



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

WISDOM

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 4, 2015

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19; Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon text: Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Matthew 2:1-2

The magi, wise men learned in such things, followed a star that they believed was a sign that a new king of the Jews had been born. They naturally first went to the capital of the Jewish kingdom, Jerusalem, and met with the reigning king of the Jews, Herod. (He was put on the throne by the Roman emperor Augustus). They told him of the star and its meaning. He pretended to be delighted. A new king, wonderful. But none of my wives has had a birth recently. Hmmm. Herod summoned his court sages. Where is this new king to be born? The scribes consulted scripture: in the book of the prophet Micah we read that the messiah will be born in Bethlehem, city of David (Micah 5:4). Well, then, go there, Herod told the magi. Pay your homage and present your gifts. Then report back to me so that I in my turn may go and pay my homage. You can practically see the evil king rubbing his bloody hands. In the prior five years he had three of his own sons killed because he thought they were plotting against him. He would stop at nothing to preserve his power. Even the death of innocent children. Two years and under, just to make sure.

The magi went and found their place in the Christmas creche. Learned and noble men and poor humble shepherds together paying homage to the newborn king. Then, Matthew tells us, after giving their lavish gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the magi returned home by a different route. They were warned in a dream not to go back to Jerusalem, and an

angel similarly warned Joseph to take his family and flee to Egypt. But no angel warned the rest of the town that the wise men had tipped off the evil king that a threat to his power had been born in Bethlehem. The evil king ordered his soldiers to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area two years and under—just to make sure, since the magi had told him the star had first appeared two years earlier.

What a terrible story. We never put it into the pageant. We seldom even read the actual verses from Matthew—see, they are clipped out of our gospel readings. The passage tells the story of the slaughter of the innocents and Matthew, typically, sees this as yet another example of the fulfilling of scripture. In this case, the prophecy of Jeremiah, which Matthew quotes:

“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 2:18).

My old theology prophecy professor, Chris Morse, wrote that the tears of Rachel—her refusal to be comforted—is an example of faithful protest against the evil in this world that God allows to happen, especially, of course, the death of innocent children.

Matthew is quoting Jeremiah 31:15. And if we consult the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, we may note that this note of sorrow for the death of children, a sorrow that refuses all comfort, is set, disconcertingly, among passages of comfort and hope, right after the passage we heard this morning (Jeremiah 31:1-14) and shortly before the famous prophecy of a new covenant to be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Perhaps our hearts need to be softened by tears before the new covenant can be written. Hearts, broken open, are only then able to receive the seed of new life. Hearts welling with the waters of life, even through our tears.

Penthos, the desert fathers and mothers, called it, the gift of tears; a deep sorrow and mourning, sometimes called compunction in the Catholic tradition. Mourning and tears for our own sinfulness and brokenness, certainly, but not that only or even most of all. Penthos is the gift of tears for the world—for all that is lost and broken. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are alternative approaches to the problem of evil, the death of children; other ways to deal with a world in which bad things happen to good people. Classic stoicism and some forms of Buddhism come to mind. Their view is that suffering is inherent in the condition of life and especially human consciousness. And they advise a sort of realistic acceptance and

emotional distancing. The Buddha realized that the human heart and its cravings leads to an endless cycle of suffering. But if craving ceases so will suffering; if there is no attachment, there will be no loss. On the stoic view, suffering is inevitable for the wheel of fortune is always turning, and therefore good fortune is always fleeting and loss to be shouldered stoically, without complaint or self-pity. There is nothing else to do.

But Rachel, a faithful daughter of Israel, trusted in the promises of God, promises of land and descendants—both of which were taken away with the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (the context in which Jeremiah is writing). Rachel had reason to be angry with God, as well as grief-stricken, and she refused the usual comforts of pious consolation: God has a plan, the dead are in a better place now, free of suffering, at peace. You have heard these yourself. I have said these myself. But I also have felt the loss of a child—and I cried like Rachel, refusing to be comforted.

The psalms teach us that grief and anger are a primal form of prayer. That our cries are heard in heaven, and answered. Not so that our grief may be somehow made to disappear, but that it may be converted to power. Anger leads to action, to do something; grief to resolve, never again. Passion, pathos, and sorrow, penthos, are themselves of God: for who else suffered on the cross, and who cried beholding the lost children of Jerusalem?

It is a new year. The world has gone around the sun once again. It has made 2015 circuits, more or less, since the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Wise people still look for answers, and evil ones still murder in the name of whatever god serves to mask their fear and greed and lust for power. It is, as always, up to us, God has ordained it so, by coming among us, becoming human, and by sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts in a new covenant of faith. God has clearly demonstrated that God is not going to protect us from ourselves or from the harsh realities of nature. There will be suffering and death. It is built in.

But our broken and softened hearts are nevertheless the source and fountain of power and action to make the world a better place. The gift of tears is the beginning of a kind of wisdom—the wisdom that is chastened by loss and understands the costs, and is willing to bear the hard burdens. It is godly wisdom and good because, like Jesus, it does not seek revenge, does not seek glory and reward for self—but, precisely, gives of self, protects the innocent, shelters the homeless and clothes the poor. And, most of all, cares for the children—all the children.

For all are children of God, made in God's image. All deserve life and opportunity to flourish and give in turn their gifts to the world. To make a better world, more just, more faithful. Not without pain and grief and loss. No, but with hope and faith and love. The gift of tears leads to a godly wisdom that refuses both false comfort and easy cynicism, and demands

undaunted courage. It is a new year—but an old story. Let us rise once again to the challenge before us, and strive for justice and peace, to be faithful and holy people, to resolve that this year, as Malala Yousafzai, that wise child, said in her Nobel peace prize acceptance speech: no more children should be denied a future.

We stand with Malala and against the Herods of this world.

In Christ's name, amen.

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