

## **SERMON CCI Matthew 2: 13-23 The Children Are Crying**

Today's worship has a different tone. We've sung This is Our Father's World and about God's comfort and care, we've read from a psalm that God gave us for those moments when we wonder why we're suffering, and our prayer time together changed as we focused our prayers on those among us and around us who are suffering and may identify with the psalm's poignant words. My heart has been touched this morning.

Why did our worship change today? Because today's scripture reading tells the story of a dark time with an important message for living today. It takes place right after last Sunday's familiar story of the magi bringing their gifts to Bethlehem to worship the one born King of the Jews. We celebrated that God's love is for all people anywhere and asked what gift we bring. And we heard that the magi returned home by a different route than Herod had asked. And aren't there times in each of our lives when we need to follow a different route than others want us to go because we are led by God's Spirit to do so?

Then the darkness begins. Because when Herod found out that the magi had left for their home without stopping back to give him the scoop on Jesus, he was furious! And he reacted the way he was well known to react - with death. Although Herod had been named the King of the Jews by the Roman Senate, he was not a Jew. Herod was an insecure leader who was known for his paranoia and brutality. He even had his favorite wife and some of his sons murdered when he suspected them of treachery. Because he was not well-respected, he decreed that forty Jewish nobles should be brought to Jericho to be killed when he died, so that there would be abundant mourning throughout the land at his death. Thankfully, the son who succeeded him decided not to carry out this final wish.

In his anger and paranoia, Herod responded to the magis' treachery by ordering the slaughter of all infant boys in Bethlehem who were 2 years and younger. Why 2 years- because the magi had told him the star they had followed had appeared about 2 years earlier. So he ordered all boys 2 years and younger in Bethlehem to be killed to be sure he didn't miss the newborn king. But God protected his Son and told Joseph in a dream to take his family to Egypt. So Joseph took his family and hurried to Egypt and stayed there until Herod died.

This story has three distinct parts: God's call to Joseph to take his family to Egypt, what happened "meanwhile, back at the ranch" in Bethlehem, and God's call to Joseph to come back from Egypt to settle in Galilee.

Matthew wrote this story for his Jewish readers who knew their history to connect Jesus being hidden in Egypt to protect him from Herod's slaughter in Bethlehem to the baby Moses being hidden to protect him from Pharaoh's slaughter of all newborn Hebrew boys in Egypt. Matthew also connects Joseph's return from Egypt to the rescue of God's people out of Egypt saying, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Matthew connects the story of Jesus' protection to God's provision for his people throughout history. Other connections can be made between Jesus as a refugee and God's concern for refugees throughout the world today as they try to protect their children from powerful forces. There is much here to preach about God in this story, and his care for his Son. Isn't that what we learned in Sunday School as we colored the picture of Mary and Jesus riding on a donkey with Joseph walking beside them on their way to Egypt that night? Our God's bigger than Herod.

But nagging in the back of my mind is the horror of what happened "meanwhile, back at the ranch" in Bethlehem. Now as an adult, I understand it's important to also pay attention to the middle part of the story we didn't hear much about as children, the part that speaks of an unspeakable tragedy.

*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. 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 are no more."*

Who was Rachel? We find Rachel's story in the book of Genesis; Rachel was the favored wife of Jacob, who was the favored **son** of Isaac, who was the favored son of Abraham, the father of Judaism. Rachel and Jacob had two sons, Benjamin and Joseph, who would become two of the 12 tribes of Israel. But Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, and Jacob buried her in the city of Ramah, about 6 miles from Bethlehem. Many years later in Jeremiah's day, Ramah was a place where the Babylonians gathered the Jews to deport them to captivity, and Jeremiah imagined Rachel weeping from her grave because her people were gone. In Matthew's story Rachel weeps again with the mothers weeping over their bleeding and dead young sons and perhaps even their husbands. The grief and loss was overwhelming. Losing a child is hard enough; having them slaughtered in front of you is unimaginable. It's a dark scene and the image of Rachel weeping tears at our souls.

One question has been bothering humankind since the beginning of human history: How can a just and loving God allow such evil to exist? How can God let innocent people suffer, while evil people thrive and prosper? The book of *Job* is filled with this question. There is even a name for the problem: theodicy is the question about why a loving and just God permits evil. But giving it a name, and even knowing that brilliant theologians have been struggling for centuries to find an answer, doesn't help when it becomes personal. When it's your child being put to the sword, the question is no longer hypothetical. The pain is real, and the question we ask is "Why, God?" Like Psalm 44 asked earlier.

Make no mistake: the slaughter of those young boys in Bethlehem was not God's idea. It was Herod's. The Bible does not say that God has a reason for everything that happens as though God makes everything happen, even the most heinous acts. And bad things do not just happen to bad people. Jesus made that clear after the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed killing some of the people sitting nearby. People wondered whether those who were killed were worse sinners than those who survived and Jesus said "No, it could happen to any of you." No, this slaughter was not God's; it belongs at the feet of Herod alone. The buck stops with him.

