



No Cheap Comfort
Matthew 2:13-23
Rev. Rebecca Heilman
December 29, 2019

Less than a week ago, the stockings were hung over fireplaces, the lights sparkled up and down Park Avenue, the red bows were tied to wreathes, the trees stood tall and the ornaments carefully placed. Cookies were baked, presents wrapped, meals planned, houses cleaned, and the innocence of children, and adults, too, laughed and sang with joy. Christmas carries a sparkle, this innocence. We make it this way so that waiting for a simple child born to a humbled family in a dirty barn is a bit more exciting and magical than it probably actually was.

And I began my season with this magic and sparkle as well. I prepared my home by hanging as much Christmas on my walls as I tastefully could. And I had every intention to purchase my first Christmas tree since this would be my first Christmas with my dog, Sadie, all on our own. But I lost that magic and innocence with one phone call.

My best friend suddenly, shockingly lost her father on December 10th. After that phone call and quick trip home, all that Christmas magic, sparkle, and innocence seemed to drain from the bottom of my heart. All of a sudden, my hometown and best friend was in mourning when they should have been charmed by the

Christmas spirit. All of a sudden, I wanted Christ to come quickly, but not with the ribbons and bows or the sweet carols and treats. This Christmas just let the light come. Let it come to shine in the darkness. And that's the thing about Christmas and this passage, they have forced me to ponder that Christmas holds innocence and loss in tension with one another. Christmas stirs up the innocence of a child born in a manger to the complexity of a family on the run and hundreds of children murdered by a dictator. For it to be Christmas though, we need both stories. We can't have one story without the other.

And so, the shepherds are gone. The angels are silent. The Wise Men have seen Jesus. They have given him the gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh and decided to go a different way for they were warned in a dream to avoid King Herod. Joseph, too, was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt because Herod is out for blood, his newly born son's blood. So, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus pack up their little belongings and traveled the long road south from Bethlehem to Egypt fleeing for their lives. Jesus was a king and now a refugee. And when Herod, a political tyrant, heard that he has been tricked by the Wise Men, he was infuriated and

engaged in an act of terror. He kills all the children under the age of two, in and around Bethlehem. This is Herod's reputation igniting again. Through other writings we learn that Herod killed his wife and three sons in order to keep power. Even Caesar Augustus said, after hearing of Herod's murders, "it is better to be Herod's pig, than Herod's son."¹ Herod will stop at nothing if his power feels threatened or if fear settles in his heart.

And so, innocence and severe loss are in tension with one another in this story. There is the hope, peace, joy, and love that comes from a baby that will also bring goodness to this world like never before. But we can't overlook that Jesus came into an already broken world. A world that carries violence and war, cancer and dementia, sudden unexplainable deaths, mental illnesses, and addiction. A world with people who are overwhelmed by poverty and homelessness. Children suffering from hunger and slavery. Prisons are overpopulated with innocent and unjust incarcerations. As well as undocumented immigrant families placed in cells because they are seeking a better life, not unlike Joseph seeking a better life for his family. "The advent of Christ does not mean the removal of evil."² Strangely enough, the birth of Christ is the motivation of violence from Herod and the narrative addresses an all too common occurrence: the suffering of innocents and the power-hungry systems at play.

We've seen a Herod-like-fury in the faces of people in power all over time. We've seen the Herod-like-fury in systems that are set up to keep people in their lowly place. We've seen the Herod-like-fury in illnesses that cripple the

body and mind. We've seen it in the faces of men carrying guns into elementary schools. We've seen it in swastikas painted on the synagogues and just last night, in the violence of a man who wounded five people celebrating Hanukkah. We've seen it in threats of nuclear warfare. And we've seen it in the test results from a surprise visit to the hospital. We are haunted by this fury and the results that fall after. This is why we need the Christmas story the way Matthew tells it. God breaks into a world as we know it, a world carrying all the things we dread and all the things that terrify us. Things that we don't wish for but are here. Joseph is haunted by the world he lives in too. At least three times, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream or a nightmare, warning him to take his new little family to safety. And it's in these dreams and the angelic interventions that we know God breaks into our world and is in control.

In the book, *Children's Letters to God*, the very first letter written is from a little girl named Jane and she asks God, "In Sunday school, they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation?"³ This question pushes our faith and makes us ask more hard questions. Where is God in all of this trauma? Does God go on Vacation? Now, I don't think this is true. I don't think God ever leaves our world. God was still at work and in control in this story. We see it in the Greek. The Greek shows that God never wanted the death of the innocents. God never wanted those evil events to occur. I don't think God wants any evil events to occur.

¹ Thomas H. Graves, "A Story Ignored: an Exegesis of Matthew 2:13-23," *Faith and Mission*, 5 no 1, (Fall 1987), pg 66-76, 70.

² O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Matthew: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013, 32.

³ Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, *Children's Letters to God*, Workman Publishing Company; Gift edition 1991.

