

## "God Is Our Refuge"

Texts: Isaiah 63:7-9;

Hebrews 2:10-18 (Series A, 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas) Psalm 148;

Matthew 2:13-23

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"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."

Let us pray:

She was the most beautiful daughter of Laban's daughters, when Jacob came to work for them, she stole Jacob's heart the first time he laid eyes on her. Jacob agreed to work seven long years for her and he was good on his word. But when it came time to close the deal Laban tricked him and gave him Leah instead.

Jacob ended up having to work another seven long years for Rachel while learning to live with Leah for whom he didn't bargain. When they finally did get married, Rachel found that she couldn't have children.

Eventually, Rachel did have a child named Joseph. She just didn't get to enjoy him for very long. By the time she gave birth to her second child, her body wasn't up to it.

In her dying breath, she named him ***Benoni***, which means 'child of my sorrow'. Jacob eventually changed it to Benjamin. She became a symbol for Israel, in other words, of inconsolable sorrow.

How can anyone console you when so much that seems to happen to you is unfair and full of sadness? So, when the Babylonians carried off Israel into exile hundreds of years later, Jeremiah wrote that it was like old Rachel still crying out from her grave. Rachel's children were God's children. *Jeremiah 31.20*

As it has often been pointed out by skeptics, the slaughter of Bethlehem's baby boys by Herod is a pious fiction, by some scholars. On the other hand Matthew is doing what Matthew does best, using scripture to interpret scripture.

The slaughter of innocents is a biblical motif, which forms the tale of Moses as well. Moses had to flee from Pharaoh. He stays away until God informs him that it is safe to return.

- So Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. - *Exodus 4.20*
- And he (Joseph) rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel." When it was safe.

It all fits very nicely into what Matthew has in mind to do, which is to remind us that Jesus is the new Moses, the one who will finally and fully lead his people out of bondage. But Matthew's story is more than just *Madrash (collection of Christian writings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century)*. It is a deliberate reminder of the kind of world into which Jesus was born.

While Herod may not have slaughtered Bethlehem's babies, there is no doubt he was a child murderer. He had three of his own children executed under accusation of conspiring against their father: in 7 B.C., his sons Alexander and Arisoboulos by his second wife Marianne (*whom he killed in 29 B.C. for adultery*); and, five days before his own death in 4 B.C., his oldest son, Antipater, by his first wife, Doris.

Herod had been married to a total of ten wives. His murderous behaviour is said to have made Augustus remark that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son. *As Jew, Herod didn't eat pork, but he did murder his sons*).

The brutal face of Herod hangs over the Christmas story like a funeral pall. His absolute disregard for human life that we see again and again throughout scripture and throughout human history.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet...We need to be careful about interpreting Matthew. He is not saying that the murderous events that do happen in the world are God's will.

The message is not that God summons evil to accomplish divine purposes, but that the scripture knows the tragic human destruction woven into the fabric of history and that not even evil in its most catastrophic form, evil as cold and merciless as the murderer of innocent children, can destroy God's ability to save.

- In Moses' story an infant was spared so that a leader could be born to save his people.
- In Jesus' story, the "new Moses" was spared so that a saviour could be born.

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children... Ramah, in other words, is the place of mourning for all of God's people, where the mother of God's children, Rachel, still weeps from her grave.

The poignant picture of a mother weeping for her lost children is used as a foil to the picture of redemption. God is coming to save his people, Matthew wants us to know. And it is as if God is saying,

Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for... they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future,... your children shall come back... *Jeremiah 31.16-17* And the question we need to ask this Christmas is: will they? Will Rachel's children come back?

Few years ago, our world was shock with the events of genocide in Rwanda, it begun as ethic conflict and when the dust settled thousand upon thousands had been killed and millions displaced from their homes.

As I speak to you this moment in villages and towns in Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Buka Haram, Sudan the killings continue, this week in the news we are once again woken by violent streak that exist within the human heart and total disregard for human life.

The slaughter of the innocents in Matthew account may be a pious fiction to some. But it is a fact of life for thousands of men, women and children who are the victims of violence in this world every passing day.

Rachel still cries out from the grave for her children who are no more. We will not return home, not any of us, until we learn to weep with Rachel, until we learn to weep with the God who cannot forget any of Rachel's children.

A rabbi once said, that when God's people suffer, God suffers. That is the reason God called to Moses from a thornbush. Can you think of a more painful place from which to speak? God is speaking in the prelude to this today's text like a aggrieved parent, crying out loud whether Israel will remember and appreciate everything God has done for them.

Then follows a most remarkable assurance. God will come to save his people without using anyone else. God will simply butt in and save his people like a parent who picks up a child and carries him / her.

Just as Herod didn't know about the redemption story, he also didn't know that the power of one child will continually draw us into the future, suggesting a better way of life possible.

God is suggesting that things can change. Just like the child born in a manger, all children represent hope, and what is hope if it is not belief in the redemption that something better awaits us.

- It began when Mary trusted the Angel Gabriel's words.
- It began when Joseph stayed with Mary despite how bad it looked to everyone else.
- It is that redemption the Shepherds witnessed and it is that brought the wise men great joy.

Redemption of hope that began that night, long ago continued with our horrific story today. And while it is easy to wonder why Matthew included such a dark story immediately after the beautiful narrative of Jesus' birth, the reason is this:

So that the church doesn't forget who it is called to be. By telling us this story, Matthew maintains that the birth of Jesus was the beginning of a community of faith, the church, whose understanding of the world is centered on God rather than the empires and kingdoms.

A community of faith based on *hope* rather than *fear*. It is one that recognizes false power when it sees it, for it worships a God who came into our world powerless, and helpless.

New Year's is all about new beginnings. It is the first day, the first Sunday, and the first week of the New Year, and it is filled with opportunities to celebrate. 2022 is over. 2023 is here. As we stand here at the beginning of a New Year it is a good time to reflect on the year that has ended and look forward to the year that has just begun.

It is also a good time for us, God's people to take inventory of our walk with the Lord. We should take a very close look at where we are in our relationship with God. We need to examine ourselves and see where we have been, where we are, and where the Lord wants us to be. This passage gives us the opportunity and the challenge to do just that.

Finally, while a new year seems to bring with it a sense of *hope* for the future, our real hope lies not in a new year, but in a new age. There is coming a day when "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (*Revelation 21:4*), when heaven and earth will come together and God will come to live with His people. And it's all because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Hallelujah. All praise to God. Amen.

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