

Rachel Is Weeping

On the wall of my kitchen I have a series of cookie molds. Many of them are replicas of molds that were carved in wood over 500 years ago, when the cookies that were pressed were used to tell stories visually because many people were unable to read or write.

Unsurprisingly, many of these special molds are religious in nature, and depict famous scenes like the nativity, the visit of the magi, and famous saints from history. In amongst them is the image of a woman being led by her husband on a donkey, holding her infant child as they flee their home for safe harbor in Egypt.

The Flight to Egypt, as it is known, has long held a special place in the Christian imagination. Centuries of Christian art and critical scholarship attest to this. For much of the history of the church, this story was considered so vital, so important to understanding the mystery of Christmas, so central to knowing who Christ is that it was given its very own standing Feast Day on the fourth day of Christmas. Nonetheless, it appears that artists and bakers alike rather preferred to paint and to carve images of the holy family fleeing on a donkey. It was far more comfortable than depicting what the holy family was fleeing from.

But that is precisely where we find ourselves this Sunday. The Slaughter of the Innocents, as it is known, is often preached with disclaimers and content warnings attached, if it is preached at all. It features an intimidating cast of characters, to be sure—a messenger from God who warns Joseph in a dream of the nightmare that is coming, a city that will soon be filled with the victims and perpetrators of senseless violence, and at the center of it all, a vengeful and evil King plotting genocide. Even from the distance of nearly 2000 years, it is an awful story.

And it all begins with one very bad king. Based on everything we know, King Herod was exactly the kind of man that he seems to be in this story. According to the historical record, he was known to be clever and calculating, but also paranoid and grudge-holding. He survived more than one poisoning attempt on his life, and until the day he died he was convinced that his family members were out to get him. In the twilight of his reign, he was personally responsible for the deaths of three of his sons, one of whom he murdered just 5 days before his own rather gruesome death. In the Antiquities, the historian Josephus recounts that, as Herod realized he was dying, he instructed his guards bring to him all of the principal men of the Jewish region, one from every family, and shut them up in the local stadium. Then he summoned his own children and made them swear to massacre those same men when he died in order to ensure that the city would be thrust into a period of sincere mourning in his name. If they will not cry for me, he thought, at least they will cry at the right moment.

In other words, although we cannot confirm that Herod might have been so callous as to murder a horde of babies and toddlers, it also would not have been inconceivable to imagine that he **might** do such a thing, especially if his legacy and kingship was at stake. It was, as they say, on brand.

So when we reach this Sunday, close on the heels of Christmas, and find ourselves witnesses not to the angel choirs of Christmas Eve, but rather to a chorus of terrorized cries from the women of Bethlehem, I wonder whether perhaps it might be appropriate for us to pause and consider, just for a second, what kind of world this is that our Lord and Savior was born into.

What sort of world is this, where power-hungry, self-interested men play games with the lives of ordinary people? Was there something special about this moment and this place that is significant to understanding who God is? What God came to do? Who Immanuel, God-with-us, came to heal and save? What did it mean, that in the words of John's Gospel, that Jesus came to bring light to this darkness, and that this darkness would not overcome him?

In other words, what would this text have us know about the nature of God?

When you have dedicated your life to the study and explication of the Word of God to the people who gather in God's name, one of your tasks is to understand the text, not only through the lens of your own understanding, but as it has been reflected through history. And one of the things that I find notable about **this** text is that, in reading the words of those who have considered this text before us, it **resists** being explained. Centuries of historians, in fact, have struggled to come up for a tidy reading that explains why God would allow something like this to happen. Rather, this text emotes. It engages us beyond the point of reason, goes right for the guts and hits us at the core of who we are.

