

Sermon: Rachel's Tears

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 28, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I hope you and your family had a good and festive Christmas. For my part, I was glad to have both of my boys back home for the holiday. I was glad to see them at the church, taking part in the Christmas Eve service, bearing witness and celebrating the formation of the holy family—of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

The following Christmas Day, we drove to Montreal to spend time with my parents and sister. Given my parents' deteriorating health, I treasure every moment we could be together, while giving thanks to God for watching over us.

As we move out of the season of Advent and Christmas, the season where we anticipate the coming Messiah, and celebrate his coming as the Christ-child. And no sooner have we come to the tail-end of this festive season, the Lectionary reading takes us right to this passage of Matthew 2:13-23, to the horror of the slaughter of the innocent—the killing of all children under two in the town of Bethlehem, as commanded by King Herod, the so-called Great. There is nothing festive or great about killing of innocent children.

This passage of Matthew 2 can be roughly divided into three sections, revolving around three commands. The first command is from the angel of the Lord, in a dream, directing the holy family to flee, as in verse 13, *"Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."* No sooner had the gifts from the magi, of gold, frankincense and myrrh, been unwrapped, were the holy family told to flee.

Ironically, Egypt was their destination. It sort of makes sense for during that time, the city of Alexandria in Egypt had an estimated Jewish population of over 1 million people. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus could've very easily blended in, while living off the proceeds of those gifts.

The second command is from Herod, ordering the actual killing. Bible commentators have noted the scale of this killing in Bethlehem was not likely to be so great, as not that many people were actually living in that

small town back then—so perhaps a dozen of so babies under two were slaughtered in all. I don't know if that softens the blow. Certainly, in terms of scale, it is not comparable to what Pharaoh did back in Egypt, pre Exodus, when ten of thousands of Hebrew babies were killed, for the purpose of thinning out their rank because they were too many. Whenever God moves for the good of humanity, regrettably, we have seen the power and principalities of this world moving precisely the opposite. They do not and will not yield so easily.

And the third command, again from an angle of the Lord, also in a dream, directed the holy family to return, as in verse 20, "*Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.*" So Joseph took the child and his mother, and returned to Israel, and eventually settled in yet another small town, Nazareth in the district of Galilee, where it was reportedly said: nothing good ever comes out of.

The author of Matthew frames this sad, sad episode in history in the context of the salvation history of Israel. More specifically, as fulfilling what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 31, verse 15:

*"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 was the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob. She was the daughter of Laban, and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. As a matriarch of Israel, Rachel was known for her beauty and the bitter rivalry with her sister Leah, for Jacob's love and affection. Out of that rivalry, and along with two other maid servants, twelve sons of Jacob were born, thus forming the twelve tribes of Israel.

However, in the biblical account of Genesis, Rachel was not known to have shed a tear for her children. What Jeremiah was referring to is more likely to be connected to the time of impending exile, during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE. When Nebuchadnezzar finally captured and destroyed the city and its temple, Ramah, a small town just north of Jerusalem was used as a staging ground to gather the remnants of Israel before marching them over to Babylon. The tomb of Rachel happened to be located near Ramah, which gives Jeremiah the poetic and

prophetic licence to picture Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be consoled, because they are in the Promised land no more.

It is worth noting that Jeremiah 31 is actually quite a hopeful passage, Rachel's weeping notwithstanding. In the context of exile, Israel was referred to as God's son and would soon be introduced to the new covenant, that the Lord shall make with his people, and it shall be written in their hearts.

By connecting Rachel's tears with the exile of Jesus, the author of Matthew is essentially saying that Jesus is the embodiment of the new covenant. The tears that started in the days of Jeremiah, that continued in the weeping mothers of Bethlehem, shall find fulfillment in the return of Jesus from exile. The heir to David's throne has come, the exile is over, the true Son of God has arrived, and the new covenant as promised by Jeremiah will soon to be realized. Hallelujah! Praise be to God.

New covenant notwithstanding, I guess what has always bothered me about this story is that as Jesus escapes, the innocents are slaughtered—the Son of God got away, but all those other baby boys and girls didn't.

No, I don't expect Jesus to be some kind of baby superhero, flying in a cape, frying Herod and his soldiers with laser beam out of his eyes. Yet, if Jesus is the Son of God, the Word becoming flesh, then what we really are taking about is the absence of God, or as some theologians call it “the hiddenness of God”.

Writing for day1.org on December 20th of 2012, author and theologian Diana Butler Bass waded in on the contentious theological debate, six days after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

If you recall, a lone gunman walked into the school, senselessly shot and killed 26 people, including 20 children and 6 adult staff members. The 20-year old gunman had previously killed his own mother; when confronted by first responders arriving at the school, he killed himself with a gunshot to the head.

Bass noted the public conversation back then—between friends, in sermons, through social media and mainstream media—has centred on God. More specifically: Where was God on that dreadful morning?

The answers seem to have fallen into one of the two camps: that God was present in the horror, or that God was absent, “banished” as it were, by human sin.

After dissecting the theological premises of those two camps, Bass offered her own solution—the possibility that God was hidden, as in Isaiah 45:15, “*Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.*”

It is not a satisfactory answer, as Bass herself admitted: that God was beyond Newtown, the God of lament, of loss, of anguish, the God hidden away. Allow me to quote her: “As answers go, the hidden God will not completely satisfy and can never get to questions of motive. Isn’t that the point? Somewhere, deep in our souls, we know we cannot know. The hidden God, I think, is the only God that makes any sense of Newtown: One neither and both present and absent; One in the hands of rescuers but not the hands that wielded the guns; One in the midst of murdered but not the act of murder. This is the God who is in all places and nowhere.”

Whether in Bethlehem or Newtown, in Gaza or Bondi beach, evil lurks beneath the surface and lashes out when least expected. As I said earlier, powers and principalities of this world do not yield quietly simply because the Word had become flesh. They will one day conspire and collude to nail that Word to the cross, as Jesus himself uttered these incomprehensible words, in his desperation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The hiddenness of God is not to be ignored. But thanks be to God, it does not end there, the story goes on, to death, resurrection, ascension, glorification and new heavens and new earth. It is a story that I never get tired of telling, and I certainly hope you don’t ever get tired of hearing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**