

2nd Sunday of Christmas

The Rev. Sarah Carver

As we continue to observe our Christmas celebration, we continue to make our way through Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus. And it takes a really dark turn rather quickly, doesn't it? Not long after the Christ child arrives, King Herod seeks to destroy him, to bring an end the possibility of this child ever sitting on Herod's throne. As we will recount on Epiphany, Herod is alerted to the royal birth by wise men who come to him looking for this new ruler, this new King of the Jews. Herod confirms the birth by assembling the chief priests and scribes who share the prophet's words detailing this new king's birth in Bethlehem. And Herod completely freaks out. Here is a rival, here is someone who might claim his throne, his power and Herod was afraid and in his fear he employs deception and murder to ensure that no king, not even a newborn with only the possibility of kingship years ahead of him, will usurp him. Today's gospel depicts Jesus' flight to Egypt and his subsequent return. But there is so much happening around this story and it works best if we read it as a whole. It is also important to remember that in between Jesus' escape and return is the massacre of the infants, when Herod kills all the male children of Bethlehem who were two years of age or younger. And part of this telling includes Matthew writing: Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." It is a troubling story indeed.

But Matthew is very intentional in his writing. Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth sees this Christ child born directly into conflict and not one of simple

circumstance, not just of a baby born under a prophecy in an occupied land, not simply of a story that could happen anywhere but a story that points to a greater truth: that the kingdom of heaven has come into conflict with the kingdoms of the world and how the will of God will ultimately thwart the will of corrupted, murderous power. Herod dies, and Jesus returns.

The late Walter Bruggeman offers a powerful interpretation of Matthew's telling: That Herod represents the last iteration of the old order and "the desperate attempt to hold on to the old way."¹ Herod, according to Bruggeman is a figure of denial, powerlessness, and ultimately, death. What he is denying, is his end. One he can see, but will do anything and everything to avoid. But nothing can stop the ending of Herod. And what's more, Bruggeman notes that it is Herod's end that is marked with the prophetic voice of Rachel as told by Jeremiah, Rachel, the mother of Israel, who grieves and laments not just these children in Bethlehem, but all of Israel who then lies wasted in exile and now, occupation.

For Bruggeman, the prophetic voice at work here is that of grief and lamentation. It is a voice he argues that can cut through the denial and numbness of the world, a denial that tells us everything is fine, nothing can be changed, all will continue as it is. "Peace, Peace, when there is no peace."² In the grief of the prophetic voice, the crying out of Rachel, that the prophet calls us to wake up to the death that surrounds us, death that Bruggeman describes by writing: The deathliness among us is not the death of a long life well lived, but the death introduced in that royal garden of Genesis...That death is manifested in alienation, loss of patrimony, and questing for new satiations that can never satisfy, and we are driven to the ultimate

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Edition, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2018, pg. 82.

² Ibid. 55

consumerism of consuming each other.”³ In other words, the prophetic voice brings to our awareness and to our emotional center, the deep brokenness of our relationship with God and one another that began in the garden of Eden and helps us to grieve what was lost, what is lost, what is being lost. And in that grieving, we join with God who is also grieving what was and is no longer. It is a difficult place to be, but without it, Bruggeman tell us, we cannot move into what God dreams for us, what God is bringing to us. For it is God who is bringing an end to all of this death. God, Bruggeman says, is the God of endings.

But that also means God is the God of beginnings. Jeremiah attests to this when he wrote of Israel’s eventual return from exile:

“See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

With weeping they shall come, and with consolation I will lead them back. It is God’s will to lead all of us into new life, to dry our tears, to comfort us. God yearns for this. And God grieves when we do not.

When I was going to school for my Master’s of social work, I interned for part of my time at a domestic violence shelter. The shelter provided services men, women and children who found themselves in coercive, abusive, and violent relationships.

³ Ibid. 45-46.

I was part of the staff who provided counseling and programming for these folks trying to begin life anew, a life that included healthy and loving connections, a greater sense of self-worth, hope and stability. It was incredibly hard work, and it meant revisiting terrible experiences with people, listening to their stories, and holding all of the awful details as well as their anger, their confusion, and yes, their grief. It was even harder for the people undergoing this change, leaving their old life behind and stepping into a mysterious newness. But without facing the brokenness, without naming the ending, there would be no newness, only a repeated cycle of broken connections and suffering. And there really was a new life for these folks, there was hope and love waiting for them.

God is coming into the world to tell us an old story, one so old it is new to us, a story of how we might be human in the world, how we might walk with God and each other, how we might heal and help heal others. How we might love in the most pure way, to envision life in ways the world wouldn't dare, to imagine a community radically different from all other communities. I imagine that this same story calls us to yearn as God does for God's creation. Lamenting when we all fall short of what God desires for us, what God calls us to be. Perhaps it means following God into foreign lands, and trusting God enough to leave what is familiar and comfortable but finite and false for what is true and eternal. Jesus as king tells a different story of what rulers might look like, how they might lead. Born to a marginalized people, Jesus' life is one of humility, healing, and sacrifice, suffering with and for his people and for the whole world, and showing us that in our struggle God is with us, calling us forward, calling us home, guiding us into newness. Amen.