In other verses of Matthew, the Greek fulfillment formula says, “such and such happens so that the word through the prophet was fulfilled.”⁴ This implies that it is God speaking through the prophet that this is what God will do. God is in action, God is in control...but not here, not in the deaths of the innocents. Instead, when Matthew quotes Jeremiah, the Greek hints towards grief and sorrow.⁵ It does not say “that those two-year olds and younger were killed “so that” this scripture would be fulfilled. Matthew says, “‘Then was fulfilled what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet.’ In other words, for Matthew, the slaughter of the innocents is a fulfillment of Scripture but not, absolutely not, of God’s will” or plan.⁶

Diana Butler Bass, a theologian and Christian historian, fleshes this out a bit more in one of the most terrifying tragedies to occur. She wrote about God’s presence just six days after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. She observed the world mourning and noticed that there were two opinions of where God was on that terrible day. Some said, God was present. God was in and among those suffering, holding them and comforting them. Other people said, God was absent, for how can God be part of such terrible acts and if God is all powerful, why did God not interfere? Diana Butler Bass offers a different understanding that mixes both of those theological opinions together. She writes maybe God was hidden that day – “One neither and both present and

absent.”⁷ A God that raises questions of do we really know who you are, God, and the power you hold? She continues, “God was in the hands of rescuers, but not the hands that wielded the guns; God was in the midst of the murdered but not the act of murder. This is the God who is in all places and nowhere. It touches some truth of human experience and questions we ask when something terrible happens – we do not know where God is in the midst of evil.”⁸ Here’s the good news, we do know God is not evil.

And God sent Jesus, Emmanuel quite literally, God-with-us, God's love wrapped up in flesh and bone. So, here is more good news of the gospel to be found in this terrible, tragic story: We are not alone. We question where God is at, we wonder, we have theological debates, but we lean on the name Emmanuel, God-With-us. We are never alone. Do you remember where Jesus is born? He's born in a manger. He is born right into one mess, and he isn't about to abandon us in the midst of any other.”⁹

And I’ve got some more good news for you since this story desperately needs it. God weeps. It’s right there in Scripture. God’s son, Jesus, wept over the death of Lazarus, even when Jesus knew Lazarus would be raised again. He was just about to preform that act and yet he still wept. We don’t understand evil, we don’t understand everything about God. But God understands our loss and grief and worry. And so, I suspect God is the one weeping for

⁴ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Matthew: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013, 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Allen, *Matthew*, 32.

⁷ “Diana Butler Bass: Where Was God in Newtown,” Day 1@75, December 20, 2016, <https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20033e3/diana-butler-bass-where-was-god-in-newtown> .

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “Jenny McDevitt: The Other Christmas Story,” Day1@75, December 29, 2019, <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5df3d08f6615f6e3a4000049/jenny-mcdevitt-that-other-christmas-story> .

the children of Bethlehem and the innocent children all over the world. God is the one weeping over the loss of a loved one. God is the one weeping over a loss of a job and security. God is the one weeping over the news of cancer or the news of another shooting.

And let us not forget another weeping soul, who has a large part in this story. That is Rachel of course. Matthew writes,

“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.”

Rachel is placed in this text for she is like a symbolic mother of the nation: defeated, exiled, and suffering. She could not bear children for a long time, a suffering for many women in itself. After finally giving birth to Joseph, Rachel later dies giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. She died near Bethlehem and she gives voice to all tragedies both then and now when there is an insufficient response, like the questions and answers of where God is in the midst of tragedy. Her weeping, and Matthew including her weeping in this text, “is an essential reference for injustice and violence wherever and whenever they occur.”¹⁰ It’s a reminder that we, like Rachel, wail and weep for the losses of the world.

And Christ’s birth, that brought light, reminds us that there is no cheap comfort for those who mourn. God gives light because God grieves too. God shines light because God knows what it means to weep. God gave the world, Emmanuel, God-with-us, because God

knew we needed comfort and change. God rescued the holy family for God had plans for that light to continue in the world. And so, if we are to take this passage seriously only four days after Christmas, then let us remember that light shines in the darkness. We’ve been saying that all Advent long. But let us also remember that light shines on the reality of the struggle between good and evil, innocence and loss.¹¹ God is at work in the world as we know it, we saw that in the Greek, and we are here to help with that work.

Another letter from a child who writes to God says, “We read Thomas Edison made light. But in Sunday School, they said you did it. So, I bet he stole your idea. Sincerely, Donna.” Donna had the right idea, we are to steal some of God’s light, but I think God would give it willingly, so that we can help shine that light in the hearts of those who are experiencing the struggles of this world. We remind them that God weeps, God grieves, God is with us.

It was several days before I could make it to my hometown of Valdese, NC to be with my friend who had just lost her father. I was terrified for her...I still am, but I kid you not, the entire town of Valdese cradled and is cradling her in their arms. Nearly 20 people were at the hospital weeping with her and at the wake, it felt like the whole town of Valdese was there to share love for one another. God was in the midst of those tears and in the midst of those hugs. Since then, that love has not stopped. One person has helped clean the house, one family helped with funeral arrangements, one person is working on her Father’s Will with her,

¹⁰ Sébastien Doane, “Rachel Weeping: Intertextuality as a Means of Transforming the Readers’ Worldview,” *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, 4 no 1 (2017), p 1-20.

¹¹ Allen Jr., *Matthew*, 33.

and several are there to just drink, eat and talk about nonsense.

That's the work of Christmas. When the bells are silent and the candles out, the realization of the world we live in lingers. But it's the hope, peace, joy, love, and light that helps us face it. It's the goodness and grace of Christmas that pushes us forward. One theologian writes, "This is why we need the Christmas story the way Matthew insists upon telling it. This story assures us that God comes into the world as it actually is, not as we wish it would be. Because we live in the actual world, and God's love will be found wherever we are" and we are here to help carry God's love into the world.¹²

To end, Howard Thurman, an African American theologian wrote this poem about Christmas.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Amen.

¹² "Jenny McDevitt: The Other Christmas Story," <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5df3d08f6615f6e3a4000049/jenny-mcdevitt-that-other-christmas-story> .