

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### Matthew 2:13-23 (NRSV)

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." [14] Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, [15] and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

[16] When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. [17] Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

[18] "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."

[19] When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, [20] "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." [21] Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. [22] But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. [23] There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

### A BABY THREATENS NO ONE

A well known historian who was famous for his skepticism toward Christianity attended a Christmas service at the urging of his family. After the service he approached the preacher smiling.

He said, "I've finally worked it out. I understand why people like Christmas."

The preacher who had heard of this guy's reputation replied somewhat sarcastically, "Really? Do tell."

The historian said, "A baby threatens no one. So the whole thing is a happy event that means nothing at all."

In one sense the historian was right. That's how we often celebrate Christmas. It's a happy event that threatens no one and in the end means nothing at all.

It's a story we love to tell, the story about the sweet baby Jesus in the idyllic manger of our dreams. There are angels and familiar carols. It makes everyone feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Unfortunately, it's not possible to celebrate Christmas in a snow globe. The world keeps intruding. The week after the happy event there's always some bad news.

## THE WORLD INTRUDES

This week the former Prime Minister of Pakistan has been assassinated, and one of the world's nuclear powers is on the brink of chaos. I know that Pakistan is half a world away, but the terrorists within her borders are the very ones who orchestrated the attacks of 9/11 within our borders.

The TV shows people filled with grief and rage. It is hard to contemplate. I quickly turn to an inane sports report on ESPN.

Merry Christmas and break out the booze for the coming New Year! If only we could remain at the manger just a bit longer, if only we could just think happy thoughts about peace on earth and good will toward men and women. But, alas the world just won't let us.

Sometimes I wish the world wouldn't insist on messing up our holidays. I wish we could tell the story of the baby Jesus just a little bit longer. I wish we could dream about a different world for just one more day. But, the world

keeps intruding, forcing us to move on to a different story, a story that is threatening and disheartening.

No, we won't be allowed to tell the Christmas story until it comes around next year. The world is forcing us to move on to tell the story of nations in turmoil and politicians striving for power and influence. We wish we could avoid such stories, but ready or not, soon we will turn away from the good news, the gospel to hear the bad news that comes at such a rapid pace these days.

How did commentator William Friedman put it? The world is flat; the world because of advances in technology and transportation is effectively smaller than ever. Our businesses and our economies are interconnected. What happens halfway around the world can have dire consequences for our own way of life.

The days have long since passed when this country was insulated and isolated from the tragedies that abound in this world. No longer are we protected by the oceans that surround us. Like it or not the bad news is not just half way around the world. It is at our very doorstep.

## PERSONAL BAD NEWS

Bad news also comes in a personal as well as a global way. Many of you have been struggling with your own bad news this Christmas.

While everyone else has been indulging in nostalgia and eggnog, you have been telling and retelling your own sad story of disappointment. You may have even mustered a bit of sympathy for Mr. Scrooge who wanted to boil those folks who uttered a mindless Merry Christmas in their own holiday pudding!

This past week I read a heart wrenching story of a choir director whose infant daughter died just before Christmas. It cast a pall over the entire congregation. There was no music that year at Christmas.

The minister said that the congregation rejoiced when the director found the courage to resume her duties later the next year. But, when the next

Christmas rolled around the choir director told her pastor, "I'm sorry, but I can't promise anything for the Christmas program this year. The very thought of three year olds running around in angel costumes is more than I can bear."

The minister understood. She had been with this family as they went through their terrible struggle the year before. She knew that the phrase, "Unto us a son is born" would always leave a bitter taste in their mouth.

The pastor said that she was embarrassed at how easily she wept for the choir director's son. She was having trouble keeping her "professional distance" in this case. She could easily look at her own children and imagine what it would be like to lose one of them. She said that it is too awful to think about how fragile and unfair life can be.

But, the choir director, like all those who suffer significant grief, needs to tell her story over and over again. She feels compelled to tell the story. And yet none of us want to hear that story. We encourage those who grieve to move beyond their grief because it is too difficult for us to bear. We do not want to contemplate such a terrible thing. We do not want to stay too long with them in that lonely place of grief.

#### RACHAEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN

A phrase from our text for today expresses that sense of sorrow and pain. When the babies of Bethlehem were slaughtered, it stirred a primal sense of sorrow that had always been a part of the story of God's people. In Matthew 2:18 we read,

"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."

The birth of Jesus was a happy, non-threatening event for us. But, it wasn't that way for Herod. He was deeply disturbed by the idea that one who was born "king of the Jews". From Herod's standpoint, there was only one king, and he was it.

When the wise men tricked him and went home another way, Herod hatched his own plan to rid the land of any pretenders to the throne. He had all the children in Bethlehem that were two years old or under killed.