Instead of offering answers, great minds are more often left pondering what this could mean, like Mary, much like the Rev. Robert Jamieson, who in his commentaries is moved to cry out:

O ye mothers of Bethlehem! Methinks I hear you asking why your innocent babes should be the ram caught in the thicket, while Isaac escapes. I cannot tell you, but one thing I know, that ye shall, some of you, live to see a day when that Babe of Bethlehem shall be Himself the Ram, caught in another sort of thicket, in order that your babes may escape a worse doom than they now endure. And if these babes of yours be now in glory, through the dear might of that blessed Babe, will they not deem it their honor that the tyrant's rage was exhausted upon themselves instead of their infant Lord?"

This pastor, who dedicated his life's work to making sense of the Scripture, found himself at a loss to explain the vicious slaughter of innocent children.

And then there is John Calvin, who himself experienced the loss of a child, and, upon considering this text, could draw few conclusions but only observed that "even this massacre

could not prevent Christ from appearing shortly afterwards as the Redeemer of the whole nation.”

It is a text so troubling that it is really no wonder that we preach it publicly only once every three years, on a Sunday when there is likely to be few people to hear it.

And yet.

It will not go away. It will not be silenced or relegated to a footnote of some distant, defanged history, because the awful truth of Matthew 2 is that this tale of terror, of innocent children mowed down by power hungry tyrants, is not confined to Herod’s day but rather continues to play out, across the breadth of history.

The ugly truth is not that this story is believable because Herod was a tyrant, but rather it is believable because humans, in their zeal for power, are capable of inflicting enormous amounts of pain and suffering upon the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the young. The innocents of this world continue to be massacred by the powerful and well-connected of this world, the cries of Rachel echo in the grieving cries of the inconsolable, and we, who gather here surrounded by the signs of Christ’s presence in this world, must ask ourselves: what is it all for?

Perhaps the miracle is that Christ comes at all. That to a world that is capable of this much cruelty, God sent God’s own son to take a place amongst us. Not just to save us, but to identify with us, to experience the joy and the pain and the fear and cruelty of being alive in a world that can be both exhilarating and also incredibly dangerous.

I wonder if perhaps this text is as much a reminder of God’s redemptive hand as it is a recognition that the world we live in right now is not all that different from Herod’s Bethlehem. For Herod may be long dead, but children still are slaughtered, their families still are denied refuge, their mothers are still crying in the streets. The light of Bethlehem simultaneously announces the birth of the Savior and exposes the unvarnished truth that the world can be and often is a dark and dangerous place for the poor and the vulnerable.

Perhaps Christ needed to come into a moment this dark not in spite of it, but because of it. Because we needed to see that light can shine in the darkest corners of human history. Because we needed to understand that our basest cruelty cannot overcome God’s infinite love. That the God of the poor and the weak and the powerless is greater than our collective indifference. And perhaps Christ steps into this moment in history because God knew that we could not find our way out of the darkness of our own making on our own. We needed someone to show us another way.

It is most often pointed out that the story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel According to Matthew is intended to parallel the birth and life story of the prophet Moses. So perhaps it is helpful to remember that, for the people of Israel, the story of Moses was one of God’s identification and solidarity with an enslaved and vulnerable people. God sent Moses into the darkness of

captivity and suffering under Pharoah with the promise that freedom was coming. Not without cost. Not without suffering. But in spite of it.

Perhaps, too, as we ponder the mystery of the Christmas season, we would do well to remember that what is most important in the Christmas story is not what happens in the halls of power. This is not a story of conquest by and for the powerful, but rather it is centered on a promise of reversal and redemption for the discounted, the disregarded, and the expendable. It is a promise to those who refuse to be consoled, who weep as they wait upon that bright day when the justice of God will prevail.

So I wonder once again: What does this story tell us about the nature of God? Perhaps nothing more important than this: That when the hurting people of God cried out in the darkness "O Come, O Come, Immanuel," the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Rachel and Leah listened, and made haste to come to tend to their sorrows, and that God abides with them still, and with all who recognize Christ within them. Until Christ comes again.

The Work of Christmas (By Howard Thurman)

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace amongst the people,
To make music in the heart.