

Christ in Genesis|Hope from the Beginning

Mothers Weeping, Children Rejoicing (4)

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Genesis 35.16-20; Jeremiah 31.10-17; Matthew 2.13-18

(Gen 35) Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. ¹⁷ When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." ¹⁸ It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). ²⁰ Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.

(Jeremiah 31) Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, And declare in the coastlands afar off, And say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him And keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock." ¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob And redeemed him from the hand of him who was stronger than he. ¹² "They will come and shout for joy on the height of Zion, And they will be radiant over the bounty of the LORD-- Over the grain and the new wine and the oil, And over the young of the flock and the herd; And their life will be like a watered garden, And they will never languish again. ¹³ "Then the virgin will rejoice in the dance, And the young men and the old, together, For I will turn their mourning into joy And will comfort them and give them joy for their sorrow. ¹⁴ "I will fill the soul of the priests with abundance, And My people will be satisfied with My goodness," declares the LORD. ¹⁵ Thus says the LORD, "A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; She refuses to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more." ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, "Restrain your voice from weeping And your eyes from tears; For your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD, "And they will return from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ "There is hope for your future," declares the LORD, "And your children will return to their own territory.

(Matthew 2) Now when they had gone, behold, 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 going to search for the Child to destroy Him." ¹⁴ So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵ He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON." ¹⁶ Then when King Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. ¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ¹⁸ "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE

This is the FOURTH Sunday in Advent... We've been looking at FIVE selected passages from the Book of Genesis (Hope from the first book of the Bible) *five texts that distinctly point ahead* to this moment when God arrives by the womb of a virgin.

Today's passage doesn't so much PREDICT the coming of God in Jesus Christ but it describes the backdrop into which He was born... It's a kind of prototype of an experience we all face...and when we face it we need some reference point and we find one in Rachel. The experience is grief...deep, crushing, *extreme grief and disappointment*.

It may be so profound an experience that it tempts a person to *feel that life is meaningless*...and it may prompt *some utterance of despair* like... "what's the use?" ...or "I can't go on" ...or "I just don't care anymore" ...or "I give up!"

I can never think of this topic without thinking of a book I read a few years ago: *A Grace Disguised* by Jerry Sittser. The author was driving a minivan with his wife, his mother and four children. A drunk driver came head-on into their lane and Jerry Sittser's wife, his mother and two of their four children were killed.

The book is a long reflection, by this Christian man, a seminary professor, his reflection on loss and dealing with grief. The subtitle is "How the Soul Grows Through Loss." I recommend the book.

One way I benefitted from it was his insistence on the futility of measuring our loss...as if to wonder "who has hurt more YOU or I?" ALL LOSS HURTS. But you do wonder – what would that loss do to YOU?

Rachel was *an infertile wife* and desperately wanted to bear children with *the husband who was crazy in love with her*... Then, after MANY years of painful infertility (in a culture where there was A LOT of shame attached to infertility) after many years of trying, this couple had a child, a son, Joseph – great news! And then, immediately, she became pregnant again...great news!...carried the child to term (great news!)... And, while on a journey, she went into labor and died while giving birth... 'never saw her sons grow up in the Land God had promised them.

And while in labor she saw what was happening and expresses her despair by naming her baby "Son of Sorrow" and then dies. It was so crushing a blow and so absurd that later generations made her a kind of *patron saint of all mourners*...Rachel's like a symbol for sorrow.

I want to look at Rachel, Queen of Sorrow...and two other times in the Bible she's used...#1) Three Sorrow Stories...#2) The BIG Imperative and How to do it.

After Rachel expresses her bitter resignation and names her son "Ben-Yoni" that is, "Son of

Sorrow” (sort of like “A Boy Named Sue”)... then Jacob the dad, changes it (so as NOT to stigmatize his poor, motherless son) and names him, NOT, Ben-Yoni but “Ben-Yamin” – son of my right hand. *Then, Rachel is buried near Bethlehem, which of course, is on OUR minds, especially at this time of the year.*

Story #2 is a chapter from Jeremiah. It’s written to the people in exile, in Babylon. Exile was God’s way of re-claiming His people after literal centuries of spiritual decline *when they forgot who they were* and became almost indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors who were practicing human sacrifice and every weird, horrible superstition.

