

Mothers Weeping, Children Rejoicing

Genesis 35:16-20; Jeremiah 31:10-17; Matthew 2:13-18

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Here's a Christmas Day tweet from a self-styled ultra-liberal socialist U.S. Representative-elect: "Joy to the World! Merry Christmas everyone – here's to a holiday filled with happiness, family, and love for all people. (Including refugee babies in mangers + their parents)." She was comparing the migrant caravans trying to cross into the U.S. illegally, to Joseph and the pregnant Mary going to Bethlehem to register according to the order of Caesar Augustus that all in the Roman empire must register to be taxed in their hometowns. Obviously, this socialist woman has to read the Bible and learn a bit of world history.

Later, realizing her blunder – which she has made many times before because of her ignorance – she referred to another article. Another funny blunder, because the article was not about the "First Family's" trek to Bethlehem to register. The article was in fact comparing the migrant caravans to the flight of the "First Family" to Egypt when Herod ordered the massacre of infants in Bethlehem. Her foolishness first showed when she compared the migrant caravans to Jewish families fleeing Nazi Germany. This is absurd because Jews were fleeing from being massacred, while migrants at the U.S. border were fleeing from poverty, not from death threats. This absurdity is the result of the anti-Christian culture advocating wickedness such as abortion, homosexuality, evolution, socialism, and nonsense such as open borders, sanctuary cities, man-made climate change, animal rights and unbridled environmentalism.

Traditional Western Christianity commemorates the visitation by the wise men from the east after Jesus was born as the "Feast of the Epiphany." "Epiphany" means "appearing," because the visitation symbolizes Jesus' revelation of himself to Gentiles represented by the wise men. But our focus today will not be on the wise men who worshipped Jesus as God the Son, but on the horrible events after their visit that most people would rather not hear.

Matthew 2:13-18 tells us about Herod's wrath after he realized he was tricked by the wise men from the east. In his usual fury and fit of jealousy for his throne as "King of the Jews," he ordered the massacre of infant boys two years and younger in Bethlehem. Scholars estimate that no more than 10-30 babies were killed since Bethlehem was a "little town." Matthew tells us that even Herod's wickedness was a fulfillment of a prophecy in Jeremiah 31:15 of weeping in Ramah because Rachel lost her children.

Jeremiah's prophecy alludes many centuries back to the time of Jacob and his wife Rachel in Genesis 35:16-20. As they were traveling from Bethel to Bethlehem, Rachel gave birth to a son, but she died in her labor. Knowing that she was dying and will never raise her son, she died sorrowing. But a few verses earlier in verse 13, Jeremiah prophesied that after this weeping and mourning, there will be occasion for rejoicing in Israel. So on this Sunday after Christmas, our theme is **"Mothers Weeping, Children Celebrating."**

Why Mothers Weep

Was Jeremiah's prophecy really about Herod's massacre of infants? No, it was not. Jeremiah's prophecy was referring to the invasion of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The great Temple of Solomon was in flames. Israel's sons were killed, or taken captive, or exiled. From Jerusalem, the procession of the exiles went through a place called Ramah, five miles to the north. Ramah was a gathering point for them before they were marched towards Babylon (Jer 40:1).

Jeremiah used the story of Rachel, the mother of two of Israel's tribes, as a personification of Jewish mothers who mourned the loss of their sons and daughters to the invaders. They were "no more," either dead or exiled. But Jeremiah reversed the situation. It was Rachel who was dying, not her children. She died as she was delivering her son whom she fittingly named Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow." (Jacob later renamed him "Ben-yamin.") She and all of Jacob's family were on their way from Bethel south to Bethlehem. Her burial place was in the vicinity of Ramah.

After Rachel bore Joseph, Jacob and his family dwelt outside the Promised Land. Jacob wanted to go back to the Promised Land, so they journeyed towards Bethlehem. Because she was pregnant again, Rachel must have been happy, knowing that she will now raise her children in the Promised Land. But in Ramah, between Bethel and Bethlehem, she started having hard labor, and died as she gave birth to a son. She sorrowed with tears, knowing that she would never see her two sons—and possibly many more—grow up to be strong young men in the Promised Land.

Rachel the weeping mother. Jeremiah the weeping prophet. Jeremiah uses Rachel's tears for his prophecies. He is a prophet of tears (8:21; 9:1; 20:14). In fact, Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, a book of sorrows. And in one of his songs, he even curses the day he was born! (Jer 20:14) Why did Jeremiah weep? He grieved over the slaughter and captivity of God's people because of their multitude of sins. The Rachels of Israel were also so sorrowful that they refused to be comforted.

Matthew then takes Rachel's and Jeremiah's weeping and mourning to tell us that these Old Testament stories are but foreshadows of another event to come at the birth of Jesus. Not an event of joy and songs and merrymaking, but a tragic event that no one wants to talk about at Christmastime: the so-called "slaughter of the innocents" by the madman King Herod. The Rachels of Israel mourned, but later, their children celebrated and rejoiced in their restoration.

Why Children Rejoice

Jeremiah's tears are only part of a bigger and more significant story. We know that the latter part of Jeremiah 31 is a prophecy about God's new covenant with his people. The old covenant with Israel was passing away, and a new covenant was dawning. This new covenant is the reason why God's people will turn from mourning into joy. Rachel and all of Judah's mothers will finally receive comfort from God, "*I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow*" (Jer 31:13).

