

Sermon Transcript

“Rachel’s Weeping”

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The presents are opened, the eggnog is finished, and the trees (the real ones, anyway) are shedding their needles. Do you know what this means? It means that there are only 357 shopping days left until next Christmas! You better get busy!

But hold on just a second...before we blast into the New Year, with thoughts of great deals for next Christmas, let’s pause for a moment. This is a peculiar time, this Sunday that rests between the Old and the New Year.

It is a doorway, a threshold between the years – a time when we, like the Roman God, Janus, with his two faces, one looking forward, and one backward - might take stock of where we have been and where we might go.

And to add to the complexity of this threshold time, the Christian Calendar, on this particular Sunday, invites us to consider the story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents,” and how this story might shape our lives in the New Year.

While Matthew’s Gospel is the only Gospel that includes this story, it is worth recalling. The “Slaughter of the Innocents” stands in stark contrast to the crèche and the angels singing on high – in stark contrast to the new born child welcomed into the world by a star in the sky, to the hope and light of the Christmas story.

In Matthew’s telling of this story, King Herod, threatened by the birth of Jesus, and what this “prince of peace” might mean to his rule, issues a violent decree to protect his throne: kill all the new born babies in Bethlehem under the age of two: Kill them all.

While we do know that King Herod did exist and was known for his cruelty and iron-fisted rule, it's unclear whether or not these babies were actually killed. In some ways, it's beside the point, because this story speaks to a reality of what it means to be human...and to have something you love be taken away and destroyed. It's a loss almost beyond imagining.

In the aftermath of this decree, Matthew informs us that, "A voice was heard...Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted...because they were no more."

Because they were no more.

To be clear, in this passage, Rachel is not a specific mother whose child has been slaughtered, but rather she is the metaphorical mother of Israel, weeping for the innocent children of Bethlehem, slaughtered by Herod, refusing to be comforted. Matthew knows that Rachel is a powerful symbol that his listeners will recognize and he so borrows this image from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Prophet Jeremiah.

You see, Jeremiah, in his own time, 600 years before the life of Jesus, also portrayed Rachel as weeping...weeping for those Jews who had been killed and those who had been taken into Babylonian captivity. Rachel weeping is a potent symbol that evokes deep feelings of grief and loss. Perhaps we get a sense of this, if we imagine Lady Liberty weeping...and refusing to be comforted, because the dreams and hopes of this country were no more.

For some reason, we tend to gloss over this part of the Christmas story.

But this is not a 2000 year old story about someone else, and their tears, in a land far away. At its heart, this is a story about us... And while it's certainly about evil, and the Herods among us today, including the ones in our own heart...and about the things we do to stay in power and resist change, I want to focus on Rachel and her tears.

In this time between the years, on this Slaughter of Innocence Sunday, I invite you to identify with Rachel, not because you've lost a child, although that may be true, but so that her tears and grief might speak to you. This is not a lifeless, 2000 year-old story.

Rather, it is a story that asks us:

- In this past year, what futures have "dissolved in a moment like salt in a weakened broth?"
- What have you held in your hand, have you counted and carefully saved, that is now gone and will not be with you into the New Year?
- What dreams of yours have faded, or been shelved so high for so long that you can no longer reach them?
- What loved ones have died, who have left you weeping because they are no more?

And if this level of grief was not a visitor to you this past year, you need only imagine those many families who gathered this holiday season, feeling the ache of a missing loved one, a service man or woman who is not coming back from Iraq or Afghanistan. You need only imagine the wailing, grieving men and women of Iraq, weeping for their dead children and loved ones.

You need only imagine the groaning of mother earth, and its melting ice caps, rapidly changing climate, and its tears, as it struggles under the weight of our collective consumption and giant footprint. You need only think of Guantanamo Bay and the slow erosion of our civil liberties.

No, this moment, this hinge between the years, is the not the time to move quickly from "Merry Christmas" to "Happy New Year." This is the time to take inventory of our very lives, of our grief, of the death of some innocence in us, and in the world. This is not the time to blast forward or to treat our grief like a homeless dog, as is our tendency, but rather, as the poet says, to trust the grief that is a part of the past year.

