

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Matthew 2:13-23

*"Weep No More"*

There is a part of Jesus' birth narrative that we rarely read; it casts a dark shadow over the sweet and sentimental picture we have of "the first Christmas." It tells of warnings and danger and flight; it revolves around the vicious reaction of a frightened man called Herod the Great (he was named that for his great building projects, and not at all for his character.) A puppet of the Romans, Herod had everything to fear from a true "King of the Jews," even when he was only a baby. So Matthew tells us that Herod ordered the slaughter of boys born in and around Bethlehem in the previous two years - an action entirely in character with what the historians tell us of a man who had several of his own family killed when they threatened him. The church has long marked the death of "The Holy Innocents" on December 28.

Why would Matthew choose to include such a story? Theologically, it is to make clear that "the shadow of the cross" hangs over even the birth of Jesus - perhaps shown also in the enigmatic gift of myrrh, a spice often used in burials. Messiah has come to save his people Israel, but the most powerful people in Israel don't want to be saved. They are quite at home with the status quo; if they want anything, it is more power, and not "deliverance from evil."

And evil is the proper category for Herod's slaughter. Evil is what Jesus will confront all his life and in his death - from the satanic

temptations in the desert, to Peter's attempt to dissuade him from the way of the cross, to Jesus' own fear in the garden of Gethsemane of "the cup he must drink." And when he dies for his people and is raised again by his Father, the words often used to describe what he has done are that he has "disarmed the principalities and powers, made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing over them by his cross*" (Colossians 2). Jesus triumphed over evil, over sin and death, by his own willing death and resurrection - and one day that victory will be manifest to everyone.

### 1) *Rachel Weeping*

But in the meantime, his people and his world weep over the evil that appears in the middle of a beautiful story, in the middle of every life, and in every age and every culture. Matthew reaches back into Israel's history to express the feeling:

*A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted  
because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15).*

Jeremiah the prophet speaks a word from the LORD as Judah goes into exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC, after Jerusalem had been sacked by Nebuchadnezzar's army. Ramah, near Bethlehem, was not only on the great trade route the exiles followed, but the place

where Rachel was buried. The beautiful wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph (who saved his people), and of Benjamin whose birth brought about her death; Rachel had become in memory the "mother of the nation," and Jeremiah pictures her weeping in her grave over her sons as they go into captivity. And Matthew hears Rachel weeping again as Herod's soldiers massacre the infants of Bethlehem.

In every generation, Rachel and her spiritual descendants have wept over the deaths of innocents at the hands of evil. Our great-grandparents wept over World War I, when 9 million died in four years - a whole generation of European youth. Our grandparents wept over World War II; over Dunkirk and Monte Cassino, over Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima, over Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Our parents wept over Korea and Vietnam, over the massacres of Stalin and Pol Pot. And we have wept over Bosnia, and Rwanda, and over "9/11," and over Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our generation, like so many before us, has faced the recurrence of evil and once again been surprised and shocked that what we thought of as a good and safe world, full of good people and great progress and much hope, could be turned in a moment into a place of fear and loss. Add the 3000 people lost on 9/11, the 4000 lost in Iraq, the 25000 injured American servicemen, the 150000 Iraqi civilians - no wonder we are sad! Rachel still weeps over her children, because they are no more.

How should we, as Christians, respond?  
What do we say to Rachel?

## 2) *What Is God Doing?*

Understand that this is no longer an armchair debate, a theoretical question, a

philosophical argument over how a good and powerful God could allow such things to happen. Evil does not need an explanation, it needs action. What shall we do?

In the wake of 9/11, as Bishop Wright has noted, Western political leaders suddenly started to use language that had not been used in a generation. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair spoke of evil: of evil states that must be opposed or vanquished, of their call to rid the world of evil. Is that possible? How would you go about it? What should we do?

For Christians, questions like that must always be posed in relation to what God is doing. How is God dealing with evil? Some people, of course, say he's doing nothing, and trash believers for suggesting that a good God rules the world. So be it. But what *do we believe* God is doing? And what should *we therefore do*, or want to do, or support others in doing? What *does* the Gospel tell us about God and evil?

Well, we have already seen a little - when God is incarnate as an infant, some people want to kill him right away. What does God do? First of all, he protects his people. Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus are sent out of harm's way to Egypt. Not the best place for God's people, as all Israel's history will tell you! But enough to get away from Herod, and after he dies and his even worse son Archelaus takes the throne of Judah, the family go to Galilee to the relative safety of Nazareth.

