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Rachel's Tears and the Joy of Christmas—*Matthew 2:13-23*



by David Westfall

PRAYER

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Matthew 2:13-23

- Jesus has been born in Bethlehem (Luke gives us more detail).
- Soon after, the magi have visited Jesus and been warned not to tell Herod.
- This is the word of the Lord.

I sometimes find that Christmas comes too soon; that the season of Advent is far too short. There's something about Advent that feels especially true to our normal experience of ordinary day-to-day life—life characterized by tension, by incompleteness, by waiting. Advent puts its finger on our exact place in the story of God and the world: groaning in expectant hope, as we wait for the return of Christ and for our final redemption.

In contrast, Christmas—at least how it's often portrayed and celebrated in our culture—feels (at best) like a brief and pleasant escape from “the real world,” or (at worst) like an effort at numbing ourselves to the real world through denial and distraction.

It's reflected in most of the marketing that begins (if we're lucky) right after Thanksgiving. (I suspect that someday we'll find ourselves saying, “Okay, the fourth of July is over. *Now* you can start playing the Christmas music.”) It's reflected in the cheerful but mostly vacuous songs playing at the grocery store throughout December; in the pictures of Santa in his rosy-cheeked, untroubled jollity lavishing gifts upon the nice children (Contrast him with the real St. Nicholas of Myra, whose generosity arose out of his desire to care for the poor and vulnerable in his community); in the idealized scenes of family and friends around the Christmas tree or the dinner table—all of them healthy, happy, overflowing with delight and an apparent sense of unassailable well-being.

And so, very often, I feel unprepared. It's not that I'm a Grinch. I feel unprepared because the reality of my life never quite fits that picture, and the disconnect seems to disqualify me from that kind

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of joy. Perhaps this Christmas is like that for you.

But Matthew's gospel reminds us that the reality of Jesus' birth, of his coming into the world, does not in fact promote such sentimentality, and offers us joy of a very different kind. The story we are hearing today in Matthew's gospel reminds us that the news of Immanuel—"God with us"—is precisely the news of God's entry into "the real world," into our pain and our suffering.

This good news does give us joy, but joy of a different kind than what a consumer-driven culture offers us this time of year. This is joy that is born, not of escapism or mere optimism, but of God's nearness to the world in its pain. It is a joy that comes from hope in the mist of grief. In Jesus, the Word made flesh, "the hopes and fears of all the years," are finally met.

Matthew's goal in this story is to show us how the events surrounding Jesus' birth reveal what it really means for God to be "with us." It's the first step in a narrative journey to the cross and to the empty tomb, ending in the Great Commission and the gospel's closing words: "Behold, *I am with you*, even to the end of the age."

And notice that God's involvement in the story at this point does nothing to circumvent or sidestep or even (at least at this point) alleviate the world's pain and anguish. If anything, God's involvement, God's nearness in Jesus, actually *intensifies* this pain and anguish. The birth of Jesus occasions a tyrant's rage and the death of children! One can imagine a bereaved mother from Bethlehem, years later, meeting Jesus during his earthly ministry and saying to him the inverse of what Martha and Mary tell him at the tomb of Lazarus: "Lord, if you had not been there, my sons would not have died." The nearness of God in Jesus, in the first place, intensifies the world's pain, rather than lessening it. It certainly does not provide escape from it. As Jesus himself would say later in life, during his earthly ministry, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). Or as the gospel according to John puts it, "This is the verdict: Light has come

into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light" (Jn. 3:19). That's not how we normally think of the message of Christmas. The Word made flesh, the light that comes into the world at Christmas, first of all *exposes* the world's true state, in all its ugliness.

That ugliness and hostility to God's nearness is represented in this story through the role of King Herod. Insecure and desperate to guard his own legitimacy and place of authority over God's people, Herod becomes the would-be murderer of the Lord's Anointed—a new Saul, seeking the life of a new David. Not only that, but (still more darkly) he also becomes a new Pharaoh, who slaughters the male children of Israel, and from whom Israel's deliverer must himself be delivered.

