

“The One Biblical Story Nobody Will Tell at Christmas Time”

Jeremiah 31:1-17; Matthew 2:1-18

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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Years ago, my friend Jim would preach on Sunday nights at a wealthy retirement home. Some of the regular attenders approached him one day to inform him how they found his reference to “blood” and “sacrifices” in the hymns he chose and the sermons he delivered as offensive, that it gave their religion the appearance of being much too primitive and violent. They suggested that he only preach on positive topics, on those subjects and themes which made them feel better afterwards. In other words, they wanted a faith that was devoid of a cross, a Christ who wasn’t rejected at his birth or doesn’t die for the sins of the world but instead was limited to being a wonderful teacher and healer, a benign Jesus who welcomed little children and promised how everything was going to turn out all right in the end. Jim resigned soon afterwards telling them to find another minister to lead their services.

In this morning’s story, often called “the massacre of the innocents,” many parishioners find the account so disturbing that pastors are loath to preach on it for fear of offending them. They are afraid that it might detract from what we have come to call “the spirit of Christmas” – all those good feelings this season is meant to generate that will help us through the tougher moments we must endure the rest of the year. After all, we want our Christmases to be filled with cheeriness and good will; we try so hard to resurrect many of the same feelings we experienced as a child and so we push the more DISTURBING parts of reality away, at least until after New Year’s. Yet, what makes this text so IMPORTANT is that amid all our fantasies of Santa and Rudolf and the little drummer boy that fill the holiday season, the scriptures strive to keep the story REAL and RELEVANT for only a story rooted in REALITY can possibly provide us with the hope needed to sustain us throughout our lives.

The fact is that the story of the birth of Jesus does contain a DARK side which presents us with a terrifying scene of human tragedy. We’ve spent weeks now preparing for the birth of a baby and yet, no sooner does he enter our world when we are confronted with an account concerning genocide- the systematic elimination of every male child under the age of two in and around the Bethlehem region. Thus within the span of a month, we find our emotions moving from HOPE and EXPECTATION at the promise of Christ’s coming, to JOY AND JUBILATION at his birth a little more than a week ago, to now HORROR AND RAGE in the aftermath of his birth today.

Our New Testament text concerns the visit of Magi to the nativity scene- the Magi being Middle Eastern astrologers who arrive to present gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Holy Family. Seeking that king who is slated to change world history, they follow the star to Judea where they head at once to Herod’s palace to inquire if the birth had taken place THERE. Surely, if royalty has come into the world, wouldn’t it be reasonable to assume that he was born where ALL kings are born- inside the comfort and safety of the king’s PALACE? But Herod has no knowledge of this new king and wants to hear more, not because HE wants to worship and present gifts HIMSELF, but so he can eliminate any possible rivals who might one day vie for his throne.

Herod was a ruthless megalomaniac obsessed with power and keeping it at all costs. When he first became king by rare agreement between Octavian and Mark Antony in 37 B.C., he responded by murdering the entire Sanhedrin- the Jewish High Court. Throughout his more than thirty-year reign, he killed his mother, his wife, and two of his sons which prompted Caesar Augustus himself to say, "It is safer to be a pig in a parent's household than to be a son in Herod's court." His paranoia was such that he had secret police with informers stationed everywhere throughout the kingdom so that NO ONE was safe from the threat of arrest and imprisonment. Knowing how hated he was and how no one would mourn for him when he died, he ordered dozens of executions to take place just before his death so that there would be at least mourners in the city. Fortunately, the order was never carried out. When he died in 4 B.C., his son Archelaus inherited his father's throne and promptly followed in his footsteps by massacring three thousand Jewish leaders. Therefore, when Matthew says that Herod sent his armies throughout the region of Bethlehem to slay every child under the age of two, it was certainly an act in keeping with his murderous nature.

After hearing all of this, you've got to be asking yourselves "Where is the "good news" in all of this? Are we going to walk out of the sanctuary on a real low after being on a tremendous high for most of the past month?" For that, we have to look at this morning's text from Jeremiah. The Old Testament tells us that because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (the sister he didn't want to marry), God apparently closed Rachel's womb while Leah went on to bear him many sons. With a broken heart, Rachel cried out to God that she TOO wanted desperately to be a mother and have children. In his compassion, God relented and she eventually brought forth a son she named "Joseph" meaning "Do it again" or "Let there be another." When she became pregnant AGAIN, something went terribly wrong and she died while giving birth to her second son, but not before naming the child Ben-oni meaning "Son of my sorrow." As Jacob could not bear the mention of sorrow in his name, he re-named the child Ben-jamin meaning "Son of my right hand."

