

## sermon 29/12 after CHRISTMAS

### Matthew 2:13-23

'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

What a gut wrenching image, an image that could be set in many places in the world today, in Southern Sudan, in Syria,..  
Genocide, deliberate killing. I have in my mind the vivid images of war artist, George Gittoes from Rwanda, Afghanistan, and his holocaust exhibition..  
This gospel reading so soon after Christmas grounds us in reality. It doesn't allow for any sentimentality, or gooeyness. The Jesus story is set in occupied territory. His family fled for their lives as refugees to Egypt, echoing countless stories in the history of their people. They were saved , but so many others were not...

Some edited reflections from Lutheran pastor, Pam Fickenscher

<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071224JJ.shtml>

'We do not live in a peaceful snow globe, cut off from the world; we live in a world where children die and mothers grieve—not just occasionally, but every day, not just in hospitals but on city streets and in mud huts. We live in a world where the oppressed suffer and the oppressors get away, literally, with murder.

You could make a good argument that we should save this story for another day—Lent, maybe, or some late night adults-only occasion. But our songs of peace and public displays of charity have not erased the headlines of child poverty, gun violence, and even genocide. This is a brutal world. Today the victims are statistically less likely to be Jewish and more likely to be from Darfur, or Zimbabwe, or Syria, Southern Sudan, but the sounds of Rachel weeping for her children are not uncommon. If we could hear them, they would drown out our cheerful, tinny carols every 20 seconds or so.

It's also the same world Jesus' ancestors were born into, that long line of men and women Matthew relays in chapter one. Shall we count how many of them buried a child? Let's be clear: Jesus is a Jew, and as such, in the biblical world, he is always at risk.

Matthew doesn't just tell this story as news. It's a story in the most literary sense, one designed to draw us beyond 'what happened to them' to the depths of 'what is happening to us.' Reading about a Joseph with

prophetic dreams should remind us of another righteous man who ended up exiled from his family in Egypt. Hearing of baby boys slaughtered by the empire would remind Matthew's readers of the way Moses narrowly escaped that fate as well. And any Jew hearing this story in 1st century Palestine would remember the more recent terrors under Antiochus, when any mother caught circumcising her son would be rewarded with a dead baby hung around her neck.

There is another memory Matthew wishes to stir up here, though, one with hope. The evangelist is quoting Jeremiah 31:15, which called to mind the matriarch Rachel as the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and marched families off into exile. Rachel's weeping occupies a key turning point in Jeremiah, when the prophet shifts from declaring God's judgment to promises of hope. "Keep your voice from weeping . . . there is hope for your future . . . your children shall come back."

It also recalls Rachel's grief at the loss of her son Joseph who was sold as a slave into Egypt.

Matthew, invokes Rachel in the midst of this story of God-with-us, the birth of a child whose name is a verb: save. God's salvation may seem far off and inadequate to the mothers who mourn, but the promise is deeper than this moment in time. The threat of this Herod passes for a time, only to be replaced by another Herod, yet another ruler without scruples. But when this child of Rachel returns to Jerusalem as an adult, God enters into the fate of every doomed child and every bereft parent.

For Christians, the birth of Christ can and must remind us that there can be no cheap comfort for those who mourn their children. Cute pageants and pious carols do nothing to stop the devastation of those who have lost a child—for any reason. Only something deeper, God's entering into this world of sorrows, will accomplish the depth of healing, the salvation we need.

This is not a cheap kind of sympathy, a soothing cliché that it will all work out in the end. Mothers still wail, daily. But if God is with us, then perhaps we can bear to listen to the cries of sorrow and pleas for justice of our time too, knowing that all our weeping is gathered up by the one who will turn it into dancing. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from our children, our parents, and even from our enemies. Nothing, not even a bottomless pit of grief or the intractable legacy of injustice, shall keep God away from being with us, yes, from saving us.'

Pam Fickenscher

Rachel Remen tells a story of a mother whose twenty year old son was diagnosed with cancer. She rushed through her house opening all the windows yelling and wailing. They lived in a typical suburb close to neighbours. Her husband followed behind her closing all the windows she had opened, overwhelmed and frightened. He became so concerned he rang the family therapist they had been seeing. He called his wife, 'Mary, the therapist is on the phone.' The wife replied, "The Therapist, the therapist! YOU talk to the therapist, Harry, I'll talk to God!"

For the next eighteen months she dedicated herself to finding help for her son. she tried everything to find cures or at least relief, but the cancer continued to rage through his body, until this once vibrant life was dead in her arms.

'All her love as a mother had not been able to save him. She felt that the life in her had gone with him. She was numb for many months. Inconsolable.'

'About two years after his death, she had gone with her brother to a catholic church that she had never visited before. Unable to pray, she had wandered through the nave, stopping before a statue of the Virgin.

Suddenly the pain that had been frozen in her heart all those months found words. "How could you surrender your son? How could you find a way to live after he died? Where is there any hope of comfort?" Tears rolling down her face, she had told the virgin that she had been good: a good person, a good mother. There is nothing more she could have done.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why?" What possible reason could there be for someone this full of life, this new, this shining, to suffer and die? She knew beyond doubt that she would never, never get over this loss. Still crying, she told the Virgin how young her boy had been, how he still sometimes forgot to eat and how he did not know how to wash his clothes properly. "He needed a mother, Mary," she said in tears. He needs a mother there too.

I do not understand but I give him into your care." Turning away, she had left the church.

A day or two later, as she was driving to work, she was surprised to find herself humming an old hymn under her breathe, a hymn of comfort. She often finds herself humming it. And very gradually, over time, she has found more room to breathe.'

Remen writes:

'I was stunned by the power of her story, awed by the depth of her love for her son and the agony of his loss. I could not speak. Mary looked at me and smiled. "The Mystery, Rachel?" she said. "The Mystery is that it is possible to

be comforted." (p347-348 My Grandfather's Blessings, Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging. Rachel Naomi Remen, Hodder, 2000)

Remen continues p351 'According to Kabbalah, all things can be made holy. Buried in the mundane and even the most difficult is a spark of God that invests life and all of life's experiences.

The light in the world is rarely obvious on the surface of things. Perhaps at the most profound level of service we find ourselves able to help others uncover this, to find in the most challenging and painful of experiences a blessing and a source of strength. In doing so we may bring about the fundamental injunction that begins the world, LET THERE BE LIGHT, and create for ourselves and others, a place of refuge in the darkness.'

For further reflection:

\* What is your visceral response to the "slaughter of the innocents?" Do you identify with those who are rescued or those left behind?

\* What contact do you have with exiles and refugees in your life? In what way can this season be a time to support them?

Philomena film.. forgiveness rather than hate..

Has anyone seen the film Philomena? It is about a woman's search for her son taken from her.....

Susanna Pain 29 December 2013