Matthew is the only source to describe Herod's murder of the children in Bethlehem. Some scholars think the event wasn't included in history for 2 reasons: 1, because it was only one of many atrocities committed by Herod, and 2, because the number of children killed was probably no more than twenty, since Bethlehem was a small village. Such violence against innocent infants and toddlers may also have been unremarkable, because children were considered as little more than property at that time. But even without other historical evidence, it rings true with Herod's character. And Matthew includes this massacre in Jesus' story as an atrocity and names it as such. Rachel wept for her children because they were no more, and God wept too.

This story rings true with the world we live in today. Herod was not the only person of power who has slaughtered people for his own purposes. Surely Rachel wept again as 6 million of her people died at the hands of Hitler's Nazis in World War 2. Heinous. The crown prince of Saudi Arabia orders the murder and dissection of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in an embassy in Turkey. Reprehensible. Bashar al Assad, President of Syria gasses his own people. Despicable. ISIS decapitates non-Muslims and slaughters thousands. Contemptible. The list is endless. How many mothers around the world are weeping as their children and

loved ones die violently in places like Sandy Hook, Colorado, Seattle, San Bernardino, Paris, Sudan, Syria, Bosnia, and more. How many more grieve their children caught in trafficking, drug addiction, or are abused or bullied. Atrocities against children and people of all ages are just as real now as they were in Bethlehem.

Even closer to home, there are people in this room and in our families and friends who have suffered the terrible loss of children. Maybe they did not die violent deaths, as those twenty children in Bethlehem did, but the loss is still real. We know what it means to weep with Rachel, who will not be consoled, because her children are no more. And even more of us know the pain of losing a long-time husband or wife, sister or brother, father or mother, or friend. The tears continue in every generation.

So, we may ask, “Why, God? Where is the good news in this story?” Even hearing that Matthew is painting the bigger picture of God’s providence and protection for his people throughout history may not help. Sometimes the pain is so deep, that the promises of God don’t even slow the tears. And we who want so much to help someone in despair, can feel helpless to diminish their pain because like Rachel, their loved one or their home or their dream is no more.

It’s a dangerous thing to be human, to face the fact of our own mortality. The Good News is not always sweetness and light. The baby Jesus in the manger may have dodged Herod’s bullet, but he won’t be able to dodge Pilate’s and he will die on a cross as a young man. God had to watch his own Son, his *only* Son, die a horrible death. And God grieves.

God grieves all the Herods and the Pharaohs and those who would snuff out people’s lives. God grieves us when we turn away from him. God grieves as only a bereft parent can grieve. That is why this story is part of the Christmas story. Christ came to be God with us – Immanuel. He came to be God with us in our sorrow, God with us in our fear, God with us in our wandering, God with us. Always.

Christ went into every dark place we humans must go, even into the darkness of the grave. But when he rose again, he conquered the darkness of death. Death and darkness do not have the last word on our lives; God does. There is no darkness that can frighten God and God will bring justice in His time. If not here, then in heaven, where Revelation 21 tells us that he will finally wipe away all tears and sickness, pain, and death will be only a distant memory. In the words sung by Pauline, “Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”

Where is God in the tears? God is with us. And his lovingkindness and promises are true even when the pain is so deep we cannot feel their truth. God is with us when we come alongside one another to shoulder the burden and lift the prayers they cannot pray. We bring a bit of heaven on earth each time we do. God's presence with us, and his people around us bring light in the darkness and healing.

One last observation from this story. Joseph had a quiet role in this story, but it was an important one. Only Joseph had the dreams with the angel. Only Joseph knew the magnitude of his task to protect the Messiah from the danger of Herod's soldiers. And just as Mary did not argue with the angel who told her she would give birth to the Savior of the world, Joseph did not argue with the angel who said, "Go...tonight!" He just went. He answered God's call.

God is calling us today. He is calling us to be His voice in a world where violence is frequent and wisdom and grace are rare. Sometimes he calls us to challenge the way things are and call what's evil by its rightful name. Sometimes he calls us to be the gentle presence of God for those who suffer violence and loss, to let them know that God is with them.

Whether we are called to Haiti to build a school or to Tent City 4 with kerosene and cookies, to the federal detention center to speak on behalf of refugees or to Congress to speak on behalf of the poor, whether we give offerings to Union Gospel Mission so they can serve the homeless, or we put our own arms around those who grieve and weep together, and when we spread hope to those who have lost it, God calls us. May we, Community Church of Issaquah, continue to answer that call without hesitation like Joseph, knowing that God is with us.  
*Immanuel. Amen.*