Why would Rachel stop weeping for her children? Because in this new covenant, near the end of Chapter 31, the LORD promised his people, "*For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more*" (31:34). He will ransom and redeem them from exile (11). After they are forgiven

of their sin, they will be restored back to their land, *“there is a reward for your work ... there is hope for your future... and they shall come back from the land of the enemy”* (16, 17). Their joyful worship will be restored (12). He will answer their prayers (7) and give them repentance (8, 9). He will preserve them (8) and guide them (9, 21) on their way to Canaan, and after they have settled in the land (10). He will adopt them as his own sons and daughters (20-22). Lastly, the LORD will abundantly provide for them (12, 14). Also note that in verse 8, those who will return will include *“the pregnant woman and she who is in labor.”* This means that God values both mother and unborn child in the womb and condemns abortion.

God fulfilled all these promises in the new covenant by bringing a remnant of Israel back from the Babylonian exile. This remnant brought forth Joseph and Mary who bore a Child, the Son of God, who would lead his people out of slavery to sin. Like Moses, this newborn Child was preserved by God by sending him back to Egypt, the ancient house of slavery. From out of Pharaoh’s wicked scheme to destroy all Hebrew babies came Moses, the redeemer of Israel. Out of the remnant from Babylon, God brought Joseph and Mary to be the earthly parents of the Messiah. Out of Herod’s wicked plan, the baby Savior-Child and his family went down to Egypt. And after Herod died, God said, *“out of Egypt I called my son”* (Matt 2:15).

So in contrast to the inconsolable Rachel, Mary, the mother of Jesus was comforted when her Son, the only true “Innocent,” died on the cross at the hands of wicked people. She found comfort in the house of John the beloved disciple. After her Son rose from the grave, she found comfort and joy in the truth of her song at Jesus' birth (Luke 1:46-47), that her Savior would be pierced with a sword (Luke 2:35). Finally, she found comfort in the company of disciples waiting for the Spirit, the Comforter, promised by his Son who had ascended into heaven.

But as God brought a remnant of Israel out of slavery in foreign exile, today God is still continuing to bring a remnant of his people out of slavery to sin. Like Mary, we too are to find comfort in our Savior and Redeemer, because our sin is pardoned (Isa 40:1-2), and we have been freed from slavery to sin. Jesus himself calls blessed those who mourn because of their sin, for they will be comforted (Matt 5:14). In contrast to Rachel who refused to be comforted, be comforted! Because through the evil done on “innocent” children, God preserved Jesus, who was born to save you from your sin.

When sorrows, afflictions and persecutions come to you, mourn and weep, but also rejoice! Because through the exodus of your Redeemer, you too can persevere through your own journey in this barren wilderness of life. The people of God rejoice in their worship services because of the Lord's steadfast love and righteousness (Psa 48:9-11). The psalmist says to God, *“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness... I will give thanks to you forever!”* (Psa 30:11) He promises that after the dark nights of mourning, he will send days of gladness and dancing. What then must your response be? Words and songs of praise and thanksgiving. But more importantly: faithful and obedient lives!

Weeping and Rejoicing with God's People

But God's people do not weep and rejoice alone. We weep and rejoice together as one family, as Paul commands the church, *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”* (Rom 12:15). We

rejoice in God's salvation, preservation and provisions. We weep together with the persecuted churches in China and the Middle East.

The body of Christ is united in one faith, one hope, one God, one Savior, one Spirit. When someone is healed of sickness, or gets a job or a promotion, or is reconciled with his wife, or his children come to faith in Christ, we all rejoice with him. The reverse is true. If someone is diagnosed with a serious illness, or gets laid off from work, or breaks up with the spouse, or the child becomes rebellious, we all mourn and weep with our brother or sister. We are to pray for him, that God will right the situation, that he may find comfort in the Spirit and in his brothers and sisters in Christ. We too are to find comfort in the assembly of the saints who weep with us and comfort us in our afflictions, so that we may overflow with joy (2 Cor 7:4, 6-7).

Jesus is the pre-eminent example of one who wept and rejoiced with his friends. He wept at the tomb of Lazarus, not only because of the unbelief of the people, but also because he felt the sorrow of Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha. Of Christ's weeping and rejoicing with us, the prophet Zephaniah says, "*The Lord your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness ... I will gather those of you who mourn...*" (Zeph 3:17-18). This is why the writer of Hebrews preached that Christ our God and High Priest is able to sympathize with all our weaknesses and temptations (Heb 4:15).

Beloved friends, though we know that the next year will be a mixture of joy and sorrow, accomplishments and disappointments, health and sickness, rejoice and be glad! God promises that he will turn dark nights of mourning into days of rejoicing.

In this new year 2019, let us take our eyes off of our differences and pride. Comfort one another. Pray for one another. Encourage one another. Be of the same mind with one another. Have the same love for one another. Mourn and weep, rejoice with everyone. Who knows what good he has for you in the troubles and afflictions that he will send your way in this new year? And pray with hope, "Come soon, Lord Jesus, and ransom captives that mourn in lonely exile in this broken, wicked world!" When that day comes, our night of mourning and weeping will turn into an eternity of "dancing and rejoicing."

God's promises in his Word will be fulfilled because he is our Sovereign Creator, Redeemer and Provider. He ransomed, redeemed and forgiven us from all our sins after he gave us faith and repentance. He adopted us as his children. He restored our joyful worship, answers our prayers, and abundantly provides for all our needs. Finally, after guiding us on our way, he will welcome us into our heavenly home as one people of God united in Christ.

As we celebrate Holy Communion today, let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul, "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread... When you come together to eat, wait for [or share with] one another*" (1 Cor 10:17; 11:33). The Lord's Supper is not just a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, but also a sign of our unity in Christ as God's people.