

Text: Matthew 2: 13-23  
Title: Inconsolable  
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There's no gentle way to get at this.  
There is no easy way in.  
Babies were killed because Jesus was born.

While the little Lord Jesus was asleep on the hay, children were roused from their beds, wrenched from their parent's arms, and executed by Herod's henchman. Somewhere amid the cattle lowing and the angels singing is heard the weeping of parents at the murder of their children.

Dear friends, there's a dark side to the nativity – an unspeakable horror that we don't quickly tell our children or include in the Christmas pageant. It's not easily pondered or proclaimed. It's hard to imagine, hard to talk about, and hard to accept as part of the mystery of how God came to us in Jesus. Maybe that's why this text gets relegated to the Sunday after Christmas. We read it in the backwash, after the Christmas crowds have gone home.

And this morning I'm particularly mindful of those who have buried children – the enduring nature of such a loss is beyond what I know or can imagine. But it's at the heart of this text...

So, what are we to make of the "slaughter of the innocents"?

Do we position it as a piece of the prophetic puzzle? Do we accept it as the cost of doing business in this cruel world? Do we just sing louder and drown out the cries of children and parents? Or, do we dare look even here for some hope, some light for our journey, some hint of God in this world? What are we to make of this terrible text?

The Gospel of Matthew is the most intentionally Jewish of the gospels. Matthew layers stories with references to the Hebrew scriptures and links the story of Jesus to the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Ruth. And in that spirit, this morning's text is rich with allusions to Israel's history. For example....

The story of King Balak and the prophet Balaam in the book of Numbers includes a frightened king, a wise man from the east, a star signaling a new ruler, an overthrow of power, and a return trip home. Sound familiar?

Or, Matthew might have been alluding to Moses being hid from Pharaoh's slaughter of baby boys only to rise up later and lead his people out of Egyptian captivity. Or, maybe readers are to be reminded of Moses fleeing Pharaoh and staying away until God told him it was safe to return. Again, sound familiar?

Matthew tells the story of Jesus against the backdrop of Hebrew history. And in our text, there's reference to Rachel....

You may remember: Rachel was Laban's pretty daughter. She stole Jacob's heart and he worked seven years for her hand, only to be tricked, when the lights were low, into marrying Leah – Laban's plain daughter. So, Jacob worked another seven long years to get the girl he wanted in the first place....

But, as it turns out, Rachel had a hard time conceiving while Leah was birthing boys right and left. Rachel pleaded with God and she finally gave birth to Joseph. Only to die after giving birth to her second, who she names *Ben-Oni* which means "son of my sorrow." Jacob eventually renames him Benjamin.

The twelve tribes of Israel come from Rachel and Leah. And in Jewish lore Rachel was buried near Bethlehem along the road where the Israelites were carried off into Babylonian captivity. Years later the prophet Jeremiah recalls Rachel's inconsolable sorrow as if she was still crying from her grave for her children – the people of Israel. So, Matthew weaves that into the gospel, quoting Jeremiah:

*A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.*

There's more, but you get the point. As Matthew writes the nativity story, he's not just writing about Jesus, he's writing a multi-layered reminder of how God works in and through history. Matthew is layering loss, longing, and liberation and he places the coming of Jesus as the culmination of God's acting in human history. The birth of Jesus is part of a woven whole....

But, what then of the dead babies?  
Are they just threads for a biblical tapestry?

It should be noted that there are no other records of this massacre of children in Bethlehem. It's not mentioned again in the New Testament. And, while the historian Josephus reports that Herod ordered the execution of his own wife and sons, and decreed that at his own death the leading citizens of Jericho should also be slain so that the nation might mourn appropriately. Josephus says nothing about the killing of baby boys in Bethlehem.

That doesn't mean it didn't happen.

Herod could have ordered such a thing and the slaughter of children from a small village might have gone unrecorded. A common number suggested by historians is that 20 to 30 children would have been killed, not hundreds or thousands. As if a smaller number is better. Tell that to the parent who lost a child.

So, what are we to make of it?  
Try this....

Gun violence recently surpassed car crashes as the leading cause of death for American children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 3,597 children died by gunfire in 2021. And while last year's count is incomplete, it's clear that the carnage has not declined.

2022 marked the ten-year anniversary of the school shooting in Sandy Hook, but while school shootings are a recurring horror, they actually account for less than 1% of all these gun deaths. And gun accidents account for only a few hundred a year. Homicides and suicides make up the vast majority.

I've been to too many funerals for killed children. I've sat with parents who were so shattered that they couldn't lift their heads to look at the casket. I spoke at the funeral of a father who died of a broken heart. Two weeks after his only son was shot and killed, he died because his heart couldn't bear the grief....

Our text has it that Rachel wouldn't or couldn't be comforted. The loss, unspeakable. The grief, inconsolable.

And yet, dear friends, the unbearable unabashed claim of the gospels is that God came in our flesh into this world – not into the world of nativity snow-globes, shiny happy people, and naïve spirituality, but into the world of gun violence, and tyrants who kill babies, and parents who can't be consoled. If the incarnation has any meaning at all, then God came into the darkest realities of this world.

Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

*Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants.*

Herod is threatened by a baby– so he orders all the babies killed. There's one in diapers who's a threat to the throne, a threat to power, a threat to the ways of this world. And that mysterious threat at the very birth of Jesus inaugurates the clash between

the power of evil and the power of love,  
the power of darkness and the power of light,  
the power of the world and the power of God.

And the shadow of the cross stretches to even the cradle, as Jesus is set on a collision course with death.

The way of God in Christ is through the very hell of the death of children. And, while that may not explain or excuse the murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem, it doesn't ignore it or skirt it either.

Henry James – novelist, man of letters – wrote:

*Life is, in fact, a battle. Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wickedness to carry the day; imbeciles to be in great places; people of sense to be in small; and mankind generally unhappy, but the world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again and for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it.*

Dear friends, the mystery of Christmas is that Jesus is born into the world as it stands – no illusion, no phantasm, no dream in the night, but the world to which we wake again and again. The world of school shootings,  
and terrorist bombs,  
and emperors who feel threatened,  
and parents who bury children,  
and every desperate and despairing moment we face.  
The world in which Rachel weeps.

God doesn't rise above, whisk away, or shrug off this world, but from cradle to cross he enters in, shares, carries, and bears our pain. He heals, weeps, and wipes away the last tear. And ultimately the mercy of God and love beyond measure will win the struggle.

This morning we come to the table and find here memory and hope, the comfort of God with us even this hard world.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.