But while God is protecting the infant Jesus, hundreds of innocent babies are killed - they die, and he lives. If that seems all wrong, then we have to look a little ahead to the moment when he will die so that they can live forever. God's purposes for Jesus will not be thwarted by the Herods of this world. The Father will see his Son through to the

place he is called to, despite all attempts to derail him from his ministry.

And his calling is to confront evil head-on. Jesus will do what the zealots, the revolutionaries, the apocalyptists, could never do: he will take on himself the evil that is stored up against God and his people, and he will willingly absorb the worst that can be thrown at him. He will be crushed for the iniquities of his people; he will bear the sin of many; he will heal his people by taking their suffering on himself. Jesus will die willingly so that people of all times and places who put their trust in him will be spared the ultimate death of separation from God. Jesus will conquer the power of sin and the power of death on their behalf, so that they can live free of the fear of sin and death.

What is God doing about evil? Taking it on himself to suffer it, and to conquer it. And then enabling his people to start living out the new way of overcoming evil that Jesus taught and Jesus personified. "Do not repay evil for evil." "When someone strikes you on the left cheek, turn the right one also." "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." "Forgive, as the Lord has forgiven you." "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good." "As God's chosen people, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another, and forgive whatever grievances you may have, as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together."

That is how Christians are called, and empowered if the Spirit of Christ is living in them, to deal with evil at a personal level. If we do not start there, we will never start anywhere. If we do not let the victory of Jesus over evil redefine our relationships, we will simply keep on doing evil, often without even knowing it. You and I need to learn

from Jesus to keep our relationships with our children, with our spouses, with our parents, with our extended families, free of evil by the power of the Spirit within us. That means the hard work of forbearance and forgiveness; but it can be done, if we will let God do it in us and through us.

But evil will still exist, and evil will still show itself. It will come from within us, from within other people, from the crevices of a fallen world and from "powers" that can only be called demonic. And we must learn not to be surprised or shocked, not to react wildly, not to retaliate, not to make bad situations worse. Evil will have at times to be named and confronted; but at times also be forgiven. How that works at an individual, at a family, at a workplace, or at a community level, let alone at a national level, requires great spiritual discernment. No Christian is asked to forgive Osama bin Laden for ordering the attacks of 9/11. But no Christian should be naive enough to think that the USA can destroy him and his followers, and evil in the world, by many hundreds of thousands of American military personnel.

Evil lives in places that bombs cannot reach. Evil lives in people, and in groups of people, and in *all people*. The world is not divided into "good people" and "evil people" who have to battle it out. The world is full of people who, in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's memorable phrase, have to recognize (as he did in the Soviet gulags) that "*the line separating good and evil runs not along the boundaries of nations, nor of political parties, nor along the prison wall, but right through the middle of every human heart.*"

So overcoming evil in the power of God means first and always overcoming the evil that lies within each one of us; in you and in me. If we allow Christ to enter our lives, to enter our hearts, we may find that the victory he has won can also be won in us. If we can

see his cross as the one we deserved but were spared from, then his death and his life can become our death to sin and our resurrection to a new life.

But then our calling - if we bear the name Christian - will be to work out that substitution and that victory in the corner of the world we have been placed in; to learn forbearance and forgiveness, to learn to absorb evil and not retaliate; to learn to work for reconciliation; for justice, for mercy, for forgiveness to people who don't deserve it. Is this complicated? Is this at times confusing? Yes, of course - but that is the nature of a fallen world. Decisions are not always clear-cut. Some situations cry out for justice, some cry out for mercy. If we don't know something about both justice and mercy through the way God has dealt with us in Jesus, we will never know what is required in dealing with other people.

But if the victory of Jesus has begun to work in our lives, we can become people of hope, people of faith, people of love, people who make a difference for good in our little worlds. And we can become for other people signs of "what God is doing in the world," and signs of the day when all weeping will come to an end. Even Jeremiah the prophet, who had not seen Christ in person, but in his heart knew about the New Covenant that Jesus would bring - a covenant of knowledge of God and forgiveness of sins - could speak the word of the LORD to Rachel: *"Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; your work will be rewarded, and your children will come home..."*

Weep no more; for the Lamb of God has defeated evil, and he promises that one day you and I will too, and evil will be banished from his world forever.

Let us pray...