Now there are some who would argue that this murder of the innocents never happened. Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us quite a bit about Herod, but he never mentions this atrocity.

One preacher said that he once told a congregation in a sermon that this terrible tale may never have happened, and they all thanked him after the service because they didn't want to believe it. It was a story that they didn't want to hear.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Josephus doesn't tell this tale in his history of the Jewish people, he does tell us enough about Herod to let us know that this kind of atrocity was an everyday thing with King Herod. Herod was paranoid. He was obsessed with maintaining control. And this obsession led him to kill numerous advisors. On one occasion Herod even killed his own wife and children to satisfy his paranoid delusions.

Herod's murderous ways led Caesar Augustus to quip that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of Herod's sons. It was a lot funnier in Greek. The word for pig and the word for son sound alike. Jews wouldn't kill and eat pigs. They weren't kosher. But, Herod would kill his sons in a paranoid quest to maintain power.

Professor Stanley Hauerwas said of this story, "Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants [like Herod]."

## HEROD AND CHRISTMAS

But, even if the story is true, why do we have to tell it? Why does the church have to mess up the first Sunday after Christmas with such a tale? Surely there is a more appropriate time to tell this story ... perhaps at a late night adults-only service during Lent?

But, no, every year we are confronted with this story. Couldn't we go just one year without hearing the story of Rachael weeping for her children?

I have come to believe that in order to truly celebrate Christmas, in order for the good news to really be good, we have to tell the whole story. And the whole story is not just about a baby born in Bethlehem.

It is also the story of babies slaughtered in Bethlehem. It is not only the promise of peace on earth; it is also the story of the first Christmas Grinch or the man one commentator called "The Christmas Monster."

## THE INQUISITION

In the Presbyterian Outlook the editor told of a recent mission trip to Peru. He said that on mission trips he had learned to expect the unexpected and that this trip was no different.

He talked about the good work being done by Presbyterians in difficult situations. He felt humbled by what they had done, and their faith had exposed what he called the hollow materialism in his own life.

But, one surprise was totally unexpected. On his first day in Lima, he took a tour of the Inquisition Museum. It was next to the Peruvian Congress building and is one of Lima's most popular and frequently visited museums.

The building showcases a beautifully appointed courtroom where tribunals assessed the heresy accusations of the prosecutors. And then the visitors were walked through the underground and unlighted dungeon where the accused and condemned were held.

They portrayed in gory detail the forms of torture used their ... including the pouring of water into the mouth of a mannequin strapped to a gurney. He said that it reminded him of a primitive precursor to today's waterboarding.

The guidebooks point out that the public burning of heretics, especially Spanish Jews, was ordered from here. The museum acknowledges that all this took place from 1570 to 1820 ... fully 250 years of Peruvian history.

While they point out that this practice was imported from Spain, they don't feign innocence. He was surprised that the Peruvians were so willing to tell a story that was so hard to hear.

But, his surprise would only increase. En route to a one day excursion to Machu Picchu, one of the wonders of the world, he flew to the Andes mountain village of Cuzo. It was a picturesque city that had a magnificent Roman Catholic cathedral. He said that the cathedral with its five naves was large enough to seat most of the town.

He said that the cathedral extended a strange welcome to visitors. The tourists' entrance on the left side of the building walks them by an outbuilding on which there is a prominent sign, The Place of the Inquisition. According to the tour guide, hundreds of townspeople were tortured and even executed there.

The editor said that what was remarkable about that building was that it wasn't found alongside a government building or on the campus of a secular university or adjacent to a synagogue. It was right there at a Roman Catholic Church. He wrote, "It confesses to every visitor that church's greatest guilt, its darkest hours, when it violated common decency in its pursuit of religious purification."

## THE HOLOCAUST

The editor remembered that the Inquisition was neither the first time nor the last time that religious people treated the "infidels" in horrific ways. He remembered being a part of a memorial service for the victims of the Holocaust at a local Jewish synagogue.

He wrote, "Pulsating around the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and around the litanies of prayer and Scripture, the liturgy beat the refrain, 'Never again.' My heart pounded in that rhythm, as I identified both with victim and victimizer."

It boggles my mind that there are some who even deny the existence of the Holocaust despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. I can only believe that they don't want to hear the story of Rachael weeping for her children.

The story interferes with their claim to power and innocence. They know that if these stories were denied there would be nothing to stop them from making their own Herod-like moves against God's people.

## RACHAEL WEeping TODAY

The Bible tells us that Rachael weeps for her children and refuses to be consoled. This is not only the tale of what a despot named Herod did long ago. This is the story of sorrow and heartache that continues even today.

