my water jar behind — the burden of hiding, the fear, the pretending. I started sharing my story. Not because I am perfect. But because I am loved.

That is the gospel. God meets us by the water — whether it's a river of tears or a well of shame. And He offers us living water.

Part 5: A Quiet Moment – Jesus Is by the River with You

Maybe right now, some of you feel like you're sitting by your own river. You feel alone. You feel like God gave up on you. Your tears feel endless.

Let's take 20 seconds together. Close your eyes if you want.

Just sit by the river. Feel how tired you are.

Now listen... Can you hear a soft voice?

"I see you. I know you. I am with you. You are not alone."

That voice is Jesus. He has been sitting by the river with you the whole time. He never left. And He is offering you living water.

Part 6: Three Steps Home – Seen, Known, Loved

My journey from tears to living water happened in three steps.

First, being seen. In Hong Kong I had to hide. I had to pretend. But here, people didn't see a problem. They saw a person — a person Jesus came to meet.

Second, being known. I shared my story — my tears, my pain with the Hong Kong church. They listened. They cried with me. Not pity — real understanding. That is living water.

Third, being loved — just as I am. Not "I love you but change." Just "I love you. Exactly as you are."

Nothing can separate us from God's love. Not our past. Not our orientation. Not even the church that rejected us. Nothing.

**Paul says in Romans 8:38-39: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." **

That is the gospel. That is living water.

Part 7: Why Pride Sunday Matters

This is why Pride Sunday matters in the church.

Not for politics. Not because we are proud of ourselves. But because we are proud of Jesus — proud of a God who welcomes everyone. And we want people who have been pushed out to hear clearly:

"You belong here. You are loved here. You are safe here."

As someone who was once rejected by the church, I stand here today because some Christians opened their arms wide — like Jesus on the cross. They gave me living water. And it saved my life.

So today I ask you: Keep your arms open. Look around. Who feels like an outsider? Invite them. Listen to them. Tell them, "You are welcome here."

Those words can save a life. They saved mine.

Conclusion

The exiles sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept.
The Samaritan woman came to the well hiding in shame.

But Jesus met both of them by the water. He turned their tears into living water.

I used to sit by the river and cry. Today I stand here and smile.

Not because everything is perfect. But because I know Jesus is with me. Even in the lowest places, His hand is holding me. Even by the rivers of tears, He offers living water.

If you are sitting by the river today... you can come home too. You can be loved. You can drink living water. Just as you are.

Let's pray.

Prayer

Loving God, thank You that when we cry by the rivers, You don't walk away. Thank You for Jesus, who gives us living water. Thank You for churches that open their arms. Help us be a place where everyone feels seen, known, and loved — just as they are. Turn our rivers of tears into springs of living water.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thank you. God bless you. You are always welcome here.