

What We Hope for Our Children  
Jeremiah 31:5-17  
Matthew 2:13-23

“Rachel is weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

The story of the slaughter of the innocents is a story as riveting and relevant as if it had been ripped from today’s headlines. Whether these verses mirror the sort of murderous violence ordered by Bashar al-Assad in Syria or carried out by tribes in the villages of South Sudan or controlled by drug dealers on the streets of South Philadelphia, violence that takes from our children their breath; or whether the more subtle devastation of sanctioned greed in high places and in the bowels of congress comes to mind, that steals from them their future, our children continue to be felled by the megalomania of soon to be forgotten little men. We therefore would do well, on this second Sunday after Epiphany, to dare with Matthew the heart of darkness that is Herod; and then, if we are to do battle with this present darkness for the sake of our children, to trace the tears of Rachel weeping down the bloody corridors of history.

What are we to make, in the first place, of the darkness that is Herod? “Matthew’s gospel has blood spattered all over it,” notes theologian Frederick Niedner. From the first chapter to the last, Matthew juxtaposes the weakness of power, of death-dealing power, against the power of weakness made manifest here in the vulnerability of a little child (whose blood is spared at the beginning, only for the sake of being spilt in the end on a cross).

In these last verses of his second chapter, Matthew places the power of weakness offstage, alluding to Christ’s birth in the past tense, while evil and sin and death in the person of Herod take center stage. Herod makes visible what theologians have called *nothingness*. He holds the place and plays the part of complete opposition to God’s will for creation, an opposition enacted here in the slaughter of the innocents, a murderous rampage that means to rid

the world of the God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

From the beginning, and throughout human history until Christ was born, say the theologians, the nothingness that *God did not will* when God began to create, the chaos at the boundary of the heavens and the earth pronounced good by God, has threatened to undo creation since God first spoke it into being. It is important, however, to be clear about what we mean and what we do not mean when we speak of this nothingness.

We know, in the world God created, that there is light and there is darkness. We need no one to tell us this. There is firm ground and there are deep waters. We map and maneuver both at our peril. *God wills all of this* as the theater for our brief hour on stage wherein we find ourselves praising God more often in the shadows than at noonday, turning to God more honestly in the depths than on the mountaintop, trusting God alone in our indigence rather than our opulence, beseeching God as we are humbled by God's judgment rather than when we are boasting of God's favor. Yet as we curse the *willed shadows* of our finite human existence—the difficulties, the depths, the hardships, the judgment--blaming God for the darkness that has befallen us, we miss the real nothingness that crouches at creation's door.

Enter Herod. Though he can be said to be a sinner raised to a significant power, I think in Matthew's gospel, Herod does not represent simply the shadow of human existence which God wills for our good, for our growth in faith, for our chastening. Herod does not even represent the corrupt politics which our better vote might reform or the sick mind that medicine can now mend. Herod's immediate and murderous resistance to news of God's presence in the world *is* the encroaching void, the evil and death God has not willed but which has rivaled God's will from the beginning. This is the nothingness that appears to resist God's rule even now, the evil that God alone can defeat.

In other words [words that Matthew uses more explicitly later in his gospel], a battle of cosmic proportions is pitched at the center of human history in the person of Jesus Christ. With this unwilled nothingness in direct opposition to God's will, God determines to enter the fray as the primary victim and the real foe of nothingness. But enter in what way? Exactly how does God intend to do battle? Though counter-violence is, for our money, the only conceivable and realistic response to Herod, God comes in this "weak unarmed wise" writes the martyred Jesuit poet Robert Southwell: "With tears he fights and wins the field;/His naked breast stands for a shield;/His battering shot are babish cries,/His arrow looks of weeping eyes,/His martial ensigns cold and need/And feeble flesh his warrior's steed." Pitted against tears, a naked breast, babish cries, weeping eyes, cold and need and feeble flesh, pitted against the power of weakness revealed in a manger, the weakness of power, the nothingness that opposes what God has willed has gone down to defeat. This is the gospel, we say on Christmas Eve: that the light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it.

But what in the world would it mean for us to follow such a child? Given the nothingness we are up against, what hope is there for our children if we only hold fast to the power of weakness? The witness Matthew cites for our consideration is the witness of Rachel weeping for her children. As we have dared the heart of darkness that is Herod, now we would do well to trace Rachel's tears. "Rachel is weeping for her children," begins the midrash of the prophet Jeremiah. Rachel, you may remember, was the second and favored wife of Jacob. She had been barren while her sister, her maid, and her sister's maid bore the sons of Jacob: the tribes of Israel minus two. [Let's hear it for traditional, old-fashioned, biblical, family values!]