So, after MANY years of warning, God sent the big, bad, cruel armies of Babylon to WAR against the Israelites *and Judea fell*...Jerusalem was destroyed and the people became prisoners of war, forced to march to Babylon and become the property of Nebuchadnezzar the Great. And IN that horrible situation, the prophet speaks these famous words of Jeremiah 31 – a description of The New Covenant.

And the words in this whole chapter are amazingly lavish, extravagant promises about God’s plan for His people. Even though it’s FULL SCALE domestic meltdown – complete collapse of their entire national life, Jeremiah says, “THIS is not the end! There will be a new beginning – a new covenant! You failed to keep God’s LAW... but God will fulfill *OUR part of the arrangement – HE WILL KEEP THE LAW FOR US and HE WILL CHANGE OUR HEARTS BY GRACE!*”

And, in the middle reading, these *OVER-THE-TOP* promises...all stacked up: “God will gather you...will tenderly shepherd you...will ransom you...will fill you with joy...make your faces SHINE with joy...new wine and oil (luxury!)...your inner lives like a watered garden...NEVER TO LANGUISH AGAIN...rejoicing and dancing...comfort...your clergymen will be consistent and have rich experience with God... you will ALL BE DEEPLY SATISFIED in God...

And then...in the MIDDLE of these fantastic promises...like the Sesame Street Song, “one of these things just doesn’t belong!” THERE’S THIS VERY SAD REMINDER... that we are NOT in this place of abundance! These are ONLY promises...and right NOW there’s inexpressible pain and sorrow...and grief so devastating that we don’t know how to put it! We need help from the Queen of Sorrow...

"A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation *and* bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." (15)

Ramah was a town just North of Jerusalem and it’s where the forced march would begin. It was where they separated families and ripped them from the Promised Land. And it was about the same distance North of Jerusalem as Bethlehem was to the South...where Rachel was buried...where Jesus Christ was born...where the slaughter of the innocents took place.

It pictures Rachel (*Queen of Sorrow*)...like a ghost...looking on from the grave and still weeping for her children...Indescribable sorrow...that seems never to go away.

The third story is the Christmas Story (maybe a year or *even two* after the actual birth). Luke focuses on Mary, but this reading from Matthew looks at Joseph... It turns out that Mary's fiancé is Joseph the Dreamer (if you've been *with us recently you know* about another dreamer named Joseph...who went down to Egypt!).

But this Joseph... the fiancé of Mary...is warned in FOUR dreams... We pick up on the second: "Now when the magi had gone, behold, 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 going to search for the Child to destroy Him.'" (Mat 2.13)

And Joseph the Dreamer takes his little family down to Egypt... Just like that other Joseph. And they stay there until God calls them out like a New Exodus, Jesus Christ will be the embodiment of a New Israel (Hosea 11.1; Mat 2.15)

And then... when those astronomers/astrologers from the East (maybe Persia) *when they realize* that Herod the HORRIBLE, insecure, paranoid, king (one of the smiling faces, lyin' to the races) *when the wise men realize that Herod wants to destroy this new born King...THEY DO NOT RETURN THROUGH THE CAPITAL CITY, JERUSALEM...* They do not want to *tell the wicked king* anything he might use against the Holy Child of Bethlehem...*they go home by a detour.*

And when Herod finds out he's been duped...he's murderously angry and he sends his soldiers/thugs to Bethlehem with instructions, "I'm NOT gonna stand for anyone to be called 'King of the Jews'... so kill all the boys in that town...two years and younger ...they ALL MUST GO!"

And that's what they did...probably between 15 and 40 babies...torn from the arms of their parents and killed. It's a kind of grief we can't even imagine ...JUST inexpressible and THAT'S WHY MATTHEW thinks of *The Queen of Sorrow*...Rachel. And he quotes the prophet of the Exile, Jeremiah, the "Weeping Prophet" as he's called, "Rachel weeping for her children for they are NOT." (Rachel is buried in Bethlehem and her ghost still cries there!)

