

A Cry is Heard

Matthew 2:13-18

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Good Morning Church,

Does anyone here this morning ever suffer from the "holiday blues"? Or perhaps you know someone who does? I know that I do. It's a feeling of a shadow, of a slight ache somewhere inside that covers me over the holidays. The ache seems to be compounded by the fact that Christmas is supposed to be a joyful season. As the singer Andy Williams croons, "It's the most wonderful time of the year!" Every advertisement in the malls promises the happy smiling faces of family members as they unwrap that perfect gift. Other people gush about their travel plans, their warm family gatherings, their favourite Christmas traditions. Seemingly, everyone else is hustling and bustling and feeling festive.

My father, has always suffered from the holiday blues. When I ask him, "Everything okay, Dad? You seem down?" "Oh," he'd reply, as nonchalantly as possible, "It's the holidays, Em." For my own father, and his siblings, the holiday blues gives way to memories of deeper pain. A childhood marked by abuse, alcoholism, an ugly divorce, mental illness and the tragic deaths of two of their siblings, Christmas seems to bring afresh painful memories as they look around the table and remember who should be there, but is not.

Even within Christianity, within the church, it can feel as though there isn't room for that sort of pain, hurt and sorrow at advent. Rejoice! Our Emmanuel has come! Advent is, and should be, a time of great celebration and rejoicing.

Yet, I can't help but ask, along with Johann Baptist Metz "Could it be that here is too much singing and not enough crying out in our Christianity? Too much jubilation and too little

mourning, too much approval and too little sense for what is absent, too much comfort and too little consolation?"

So, where can we look for connection when we as humans are sorrowing? Is there a place for people like my father and his siblings in the Christmas story?

The Scriptures answer these questions with an emphatic yes, in the person of Rachel.

Last week, Doug gave a wonderful Epiphany Sunday sermon about Joseph and the wisemen coming to meet the newborn King. It's a triumphant moment in the story. Jesus, a boy of less than three years old, is recognized and acknowledged as the future King. God led a group of wisemen for two years through the desert to a little house, in a little town, with gifts for a little boy. And, often, this is where we leave off in the advent story. We leave off with this happy and victorious visit.

Scripture, however, does not leave off there. Please join me again as I read Matthew 2:13-18

13 After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, 15 and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt." [a]

16 Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. 17 Herod's brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 "A cry was heard in Ramah—
weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted,
for they are dead." [b]

As a parent, it is hard for me to imagine a more excruciating pain than the murder of my own infant child. All of the ugliness and evil of this world seems summed up in such an act. If I had been a mother in Bethlehem at that time, Ezra would not have survived Herod's bloody decree. I feel the anguish in verse 18 as Rachel refuses to be comforted as she weeps for her babies.

Rachel and the inclusion of this passage in the advent story is important because **it creates space for grieving people within our churches at the holidays.** As Pastor Leanne Friesen writes, "Yes, the Christmas story is ultimately one of joy. But it never demands that those in pain be forgotten. It doesn't sugar coat, cover up, or forget heartbreak. We always stop the readings before we get to the awful part on Christmas Eve, but it strikes me that Scripture never left it out. God didn't say: "This is too sad. It'll bring people down. Let's not mention it." It isn't justified or explained away. It is simply acknowledged and named and allowed to be.

I know we forget this in churches, especially at Christmas time. We don't always want to make space for the sad stuff, and this can make those who carry sadness feel forgotten. For that, I am sorry, and it is why I want to say it again: if you are grieving, hurting, longing, dream-shattered – you belong in the story, too. Alongside Mary and Elizabeth are the mothers who mourned. There's space for your loss there, and there is space for you."

While it may feel that there is no room for hurt and grief at Christmas, Scripture says, "Yes! There is room for you!" We can laugh with Elizabeth. We can rejoice with Mary. And we can sorrow with Rachel.

Secondly, Rachel, in the passage is important because she raises a very important issue for believers. In theological studies, it's called the issue of theodicy. Or as C.S. Lewis called it, in a book with the same title, "The Problem of Pain". If God is all good, how can there be so much pain and suffering in this world? Because there is so much pain and suffering in our world, how then can God be all good?

Believers have wrestled with this question for the entirety of church history. Most of the responses to this question fall within two camps.

The first camp says that evil exists by the simple fact that we live in a broken, fallen world. All of creation; humanity, animals, and nature are impacted by sin. All of creation is longing to be redeemed and brought back together into peace with one another. Someday the lion will lay down with the lamb, and children will play near the den of the snake, but until that time, we must live with evil as a by-product of sin.