In this holiday season, perhaps it's easier to prepare a place in our hearts for hope and the baby Jesus, but we should also prepare a place for grief, loss, and despair. As the poet May Sarton reminds us, do "not rebel against what pulls you down, the private burden each of us can name."

In Matthew's Gospel, it says "Rachel cried out, weeping, and refused to be comforted."

What are we to make of this? Why did she refuse to be comforted? Did Rachel turn away all those who came, offering sympathy? Did she push away the breads and soups that friends and neighbors surely brought?

I struggled with this, wondering why she refused to be comforted, imagining the dark depression she was in, until I remembered this line by May Sarton: "Do not rebel against what pulls you down."

And it dawned on me that Rachel (remember, we're talking metaphorically here) must have accepted the love and food of her friends and neighbors, but she refused to let anyone talk her out of grief. She tuned out the empty platitudes and explanations for why her children were dead, explanations primarily meant to make *others* feel comforted, to ease their pain.

Instead, I imagine Rachel sitting with her grief, speaking to it, letting it course through her body, feeling every dimension of it, knowing and trusting that God abided and grieved with her. But she refused to act comforted or to avoid her pain, so that others might feel better. She did not rebel against what pulled her down.

Through this process of opening up to your grief, you might, as the poet says, "Speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth."

You might see that loss and grief are not unique to you, that they are the fabric of life, that your tears join other's tears that together flow into a common ocean. Today, I invite you to weep for the dreams and loved ones lost this past year, as well as the "innocents" who suffer in the world.

Is this heavy enough for you?!

I imagine some of you are saying, Enough Grief and Sorrow! Can't you tell a joke or something...or say something saying happy! But that's another sermon. The point of truly feeling this sorrow and grief is not simply to lounge around in an elaborate pity party, but to invite the grief to serve as a catalyst in your life and in the New Year.

As poet David Whyte says,

those who will not slip beneath
the still surface of the well of grief
turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe
will never know the source from which we drink.

They will never know the,
the secret water, cold and clear,
nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown away by those who wished for something else.

As Naomi Shihab Nye says, “Before you can know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you know sorrow as the other deepest thing.”

Not turning away from the grief allows your heart to crack wide open and in that process you may discover a compassionate kindness you didn't even know you possessed. You may discover a deeper sense of solidarity and empathy with all people, as you realize you all share the simple breathe that keeps you alive – as well as the hurts, hopes, and hungers that fuel every life. And it is this new awareness, this new kindness, that will save the world and one another, according to the poet Dorianne Laux. In her poem, *For the Sake of Strangers*, Laux writes,

No matter what the grief, its weight,
we are obliged to carry it.
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength
that pushes us through crowds.
And then the young boy gives me directions
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,
waits patiently for my empty body to pass through.
All day it continues, each kindness

reaching toward another – a stranger
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees
offering their blossoms, a retarded child
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.
Somehow they always find me, seem even
to be waiting, determined to keep me
from myself, from the thing that calls to me
as it must have once called to them –
this temptation to step off the edge
and fall weightless, away from the world.

Whether you are the stranger, or the one reaching out to the stranger, my hope for you in the New Year is that you might look your grief head on, to name and acknowledge it, so that you find the life giving energy that can emerge from that.

My wish for you in the New Year is that by doing this, you discover an abiding kindness for yourself, for your body, for your foibles, for your own grief.

And that in this New Year, you to recognize yourself as an agent of change, as one who understands the amount of suffering in the world, and believes that that suffering can be lessened...or at least responded to in a more compassionate way.

My wish for you in this New Year is that you might be an agent of kindness, because you understand that it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.

My prayer for you in this New Year is that by pausing and taking stock of where you're at in your life, you might move boldly into the New Year, full of clarity, commitment, and compassion, yearning to truly live a life of integrity, service, and joy – yearning to bring forth something beautiful and healing into the world.

May it be so... and Happy New Year!