She cries because this world...is not the way it's supposed to be. The despair of Rachel – when she names her child that bitter name – almost like she's looking for someone to punish – her despair is felt by all of us at certain times. You may feel it when you read the newspaper or hear about some "senseless act of violence" OR you may hear about Jerry Sittser and wonder, "why does God allow that?" or when we learn about the child soldiers in some nations or sex trafficking (I can't imagine anything worse than that). OR you may look back on some very painful...senseless ...horrible act of abuse in your own life and family and YOU MAY HEAR (as it were) the ghost of Rachel weeping...and what do you do with the LOSS and the

pain/grief?...MAYBE YOU FEEL IT MOST ACUTELY AT THIS TIME OF THE YEAR. It's even possible to feel guilty for hurting (like, "I'm not in some work-camp in an underdeveloped nation...I should quit feeling bad!") Do these sorrow stories tell us what to do with this weeping of the world?

The ONE imperative in all that we read...the one command of any kind is the middle reading, v. 16, "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears..." Is that it? Is the Bible's solution to all the pain of the world...all the weeping mothers...the ghost of Rachel...ARE WE JUST TO "MAN UP" and quit sniveling and tell ourselves it COULD be a lot worse?

Well thankfully...that's not what this is saying at all. The whole focus of this central text is that whatever pain the world is enduring right NOW and from whatever the source – whether it's self-inflicted (as by dictators and unjust officials like Herod) or whether from "natural occurrences" like women dying in childbirth or birth defects or illnesses or typhoons or senseless acts of violence... or past abuse and personal failures...THE ONE REASON WHY WE CAN KEEP OURSELVES FROM DESPAIR OVER LOSS IN THE PRESENT OR PAST is ... because of the FUTURE.

The TEXT from Jeremiah is screaming to us: "Look what I have in store for those who enter into relationship with Me – all these descriptions of deep human flourishing and satisfaction and deepest joy and fulfillment...let the thought of what is coming OVERWHELM the past and the present. In the end you'll see THAT I AM THE LORD OF TIME!"

This is not a call to be stoic or hard or cold...It's saying "I see the incredible LOSS and GRIEF...and your impulse to give up...and give in...to be LOST in despair as you live in a world where these unthinkable losses are COMMON...but I will, at last overwhelm the LOSS...so that they will seem "light and momentary" (2 Cor 4.17)...IN THE MEANTIME...speak to your own weeping...speak to Rachel's ghost and say, "One is coming who will redeem us and save us from despair..." It's actually a two part imperative, starting with the FIRST words, "Hear the word of the Lord!...and thus restrain your eyes from weeping."

And we know that He has indeed come...Don't think of God as a cruel little boy looking at a fish-tank and tapping the glass ...or worse, an Ant Farm and shaking it up...Here, in Jesus Christ, is the God who came INTO our tragic world...HE BECAME AN EXILE FOR US...He comes RIGHT IN to the world *the way we did...through the labor of a birth*...The Word is made flesh. He became our "Ben-yoni" Son of Sorrow...and is now, "Ben-Yamin", *Son of the Right Hand*...risen and seated with authority – the right to open the seals and bring God's future into being! (Rev 5.5)

He is "the Man of Sorrow and acquainted with grief" ...born to obey in our place... born to die and ...absorbs our sins and sorrows...born to voice the deepest cry that even Rachel could not voice when He takes all our questions and compresses them down to ONE great cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

He is forsaken so WE can be received...that we could know a future SO overwhelmingly ...unimaginably rich that the thought of it can buoy us when we begin to sink in the waters of grief and loss...

Maybe when the NT calls us to “redeem the time for the days are evil” (Eph. 5.16), maybe that ‘s NOT simply a call to be more efficient workers and get more punctual and get more accomplished like better machines...Maybe it’s a call to LIVE with this strong hope...that despite what we see, a world that often looks absurd with crushing loss...MAYBE TO “REDEEM THE TIME FOR THE DAYS ARE EVIL” means that we buy back our past and our present...with the capital Jesus Christ puts in our hands...WE say, “While I weep for my losses and the losses of others (blessed are those who mourn) but I will NOT be consumed by despair...

I will live in hope and I will seek (even now) the joy and fullness that is laid up for me...I will look for the fruit of the Covenant Keeper to show up in my life. I will seek that transformation that He promised...His Law written on my heart...MY MOTIVES liberated for an obedience that comes NOT from fear and cowering but from FULLNESS AND ANTICIPATION of a future He has already sealed.