Today people just like Joseph and Mary are displaced by the power of unjust tyrants and are forced to take refuge in a foreign land. Today people just like Joseph and Mary fear for the lives of their children in an economically deprived area and immigrate to a place that is far from home. Today mothers and fathers weep inconsolably over the premature loss of a son or daughter and refuse to be consoled.

The temptation is to refuse to hear such stories. Oh, perhaps we might listen the first time or two. But, then the pain is too much to bear. We don't want to hear the cry of Rachael any more.

We tell her that she needs to get over it. We tell her that time heals all wounds. We tell her that she should be grateful for the children she still has at home. Why ruin the rest of your life with sorrow over this one child?

Rachael will often respond to our advice with an uncomfortable silence. She knows that her pain is too much for us to bear. But, this does not make her pain stop.

## THE COURAGE TO WEEP

Sometimes people ask me what they can do when a person has lost a loved one. How can they be of help? What they want me to do is tell them some clever word to say, some verse of Scripture that will help the grieving person find faith again. But, alas there is no such magic bullet.



I tell them there is one thing that they can do, but it is not easy. It will require great courage and strength on their part. They can listen to their friend's story of grief and pain ... not once, not twice ... but as many times as the friend cares to share the story. This is a costly ministry because we will be caught up in the pain of the one who suffers. If we truly listen to Rachael, we will understand the meaning of the word despair. We will not be able to maintain a cool, professional distance. We will find ourselves shedding a tear as well.

Why in the world would we want to do something like this? Why would we want to hear stories about the slaughter of innocent babies in Bethlehem or the Inquisition or the Holocaust? Why would we want to hear the terrible details when a friend suffers a terrible loss? Isn't there enough pain in our world without allowing Rachael's sorrow to become a part of our life?

Pain has always been a part of Jesus' story. The beginning of his life foreshadows the end. The cross looms over the manger in this story about Herod. And the cross looms over our lives as well.

The question for us is the same question that Jesus asked his disciples. Do we believe enough to embrace the pain and suffering of others? Do we believe enough in the power of the cross to take up the cross and follow him?

Do we believe in the good news of peace on earth, good will toward men and women enough to confront the Herods of the world who cynically kill others in order to advance their own political ambitions? Do we believe in the power of resurrection enough to sit in the place of unspeakable sorrow, knowing that there is nothing we can say or do to take away Rachael's pain?

## THE STORY OF SALVATION

The story of Rachael's sorrow is part of a greater story.

You'll remember that the first Rachael was the favorite wife of her husband, Jacob. But, Rachael couldn't have children. And this was made all the more unbearable by the fact that her sister Leah (who was also married to Jacob) had many children.

But, finally Rachael did have a child. His name was Joseph. Roughly translated his name meant “do it again”. And then Rachael had a second child, but there were serious complications in the birth of the child. Before Rachael died, she named her second son, Benoni which means “son of my sorrow”.

Jacob could not bear the sound of his beloved’s sorrow in this baby’s name, so he called the child Ben-jamin, "Son of my right hand." This second name lifted a burden from father and son, but it also silenced the dying mother’s voice.

For a thousand years Rachel rested in deep silence out there in her makeshift tomb along the roadside near Bethlehem. Then came a day when Jeremiah was watching as Babylonian soldiers marched Rachel’s offspring, children of Israel, naked and trembling along that same road toward exile far away.

This prophet, himself so intimate with heartbreak that he wished both he and his mother had perished on the day of his birth, could not bear this grief alone. For company in sorrow, he called mother Rachel from her tomb and gave voice again to her cries that refuse all consolation.

And that’s where we get the Old Testament quote from Jeremiah in our lesson for today. And so, once again the inconsolable Rachael is called upon to express the grief of God’s people.

#### A SIGN OF HOPE

But, just as Jeremiah’s quote is set in the context of a promise, the promise that one day God’s people would return from exile; so the sorrow at the slaughter of the innocents is set in the context of the incarnation.

In the middle of a world where tyrants kill little children a child is born who will bring salvation to all people. A sign of hope is given that will not be silenced by any political or religious power.

God will not be defeated by Herod or Caesar or even sin and death.

There are many illusions in this passage to the faith stories of the past. The killing of the children reminds us of how the firstborn males of the Israelites were killed in Egypt and how Moses was spared that fate. Jesus and his parents coming out of Egypt remind us of how God led his people out of captivity into the Promised Land.

But, even those great stories of salvation pale in comparison to the salvation that God was bringing his people in Jesus. Rachael might not be consoled today, but one day she and all like her will be consoled. One day sin and even death itself will be defeated.

Until that day, let us hear with the clarity the hard stories of life. Let us have the courage to deny ourselves and take up the cross.

Let us hear Rachael's cry believing that pain and sorrow will not have the last word. Let us follow where God leads knowing that he will lead us out of captivity, out of the wilderness and back to the home where we belong.

Amen.