Like Moses in the basket, Jesus is preserved from the fate of his brothers; like Moses fleeing Pharaoh as an adult, Jesus must sojourn in a strange land until the king's death enables his return.

Consider, then, what Jesus' birth reveals about the state of God's people: they have become the groaning slaves of a new Pharaoh in a new Egypt! They are the subjects of a king whom God has rejected, weeping and bleeding under his reign of terror. Jesus' birth brings all of that to light. Before it can bind up our wounds, God's nearness to us through Immanuel must first expose those wounds, must bring them to light and do the painful work necessary to bring real healing. Is that how you usually hear the story of Christmas told—as the story of God shining a light on the depravity and injustice entrenched within human nature, as a story of pain?

Matthew uses the ancient words of the prophet Jeremiah to give voice to this pain, and in doing so he adds another layer of meaning to Israel's condition: "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."

In its original context, the prophet Jeremiah is describing Israel's departure into exile in Babylon, following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in his own day. Six miles or so north of

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Jerusalem, and possibly near the site of Rachel's burial, the town of Ramah lay along the route that the captives took as the Babylonian soldiers forcibly marched them away from Jerusalem to their own land. Rachel, Jeremiah says, has been bereaved of her "children," the sons of Israel, who have been taken away from her. In effect, her children, God's people, have "died"—that's what exile means for the nation and for its covenant with God. That's the choice that Moses set before Israel as they entered the promised land: life and death, the blessing and the curse. "Therefore choose life!" Moses implored. But like Adam in the Garden, Israel did not. You have not. I have not.

But it is precisely at this point—in the darkness of death under the curse of the old covenant, revisited again, years later, in the deaths of innocent children in Bethlehem—that Jeremiah gives his listeners hope.

As with most quotations from Israel's Scriptures that you find in the New Testament, Matthew's quotation of Jeremiah must be read in its context. And in the very next verse, Rachel's lament is *answered*:

"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land."

Rachel's grief is followed by Rachel's consolation, by the *hope* of an end to the curse, an end to exile. God's people will return to the promised land; the children of Bethlehem will return to the land of the living. Later in Jeremiah 31, that hope is spelled out in detail:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their

God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Enter Jesus, the one who is so named "because he will save his people from their sins"—that's what the angel tells Joseph in Matthew chapter 1. Jesus, Yeshua, "Yah(weh) saves." Amidst the slaughter of the sons of Israel, amidst the curse of the covenant and the darkness of oppression and continued exile, there is hope: hope of a new covenant, through a new act of God, an act of forgiveness and transformation.

Matthew doesn't spell out for us here what this new act will involve in great detail, but he does hint at where the story is going. As you'd expect from a new Moses, Jesus is born to lead a new exodus—a new exodus from the slavery that still clung to Israel, even after they left the land of Egypt and came into the promised land, an exodus from the slavery of a hardened heart and the burden of sins—from the fundamental human problem that manifests itself in Herod's rage and the suffering of children.

But this new exodus won't be what anyone expects. According to Matthew, Jesus isn't just going to *lead* Israel, as Moses once did. Jesus is going to *be* Israel. He's going to act as Israel's representative. And as Israel's representative, Jesus won't simply relieve his people's painful condition: he will take that condition upon himself in order to bear it as his own.

This is ultimately where Matthew's quotation from another prophet, the prophet Hosea, points us: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). As with the quote from Jeremiah three verses later, the significance of what Matthew is saying can only be seen when we look at this Scripture in its original context. The prophet Hosea is not predicting the travel itinerary of Israel's messiah centuries down the road: he is actually talking about an event that took place long before his own time, Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt. "*When Israel was a child, I loved him*, and out of Egypt I called my son.... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, tak-

ing them by the arms.... I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.” This unique relationship between God and Israel is highlighted in the book of Exodus itself, where God tells Moses to go and say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son.... Let my son go, so he may worship me” (Ex. 4:22-23).