Finally God remembers Rachel. Her womb is opened twice and she first bears Joseph, the son who will be sold into slavery by his brothers; then Jacob's last son Benjamin is given life

with Rachel's dying breath. Buried on the way to Bethlehem, Jacob sets up a pillar at her grave...which is there to this day" records Genesis, and so it is. The guides wink as the bus passes by, "'Traditional' grave of Rachel."

Traditional or not, it is Rachel weeping from this grave that Jeremiah hears as he watches the children of Israel march hopelessly into exile. "Thus says the Lord," according to the prophet, "Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country. Indeed I have heard Ephraim {Rachel's grandson}," says the Lord. *My inward parts tremble for him*, says one translation, "I will surely have compassion on him."

Curiously, the verb "to have compassion on" shares the same root as "womb." God is overwhelmed, says Jeremiah, with the compassion of a mother. "It is this love, compassion and faithfulness," writes Susan Brown-Gutloff, "that Jeremiah seems to be saying will be the new order of the day...will [eclipse] Israel's...reliance on human might...In answer to Rachel's cries, God will create *something new* in the land."

The new creation, according to Matthew in these latter days, is God's compassion made known not from the distance of heaven; rather, God has entered the womb of a woman to reveal God's love and mercy and faithfulness in a vulnerable child who is both refugee with and refuge of those for whom God's inward parts tremble. Five centuries after the Babylonian exile, Matthew remembers Jeremiah's midrash and uses it as his own. "...wailing and loud lamentation," writes Matthew in sight of the matriarch's tomb, "Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." Like the exiles before them, the holy family passes by Rachel's grave, fleeing Herod's murderous opposition to God, so that the Son

of God, born in a manger in Bethlehem—a manger inexorably linked to Rachel’s tomb and her inconsolable weeping—might hear.

Later Martin Luther would engage in what some would consider a Christian midrash on these same texts, literally connecting Rachel’s weeping to Christ’s birth and death. “By not believing any consolation short of God’s own descent into hell in Christ,” Luther understood Rachel’s weeping to be “a faithful witness to the Resurrection.” I take that to mean that Rachel’s tears not only have prompted Christ to come as our only consolation and companion in the exile that is death; her tears also have become a witness to the triumph of the power of weakness that is the Resurrection, over the weakness of power that is nothingness and death. Therefore, says an interpreter of Luther, “both the credulity that seeks comfort in false hope, and the cynicism that says there is no hope that can be trusted in the manger adjoining Rachel’s tomb, [both] are revealed as *not* to be believed.”

The hope for our children, I do believe, is our refusal of the violence that is nothingness, of the subtle devastations that take from our children their future, in favor of wailing and loud lamentations, our tears being our witness to him who, in this weak, unarmed wise, has defeated death itself. I think, on this weekend, of another Martin—Martin Luther King—whose witness of non-violence and tears shed on behalf of the children of slavery will be traced long after the Herods of his day are forgotten.

Still it must be acknowledged that Rachel’s Tomb has today become a fortress, in part to accommodate larger numbers of pilgrims, but mostly in the name of security. “Something is not right about this picture,” writes Fred Strickert, theologian and pilgrim, himself to Bethlehem. “Jews traveling to a holy shrine in armored vehicles. Soldiers guarding a holy place and shooting young children. Inside..., women wailing with tears over pregnancy and childbirth. Outside,

mothers sobbing uncontrollably over the deaths of their sons. It is a scene repeated all too often in recent years in Bethlehem,” he reports....“In this particular case a fortress is totally out of character [because] Rachel...is the mark of vulnerability and faithfulness. Her appeal over the centuries is to victims, who like [Rachel herself] remain vulnerable and faithful at the same time. Her burial is significant because it is located at the side of the road, still on the way to her destination and still vulnerable.”

From Jerusalem to Gaza, from Basra to Baghdad, from Pretoria to Soweto, from Zagreb to Sarajevo, from the suburbs of Philadelphia to the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia, children are on the way to their destination and still vulnerable. What defense have we to give them? How are we to do battle with all that God has not willed and that threatens to eclipse their future? The temptation is to join forces with the *nothingness* against God’s will, claiming always to have taken up arms in defense of God’s will.

But if “With tears he fights and wins the field;/His naked breast...a shield;/His battering shot...babish cries,/His arrow looks of weeping eyes,/His martial ensigns cold and need/And feeble flesh his warrior’s steed”, then may our tears bear witness to him. May we be those heard wailing and weeping, refusing to be comforted until all God’s children are safely home. Thanks be to God.