Many years later, Jeremiah was watching as the Babylonians marched Rachel's offspring--the children of Israel--off into exile. To express the terrible deep grief he felt over this, he invoked the name of Rachel and the overwhelming sorrow SHE felt at her initial barrenness. He could only hope that as her heart-felt lamentation caused God to relent and eventually bring forth one of the great patriarchs of Jewish history, God would ONCE AGAIN change his mind and eventually restore his people's fortunes- which God did DO some seventy years later when the Babylonians allowed them to return to their homeland in Judah. Thus for Matthew, Rachel's deep pain and sorrow, which had been echoed by the prophet Jeremiah almost six hundred years earlier, is once again invoked at the slaughter of all those young babies. Just as God was able to bring forth hope and promise from out of her mourning and distress, those mothers of Bethlehem could only pray that--like Jeremiah and like Rachel before HIM-- God would offer THEM some hope from out of the midst of their OWN grief. For Matthew, that hope came with the birth of Jesus the Christ, God entering our world as Emmanuel (or "God with us"). That child, so frail and vulnerable to look upon, represented for Israel and the WORLD the most POWERFUL AND DRAMATIC HOPE IMAGINABLE for he was the DIVINE FULFILLMENT OF MESSIANIC PROMISE!

The GOOD news is that that child in a manger in Bethlehem becomes God's answer to all the tears and all the suffering of every mother in every land throughout every age. You see, Jeremiah doesn't stop there with the verse 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud

lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.’ In the verse that follows Rachel’s lament, Jeremiah adds these words: “Do not weep any longer, for I will reward you. Your children WILL come back to you.” So, Rachel would be comforted AFTER ALL. Here, Jeremiah was promising those mothers that one day, their sons would return from exile in Babylon and their tears of sorrow would be transformed into tears of joy, that their children WOULD be restored to them. When and how, I don’t even think HE knew but he did have a PROMISE- a HOPE given to him by God that he would never let go, one to sustain him and the faith of those parents till the end of their days. This was the same prophet who spoke: “Yea, O people in Zion who dwell at Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you” a few verses later in v.19.

We sing at Christmas time the words of that well-worn carol, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years, Are met in thee tonight,” and it reminds us how the hopes and fears of all those generations--the tears of Rachel and every other mother the world over--were met in that one small child who represented the light and love of God to mankind. For those who look to him in trust, he doesn’t completely take away the sting or sense of loss that each of them feels, but he certainly makes it a whole lot more bearable. If we know that we are not alone in our fears or in our tears, that there are Rachels everywhere who carry a similar burden upon their hearts (and there are); and if we are assured that the Son of God can identify with all the pain and suffering and violence in this world and not be carefully insulated from it (and we are); and if we are given a promise, a simple word of hope from out of the mouth of God himself to the effect that sorrow and suffering and death do NOT have to have the last word (and we are), then regardless of how TERRIFYING and DANGEROUS the world may be which we inhabit, then our tears and our grief DON’T have to last forever. We WILL find comfort in and through that child in the manger- and of that we are PROMISED. He becomes our assurance, our proof that God our Maker--He who created and sustains us--does not abandon us in the moment of our greatest trial, that he will likewise be with US- to strengthen US and carry US through, regardless how difficult the going may get.

Yes, a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation; it was Rachel weeping because her children were no more. As there are STILL Herods in this world inflicting death upon ones so young and so vulnerable, there are also many more RACHELS who remain inconsolable in their grief. And yet this is the world that the Son of God chose to come and make his home in! It demonstrates how NOTHING would deter him from his purpose, that NOTHING would interfere with his plan of saving and reconciling us back to his Heavenly Father- not all the threats of violence we could throw at him, not all the pain and suffering we could inflict upon him.

What we see in this story is that not only is Christ rejected by the world at his crucifixion, but we also see how the world rejected him in his birth. When Luke tells us that "there was no room for him in the inn," he is telling us so much more than that all the rooms of all the inns in Bethlehem had already been rented. Rather, he is asserting that there was no room for him at all in our WORLD, that there were cosmic forces at work conspiring to keep him from entering it and accomplishing his mission to save us. This world hated him before he had even drawn his first breath while Jesus LOVED this world and never ceased loving it, even when we eventually killed him because of that love. He was determined that NOTHING would keep him from entering our world and aligning himself with our lives and eventually saving us from our sins. In the face of our

NO, God said YES! and NOTHING would thwart his divine intentions- in SPITE of all the deceit and hatred and violence we could possibly muster towards him.

My friends, Rachel can STILL be heard weeping for her children but the “good news” is there IS hope, that God DOES offer us consolation. For the gift of a child in a manger two thousand years ago reminds us and it reminds them that they don’t have to weep forever- God has promised to reward them; their children WILL come back to them. As terrifying and dangerous as this world is, He who allowed his own son to born into it and make it his home, He who accompanied him every step of the way in his perilous trek towards that cross, and He who eventually released him from the shackles of death and raised him up in triumph- this same God no less promises to accompany each of US as we make our OWN way through this life. And even when we arrive at the end of our OWN journey, he further assures us that Christ will be there to escort us across death’s doorway into a whole NEW existence- one more beautiful than anything we have ever experienced on THIS side of death. We need never fear being abandoned or overwhelmed for he pledges to be there for us, through the sorrows as well as the joys, in sickness as well as in health, through our failures as well as our successes- and of that, WE can be assured! Amen and amen.