



*Rachel Weeping for Her Children
Matthew 2:13-23*

*1st Sunday after Christmas, Sunday, December 29th, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
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Once upon a time there was a couple who had known each other as fellow church members for many years. Somewhere along the line, love blossomed and grew between them, and the whole church rejoiced when they announced their wedding plans.

A couple years later, the church rejoiced again when this couple announced they were pregnant. They had been older when they were married, and had had difficulty conceiving. Finally, after fertility treatments, they learned they were expecting twins. That was a double joy, for the doctor told them that, because of their age, this was probably their only chance at having children of their own.

Sadly, the babies were born many weeks premature. Despite the doctors' best efforts, they lived only a few hours -- just long enough for the parents to hold them and bestow upon them the names they had chosen from the start: Abraham Joseph and Sarah Mary, names that, according to their faith, expressed the fulfillment of God's promise.

And so it happened that, when this couple should have been talking with their pastor about baptisms, they were talking about a funeral. Together the three of them planned the service, and when the question of music came up, the parents asked if someone could play the song, "What a Wonderful World." Under the circumstances that struck the pastor as a bit odd, but of course the answer was said "yes".

The service was emotional for everyone. As the pastor pronounced the benediction, he could see the grief etched on every face. Then, as had been previously planned, someone punched a button on a CD player, and into the church floated the gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong, singing "What a Wonderful World."

What happened next, though, no one expected. The husband rose to his feet and opened his arms. His wife stood, too, and drew herself close to him. And then, in proper ballroom form, they danced.

The two of them danced a dance of life, clear across the chancel of that church for they knew, beyond a doubt, that, when suffering comes, the kingdom of heaven is near. They knew that life is sometimes ambiguous, filled with contradictions. They knew that sometimes things happen that no one can explain. Yet they also knew that nothing -- not heartache, not grief, not loss -- could ever separate them, nor their children, from the love of God in Christ Jesus. ¹

¹ Let's Keep Herod In Christmas, "Illuminating Illustrations", Homileticsonline, January 2, 2017

The one character that you will never find in a Christmas pageant is Herod, the ruler who was deceived by the three wise men or magi, as they are sometimes called. Herod's reputation was well-known. He was sadistic and treacherous, vengeful and duplicitous, insecure and superstitious. The fact that he ordered the slaughter of all children around the age of two and under in and around Bethlehem is totally in character, even though there is no historical evidence to support the claim. But then often there is little or no evidence left behind of genocide.

Into the birth of the world's Savior the gospel writer in Matthew inserted a tale of horrific evil. Why? Why did Matthew insert such an event? The question is somewhat rhetorical. There are a couple of different answers but for this morning's purpose, Matthew included the slaughter of the innocent to remind us of the kind of world in which we live.

God did not become incarnate in the son of Mary and Joseph to bring us a mid-winter festival of peace and contentment. No, God came into this world where families wander homeless and corrupt tyrants rule by murder and deceit. God broke into this world because this world needs a Savior for it cannot save itself.

In one of his parables Jesus told about a "good Samaritan" when asked, "Who is my neighbor?" The neighbor, Jesus replied, was anyone in need.

There are many in this world whose main worry is not if they got what they wanted for Christmas. Their lives are tainted by suffering and want. Think of the Syrian Christians who come from some of the world's oldest churches, as well as the other refugees from that civil war-torn country who have swelled the populations of Europe and trickled into Canada and the United States. Will they ever be able to sing the hymns of Christmas in their homeland again? And what about the homeless in our own land, in our own city, in our own communities? Then there are those who grieve the loss of loved ones, those who have empty places at the holiday table or unwrapped gifts. The world is grand but it is also very broken.

The Gospel of John reminds us that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but that it might be saved through him. (John 3:17) And we who take Jesus seriously are called to be the body of Christ on earth. We have work to do by living into our baptism vows, God's claim and call upon our lives, by using the spiritual gifts and material resources that God gave to us.

The slaughter of the innocent, the tears of Rachel weeping for her children, remind us that we live in the midst of brokenness. But in the midst of the brokenness, we also have a work to do.

To God be the glory. Amen.