The deliverance of God’s son, Israel, out of slavery in Egypt, through the waters, into freedom: that is the story that Matthew is drawing from Israel’s Scriptures and applying to Jesus the Messiah, the unique Son of God. Jesus is born to become “Israel in person,” to take the destiny of God’s people upon himself. He is Immanuel, “God with us,” but he isn’t simply *with* us: he stands with us in order to stand *for* us, in our place, to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. The Christmas story isn’t simply about God drawing near in order to “appreciate” our burdens more fully by getting a closer view of them. It is ultimately about God drawing near to *assume* our burdens as his very own—to take our slavery and our exile, our curse and our captivity, upon himself, and to overcome them for our sake.

The rest of Jesus’ story in Matthew (and in the other gospels, and in the New Testament as a whole) shows us precisely what that looks like. Baptized in the Jordan river, Jesus becomes “the perfect penitent” (as C.S. Lewis put it), tasked with carrying out our repentance and embracing our judgment. Pouring out his blood, the blood of the new covenant shed for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus shows us the true meaning of the name Immanuel. If Jesus as a child escaped what befell his brothers in Bethlehem, it was only so that he might stand with them in a more perfect act of solidarity when his hour finally came. His blood breaks the chains of our slavery, swallows up the curse, blots out our guilt, silences the Accuser, purchases the Spirit of life and holiness, gives birth to a new heart and a

new creation, makes all things new. That is why he was born. Thanks be to God.

Even as the newborn child in Bethlehem, Jesus is the living embodiment of God’s promise to humanity that secures our hope: the hope of liberation and freedom because of God’s desire to be with us, to be one with us. And because his birth gives us that hope, it produces a different kind of joy. The joy of Christmas arises from God’s presence with us in the pain, and his faithfulness to fulfill his purpose of healing it, even at great cost to himself. This joy is not a cheap form of escapism or mere optimism, because this joy doesn’t come from *ignoring* the pain and brutality of a sinful world. Rather, the joy of Christmas comes precisely from *seeing* that pain and brutality be carried into the heart of God in order to be extinguished through his reconciling love.

So don’t let your pain disqualify you from the joy of Christmas. Don’t let it keep whispering in your ear, “God has abandoned you,” because in Jesus, Immanuel, our pain is now God’s pain, and its days are numbered.

What is our response, then, to this wonderful news? The Church down through the centuries gives us a clear answer, this time of year: our response is to *feast*. Our response is precisely to enjoy the goodness of God’s creation, the goodness of gifts and food and friendship and family—many of the very things that our culture encourages us to enjoy during this season. But the good news of Jesus’ birth invites us to feast in the joyful spirit of *triumph*, rather than the hollow spirit of escape.

That joyful spirit of triumph is not only the reason why the church celebrates a twelve-day festival to commemorate the birth of Jesus every year. It is also the reason why the first three days of that festival, following Christmas day, are commemorations of the deaths of *marytrs*—the feast of Saint Stephen (December 26th), the feast of Saint John (December 27th), and the feast of the Holy Innocents, the babies slain by Herod in Bethlehem (December 28th).

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How can the church celebrate a *feast* in commemoration of dead infants? Or, for that matter, how can we celebrate a feast at any time in a world so full of division and violence, oppression and warfare, greed and futility? Since last year, at least seven children have died in detention centers along our southern border, separated from their parents. In the time that it has taken me to preach this sermon, two or three children in Yemen have died of starvation brought on by civil war. In the time that it has taken me to preach this sermon, somewhere between twenty and thirty children in the United States have been aborted. We live in the same world today into which Jesus was born then, in which Rachel weeps for her children.

But we are also recipients of the same comfort

and the same hope as she. We can feast because in Jesus, death itself has been transfigured into the place where God is with us, and where we gain the victory that overcomes the world. Through the incarnation of the Word, we can be assured that nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God in Messiah Jesus, our Lord.

So we rejoice, precisely because our eyes are wide open. Just as we do not mourn like those who have no hope, so also we do not feast like those who have no hope—“Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Rather, Immanuel tells us, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for I have overcome the world.”

Amen.