



SERMONS THAT WORK

2 Christmas

Whose Voice Do We Hear?

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Amidst all the packages, wrappings, ribbons, get-togethers, cookies, and whatever is left of the puddings and roast beast, Matthew's story of the first Christmas turns suddenly dark and foreboding. Above all the comings and goings of Magi and shepherds, Matthew, and only Matthew, calls us to pause in our celebrations and listen to a voice wailing and weeping throughout the ages. There is an urgency in how Matthew tells the tale that calls the listener to stop and listen. And yet, we can see that something is missing. Part of the story has been left out that means to connect this infant Jesus to the long history of his people, Israel.

In a dream, Joseph is warned that the infant Mary named Jesus, "He who saves," is in grave danger. Herod is going to seek out the child to destroy him – the one the Magi said is born to be King of the Jews, the very title Herod carries on behalf of Caesar. Joseph is to take his family to Egypt, where the story of Israel began. Egypt, where Pharaoh ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies. Egypt, where Moses was the only survivor of that first genocide to save God's people. We note the irony that Egypt is now seen as a safe haven as Jesus and his family become refugees, immigrants seeking asylum from the violence and danger about to take place in their hometown of Bethlehem.

It is no coincidence that the stories of Moses and Jesus have sustained the hope of oppressed peoples throughout the centuries: the hope that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus will act once again on behalf of endangered persons. Suddenly, however, we go directly from the Holy Family fleeing danger to receiving a new message to leave Egypt and return home. An angel of the Lord issues the "all-clear" signal. It ought to concern us when some invisible-hand edits the story – in this case, to remove the part we most need to hear: the story of the danger they are fleeing in the first place:

"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."

Rachel is the second wife of Jacob, named Israel by YHWH. She bears two of Jacob's sons: Joseph, who plays a key role in helping Jacob and all his children and tribes to seek refuge in Egypt from a long drought and famine. They arrive as refugees and remain as slaves. And Benjamin, whose tribe is later carried off to Babylon as servants and slaves after the Assyrians destroy the First Jerusalem Temple. Jeremiah imagines Rachel as the classic mother who mourns and intercedes for her children, praying for an end to her descendants' suffering and exile.

Matthew, then, reimagines Rachel wailing in loud lamentation for all infant descendants mercilessly and needlessly slaughtered by Herod's Roman soldiers in Bethlehem to keep the infant Jesus from usurping his job as King of the Jews. Rachel continues to wail in loud lamentation for all persons throughout history – right up to our own time – who suffer similar genocidal violence and brutality of history's endless succession of "Herods". She wails for the victims of those desperate to preserve their personal stranglehold on power: the Hitlers, Stalins, Khmer Rouge, and all who continue to brutalize the "others" who, in their paranoid rage, believe threaten them.

Matthew does not shy away from telling the whole story, as does our lectionary version of the story this second Sunday after Christmas. Matthew relates this tale to both connect the baby Jesus to the long and storied history of his ancestors, and to foreshadow the rest of the story in his version of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It seems that Matthew means for us not only to hear Rachel's weeping, but to stop whatever we are doing and join in her lament – to weep for all refugee and asylum seekers who today, at this very moment, are in mortal danger, like Joseph and Benjamin and Jesus before them, and for all those who are "no more."

As Joseph, Mary, and the baby return, finding Bethlehem to still be dangerous, they resettle in Nazareth in Galilee. It is easy to imagine that as Jesus grows up, he will at some point ask why he never meets his cousins and aunts and uncles in Joseph's hometown. Surely, the story of Herod's slaughter of innocent children, and the adults who got in the way trying to protect their infants, is told over and over again among whatever might remain of his earthly family. Jesus, like Moses before him, was saved by the hand of YHWH, a survivor of this Bethlehem massacre, so as to save us all from a sinful, broken, and dangerous world.

Each child under the age of two represents a poem never penned, music never composed, a book never written, new discoveries never made. We will never know how many children actually died in Bethlehem in an effort to thwart the will of God's saving grace, love, and compassion in the person of Jesus, while more die in refugee camps every day all over the world. That is a lot of human potential, culture, and imagination mercilessly destroyed.

Matthew wrote this part of the story so that those children might never be forgotten – that Rachel's children might never be forgotten. And to remember, that it is humans like Herod and Hitler who commit such atrocities, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Just as God intervened on behalf of

Rachel's descendant Jesus, so God intervened after the Crucifixion by raising Jesus from the dead. Matthew, and only Matthew, reminds us that the light wood of the manger is the hard wood of the Cross.

We need to thank Matthew for not holding back the whole story. In telling us what happened in Bethlehem, we are called to stop whatever else we are busy with these Twelve Days of Christmas, to listen. When we do, we can still hear Rachel's lament; Rachel's weeping for those who are no more; wailing for all God's children everywhere. Above the din of our holiday activities, we can hear Jesus' voice calling us to follow and join him as he saves those who are still at risk. He promises us that we will do the works he does, and greater things than these we will do, in his name. This is the Good News of Christmas.

May we hear our Lord and Savior call us to take the time to stop, and in the silence, to listen. Here and now, listen. What do you hear? Amen.

***The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek** is currently Priest in Charge at Christ Church, Rock Spring Parish, Forest Hill, Md. Christ Church is a Small but Mighty parish, and together we are rediscovering what our Lord has in store for our future. He has spent over 35 years in Parish Ministry in all shapes and size parishes, and for 15 years worked with The Episcopal Church Office of Stewardship and TENS. He often uses storytelling, music, and guitar in proclaiming the Good News. Married with three adult children and one grandson, Kirk also plays drums in On The Bus, a DC Metro Area Grateful Dead tribute band. All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well!*