

## Second Sunday After Christmas – Samantha Paulin

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Well, I picked the wrong the week. When Nate and I were on break from seminary in Seattle and visited here over the summer, Judy asked if we were available and willing to preach one of these two weeks. I thought by going second I would be guaranteeing that I would not preach on the need for patience and waiting in Advent, two things I am not very skilled at. However, I didn't consider what that meant for today. Because I wanted just the joy of the birth narrative. Of Immanuel, God with us. I wanted the warm fuzzy feelings that come with the birth of a new baby, the glorious coming of Jesus into this world for the sake of creation.

I didn't want the story about murder. I didn't want the pain and suffering of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, the refugee family seeking asylum in another land...the land where their ancestors were once enslaved. I didn't want to read aloud the pain of Rachel's grief alongside the grieving of the parents of this massacre. I wanted what so many of us want in this season of Christmas—peace, joy, loving embraces by family and friends.

I wanted to forget and avoid the pain that comes with this season for so many. For those who have lost loved ones during this time and are drawn back into memory of their grief. For those who are currently on this path of mourning as they themselves are close to death or face the death of family and friends. For those in the pain of isolation, or lacking sufficient resources (food, a home, healthcare).

Yet here I found myself, the second day of Christmas, weeping in my living room as I was drawn into Rachel's grief. I found myself sad and frustrated as I was drawn into the fear and uncertainty of a refugee family on the run from an oppressive king. Drawn into the confusion of why God gave Jesus' family a vision to flee but no one else.

What am I—what are we as the Church—to do with these words? With this story of pain and grief and death? How are we to join the psalmist in praising the God of creation?

If I have learned anything from these last few years of seminary, it's been that three is a big number in the Christian world...and also that grad school requires way too much reading.

However, in this reading, I do think God is drawing us into three things. First, I think God is drawing us to remember. We can't help but see the underlying connections between Matthew's narration of Jesus' early days and the memory of the lives of the Israelites in Egypt. We have before us the parallel between Herod and Pharaoh and their massacre of infants. We have before us both Jesus and Moses being saved from this death. We have both Jesus and Moses' families returning to the land once those who had tried to kill them were dead. Both men born into a system of oppression and dominative power.

In and through Jesus' birth and his family's escape to Egypt, we are invited to remember the God of Israel, the God who looked upon her children, saw their distress, and came, not through angels or messengers, but instead in her very presence. We see this invitation to remember the deeds of God through Christ in our Hebrews text as well, calling us to remember the Incarnate God who

comes not separated from our humanity but *in every respect* became flesh and blood to be present and live among us.

Yet our Gospel today is not shying away from the reality of the world in which Jesus enters. Matthew highlights both the dangers and the costs inherent in challenging the world's powers of this time. Jesus, our Savior, our God Incarnate, is not born and suddenly everything else is made different. Just as Moses is born into a world of death and grief, Jesus too is born into a world that is violent and full of destruction. We see again the connection to the Israelite people as Matthew quotes Jeremiah's words: *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.*

Now this prophecy was originally referring to the conquering by outside nations and the dispersion of the Israelite people many centuries before our Matthew story. Yet by including this prophecy in connection to the massacre of children here in Bethlehem, our Gospel highlights the fact that tragedy and death have now come upon God's people, Israel, from within, from the "King of the Jews" himself. Here we find what so many of us continue to experience today—the oppression and grief not from some "outside" nation or peoples, but from the very people among us. From our own rulers and kings, from our own fellow neighbors.

And in this passage, the Greek wording says that Rachel does not want to be consoled. Her children are no more; she has nothing left but her tears over them. If she gives up her tears, all seems lost. In the midst of this new birth, this joyous occasion, we are confronted with the pain of death. Rachel's tears honor her lost children. We are reminded in this narrative that Jesus comes into the world we know, with its pains of death and oppression, of genocide and grief. Rachel's cries for her children here give voice to the cries of those who continue to long for liberation from these sufferings.