The second camp would say that God knows all of time from beginning to end, and can see each and every act of evil that has been or will be committed. But, for reasons that are beyond the understanding of people, God chooses not to stop these evils from happening. Most Christians would never go so far as to say that God causes evil, but instead that God chooses to allow evil for his purposes.

Personally, I find the answer from both camps to be unsatisfying. Yet, I recognize that I'm hearing these ideas from own, human, finite understanding. A verse that I often take comfort in in the wake of both personal and global tragedies is Isaiah 55:8-9, "'My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,'" says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.'

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes, "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." While the Bible may not offer us a clear answer as to why our God allows pain in our lives, we can take comfort that God both speaks to us though it and hears our cries within in.

**"A cry was heard in Ramah—
weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted,
for they are dead." [b]**

What is most interesting, I think, in this verse in relation to the question of pain is that the passage makes no attempt to explain away Rachel's sorrow. There is no answer presented to the inevitable "Why?" question that we would ask if such a tragedy occurred here in Saskatchewan. It happened, and so Rachel mourned. We ourselves can find a comfort in this idea that seemingly God does not expect us have an answer or stuff our grief deep inside. When disaster or death makes it's mark on our lives, then the Bible gives us permission to raise our voices with Rachel. *There is no shame in grief.*

Thirdly, Rachel is important because she teaches us that Jesus came to us in the midst of sorrow and continues to meet us in our pain.

Our Lord Jesus was embodied as man who knew grief and sadness. The Bible calls Jesus, "A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." In John chapter 11, we find Jesus coming to the home of Martha and Mary whose brother Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, has just died. " Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus's grave to weep. So they followed her there. When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him,[f] and he was deeply troubled. "Where have you put him?" he asked them.

They told him, "Lord, come and see." Then Jesus wept. " All the emotional pains that we feel when facing death- anger, sadness, and sorrow have been felt by our Emmanuel.

Further, God sees our pain and is moved by it. In researching for this sermon, I came across a very interesting story. In Jewish traditions, there is a teaching of a time when God decided it was necessary to punish the nation of Israel for their sin. God calls together the patriarchs of faith; Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Moses. Each of them provides God with a very logical, rational reason as to why God should spare Israel. In spite of their passionate arguments, God steadfast is his resolve to punish Israel. Then, in walks, Rachel. Weeping. Sobbing uncontrollably. The teaching tells us that Rachel is so overcome by her emotions and grief that she cannot speak. She opens her mouth to form words, but only back wracking sobs come out. And *then* God is moved. Seeing his daughter, Rachel, weeping over the punishment that would befall Israel, God changes his mind.

I'm certainly not trying to imply that we can always change the outcome of something that is in the hands of God by our tears; we know that life doesn't work that way. But it would also be a misjudgement on our part to believe that the God who created our emotions does not care about how we feel.

Alexis Waggoner, in her beautiful essay, "Rachel, Matriarch of Advent", sums it up so perfectly when she writes, " And then Rachel shows up again in Matthew with the only understandable response to the destruction Herod visits on Egyptian families. She weeps and refuses to be consoled. What could console you after the loss of your child?

Rachel's presence in the story tells us something important: there is room for extreme sadness and inconsolable loss in the midst of the Christmas story—a story that is normally shared with hope and joy.

That grief comes to us through the eyes of a woman. It is significant that Matthew uses a matriarch of Israel to help readers grasp the dual narrative of sadness and joy in Advent. It is Rachel's lens that helps us appreciate the complexity of the nativity story.

Loss and hope are meant to go hand-in-hand.

Rachel's weeping teaches us that if the Advent of hope, peace, joy, and love doesn't meet those who are in their deepest sorrow, it isn't a Word worth waiting for."

If this good news of Jesus isn't good news to the unmarried pregnant woman, the dirty, cast off by society shepherd, the rich, intellectual wise man, and the grieving mother who refuses to be comforted, then it isn't THE good news. If this good news isn't good news for the drug addict rehab in Saskatoon, the prisoner marking time in Prince Albert, the homeless woman who walks 22nd street everyday until the Lighthouse Shelter opens, the family sitting in hospice care rooms at RUH, and for each of us here at Warman Mennonite Church, then it isn't THE good news.

Emmanuel means God with us. And that means God with us in both joy and sorrow, peace and pain, hope and despair, love and loss. When we feel ourselves being overcome by the darkness of this world or feeling as though we need to hide our pain from our sisters and brothers, let us remember Rachel. Let us remember our Emmanuel. Amen.