

Sermon – January 1st, 2023 @ BMC

A voice was heard in Ramah that could not be consoled,
As Rachel wept for children she could no longer hold.
For Herod ruled the nation, yet feared the Infant King.
How great the devastation that fear and anger bring!

The first Stanza of Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn "A Voice was heard in Ramah," draws us right into the *political* drama of Christmas. Her hymn reminds us that the Christmas story is not just poor shepherds watching their flocks by night, angelic hosts bringing good news of great joy and peace on earth, not just a humble Father and Mother and their gentle babe lying in a manger. The Christmas story is all those things, to be sure, but it is also a story of Mary, Joseph, and little baby Jesus fleeing the violent tyrant Herod, it is also about Herod's bloodthirsty rage over the ascendancy of a political rival in the newborn King, it is about the slaughter of innocents, and it is about the pain and mourning that follows that slaughter:

Matthew 2:18 "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."

Matthew's allusion to Rachel's weeping digs deep into Israel's history to make sense of the suffering brought by Herod's campaign of death. Rachel, a significant Matriarch in Israel's long story of promise, died as so many women have over the centuries, in childbirth (Genesis 35:15-19). Rachel was on the road with her husband Jacob, pursuing God's promise by leaving home, just as Sarah had travelled away from home with Abraham years before. But it was while on the road that Rachel went into labour, and while giving birth to her son Benjamin there, she died in the process.

In Genesis chapter 35 we learn that following her death, Jacob buried Rachel on the road to Ephrath (a place later associated with Bethlehem), and that he set up a pillar there to mark the spot of her passing (Genesis 35:20). It would be generations later, as the people of Israel went

into exile, forcibly leaving behind the land of promise that Rachel had herself sought, that the prophet Jeremiah would invoke Rachel's tears as tears shed for the lost children of Israel – many of them overcome by the ravages of war and exiled from their homeland – she wept for they were “no more.” Later Rabbinic authors reflected on Jeremiah's invocation of Rachel's weeping, suggesting that Jacob had somehow foreseen that Israel would later pass by Rachel's grave on the way into exile and so he buried her on the road “so that she could plead for mercy for them.”¹ Rachel, in this interpretation, becomes an intercessor for Israel, calling out to God on their behalf in their time of suffering. Before this Rabbinic interpretation, the Gospel of Matthew also creatively invoked Jeremiah's words about Rachel's tears as he tried to make sense of the tragic events that took place around the time of Jesus' birth. Rachel's loud lamentation, for Matthew, could be heard in the tears of the many mothers in Bethlehem mourning the loss of their little ones at the hands of a brutal King.

As the scripture passage reads, there can be no consolation in the face of such brutality – such loss. No words of cheap comfort and great joy; no easy claims of “peace on earth” will console a mother who has lost children to the heartless powers of raging nations. In such circumstances, lament is the only appropriate response – and so Rachel cries out, indeed all the “Rachels” cry out – a voice of lamentation that is heard far and wide. But as the faithful through history have long known, lament is powerful precisely because it will not let political brutality go unanswered; it will not let it have the last word. Instead, lament cries for the overturning of a world where young children are sacrificed at the altar of nations, kings, and their aspirations. At the heart of the Christmas Gospel is the powerful, revolutionary cry of Rachel, a cry for a new

¹ This interpretation appears in the *Genesis Rabbah* although I found the reference in the article “Rachel Weeps in Ramah: Of all the Patriarchs, God Listens Only to Her,” as found at <https://www.thetorah.com/article/rachel-weeping-in-ramah-of-all-the-patriarchs-god-listens-only-to-her>

world and the babe who has come to bring it. And so, Christmas brings no cheap comfort or easy “peace.” Rather, God’s incarnation in Jesus becomes comfort and great joy for the oppressed, but discomfort for the oppressors, the Herod’s; God’s incarnation becomes “peace on earth” for those under the threat of violence, but disruption for those who use violence and force to secure their own “peace” at the expense of others. Jesus, God’s presence in person, is a threat to the powers of darkness and just in this way is he also comfort and peace on earth for those sitting in darkness, in the shadow of lament.

As I thought about Rachel’s weeping and the way that Matthew alludes to it when describing Herod’s brutal campaign of killing in his attempt to be rid of Jesus, I couldn’t help but have this picture in my mind, of Mary and Joseph fleeing Bethlehem with baby Jesus and passing Rachel’s grave along the way. Did Mary know what Herod had planned? Did she weep and lament too, not just out of fear for her own child’s safety, but with and for all the other mothers who would not escape Herod’s rage? Did she cry out to God with Rachel, cry out on behalf of the children who would be no more? We don’t know, but what we do know is that Mary and Joseph trusted that Jesus was God with their people in all their distress – that he was to be the promised savior, and so, heeding the Angel’s message and managing to escape, they faithfully carried Jesus away until Herod met the fate that all tyrants do – he died. His rage, his brutish violence could do nothing to stop him from meeting his end and facing the judgment of God. Keeping Jesus safe, Mary and Joseph gave God in flesh time to grow a new world, a new kingdom opposed to all kingdoms that are responsible for the loud lamentation of mothers like Rachel.

It’s not hard to hear Rachel weeping today as well, is it? We could multiply Jeremiah’s words a thousand times over, couldn’t we?

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

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

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

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

That last one might have felt a bit jarring, but we must hear it too, for Rachel's cry is not heard only in "far-off," war-torn countries, but on our own doorstep as well. It can be heard wherever and whenever the kingdoms of this world are willing to sacrifice the most vulnerable for the sake of securing the privileges of the powerful. So how do we respond to Rachel's cry this Christmas season? Perhaps there is no better way than to fully take to heart the final stanza of our hymn of preparation:

O Prince of Peace, you lead us in ways of truth and grace.
May we be brave to practice your peace in every place
To love each fear-filled nation, to serve each troubled street.
How great the celebration when peace and justice meet!

As today's story has shown us, practicing love and peace is political and it will be costly.

Practicing love and peace will not keep us from the dangers of our world and it will not take place apart from sharing in the laments of the world because the fear and anger of our world are threatened by the love that casts out fear and the peace that refuses to let anger rule in our hearts. But to practice that love and peace, we must continue to be formed and shaped by the holy child within the manger, formed and shaped by our reverence for God in the lowly, the vulnerable, the little one fleeing on the road. May it be so among us. AMEN