And this leads us to our second invitation today. Not only are we, like the Israelites, called to remember God's presence among them and among us, but we are also called to lament. To lament, to express grief, alongside Rachel as she weeps for her lost children. To lament the ways injustice, oppression, and genocide wreak havoc and destruction for so many. To lament the past deaths and current deaths of today's vulnerable. We are called not to forget nor ignore the ongoing deaths and pains of today—our own and our neighbors. And I think we also may be called to pay attention to the ways today's kings oppress and how we are complicit in those oppressions.

We must both remember and grieve for this turmoil Jesus was born into and raised in, just as we must remember and lament today the turmoil and destruction facing our most vulnerable neighbors—those facing generational poverty and racism. Those facing deportation or death at the hands of violence or avoidance. Those facing physical and mental pain at the hands of chronic illness, degenerative illness without proper healthcare and support.

I have often wondered this week, as I have attempted to ignore these deaths and pains, if I do genuinely hear the weeping of Rachel and the Rachels of today? Do I—do we—hear the sounds of lament from our neighbors? Do we hear not only the cries of the dying but the cries of the angry and powerful who seek their destruction? I often wonder whether my position in this

society enables me to avoid these cries, to sidestep the need to lament. And I wonder that for us too. How might we begin to have collective ears to hear as well as the courage to respond to these cries of lamentation?

Our New Testament readings, in all their promise of victory over sin and death, do not erase or absolve the deaths of these children, any more than they excuse the tragic acts we commit against one another today. The coming of the child, Immanuel, has not instantaneously created a world in which sin and tragedy are somehow joyfully absent. Yet we are presented today with the welcoming of the God who does indeed weep with Rachel. For God has been present, and still is present, in Rachel's mourning, and in ours today. And I would venture to say that this lament, this mourning of the dead and the oppressed, is a part of the ongoing journey of God with God's people—we see this in the lives of the Israelites, as God's chosen people. We see it in Jesus as he is moved to pity again and again for those in suffering and grief. And we continue to see it today, in the lives of our neighbors, our friends, at times ourselves and our own families.

Yet alongside this invitation to remember, alongside this call to lament, I also think God is inviting us into hope. In the recalling of the Exodus, we remember the salvation of the Israelite people from destruction. In recalling the captivity of the Israelite people in exile and the pain of Rachel's grief, we remember and receive hope in the God who became like us *in every respect*, to be with us in our grief, in our pain, and in our uncertainty of the future. In recalling the Holy Family's return to Galilee, we remember the ultimate return of Christ to come, who has defeated death and, in this victory, called us to hope.

This Jeremiah prophecy of Rachel, coming alongside this pain and death, is set in a chapter full of hope for the future, including the promise of a new covenant. The hope of the new exodus that Jesus will provide for the redeemed people of God. And while I do not have the answers (and I don't think I will find them in seminary) as to why God gave vision to one family, saving them and not the multitude of children and families torn apart at the hands of a fearful and angry king, I believe we must still cling to the hope that Jesus' birth, the Incarnate God of flesh and bone does mean something for our lives today. It means that there will indeed be a time when there is victory over both our personal and corporate tragedies of this world. It means there is hope that God, in the vulnerable baby Jesus, is with us as we remember and grieve. It means also that in these invitations we must learn how to participate in the restoration of God's creation—through collective discernment of God's movement, through attentiveness and courage in the face of the Herods of the world, through examinations of our complicity and avoidance of these pains and deaths.

Finally, I can begin to see what the psalmists are talking about when they sing of God's praises. We are invited to praise God because we are indeed not alone in these lives of remembrance, grief, and lament. Just as God's presence went with the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness, Jesus has come into our present wilderness. To be with us in the pain and the deaths of today. Just as God's presence saved the Israelites from suffering and death in Egypt, we too are invited to be saved by God's presence in the Incarnation.

Thanks be to God.