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Matthew 2:13-23

Isaiah 63:7-9: I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Matthew 2:13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, '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.'

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,
¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ '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.'

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 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.'

²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Sermon

When I was a child, there was one December tradition that heralded the coming of Christmas in a way no other did. Some day early in Advent, my mother would announce that it was time to set up the nativity scene, and my three siblings and I would gather around the large cardboard box packed with small figures, each individually wrapped in Kleenex. My mom would tell us again how the nativity scene had been a part of our family since the first Christmas she and my dad were married. We would smile at the familiar story of her coveting the sweet figures in the store and how hard Dad worked to keep the gift a secret. Then my mom would take the lid off of the big box, and one by one, my siblings and I would peer into it and remove a tissue-clad figure, gently peeling away its layers to reveal the delicate porcelain within.

Even through adult eyes, I find that nativity one of the loveliest I've seen. The usual cast of characters is there—gentle Mary, strong and silent Joseph, a shepherd boy, three kings bearing gifts, a sweet cow, a tired camel, an open-mouthed cherub, and, of course, the baby Jesus. Although the figures were very likely made in China, they look decidedly Scandinavian—fair skinned, wide-blue eyes, pink cheeks, and expressions of unmistakable calm on their pre-pubescent faces. As if to prove just how peaceable the kingdom was that night, the designer of the nativity had added to the halo-clad baby Jesus a baby bluebird and a baby squirrel who perched on the edge of the manger, the icing on the cake of childhood innocence. So on that special day each December, my siblings and I would unwrap each figure with care and almost hold our breath as we nestled them, one by one, into the stable strewn with

straw. Then we would sit back to take in the whole scene and find ourselves caught up in the awe and hush of that silent, holy night.

And so it was that in early December, these delicate, porcelain figures rooted themselves on a chest in my family's living room, their perpetual smiles guarding over all of our going out and coming in. On occasion, I would creep in to gaze at the baby Jesus, who rested gently in his manger and basked in the radiant glow of those who had gathered to adore him. And well on into the new year, that sweet nativity emanated peace and quiet from its corner of our noisy and busy household.

I'm not sure when that scene stopped being real for me. Maybe it was when I was old enough to realize that the Holy Family with their Middle Eastern roots likely had skin a few shades darker than Norwegians. Maybe it was when I knew enough about childbirth to question the Mary figure's slender waist and sweat-free brow. But I know by December 26, 2004, the only power those porcelain figures had for me was a vague nostalgia for childhood innocence.

On the night of December 24, 2004 I had done as most Christians across the country did that night—huddled in a darkened sanctuary and, by candlelight, sung of the silent, holy night when Christ the Savior was born. And thirty-some hours later, we North Americans awoke to the news that a tsunami had devastated southeast Asia and taken a quarter of a million lives in its wake. And the juxtaposition of that sweet porcelain nativity scene and the number of lives lost to such a tragedy—well, the incongruity was too much for me. What does a cooing baby Jesus surrounded by baby bluebirds do with a tsunami? I went looking for another picture of the Christmas story.

As it turned out, I didn't have to look very far. The day of the tsunami was a Sunday, and the scripture read in churches that follow the lectionary that day was this passage from Matthew's gospel.

Matthew's Christmas story makes for a pretty empty nativity scene. There is no stable, no donkey, no shepherds in the fields, no choir of angels—Matthew leaves all of that to Luke. At first there is only Mary and Joseph, and the birth of Jesus happens in all of half of a verse. There are wise men, eventually—they follow the star and come bearing gifts. And, there is Herod. King Herod who heard a rumor swirling around Bethlehem about a child born king of the Jews and felt his throne tremble beneath him. Herod who was filled with fear and so lashed out with violence, ordering every child under the age of two in Bethlehem to be killed. And that is how there came to be one more character in Matthew's nativity: Rachel.

Rachel, remember, lived all the way back in Old Testament times...she was the wife of Jacob, mother of the twelve tribes of Israel and so, in some sense, mother of all of God's people. Back in the days of exile, the prophet Jeremiah watched God's people be marched out of the Promised Land in shackles. And when he reached for words to describe the profound sadness of the scene, he talked about a voice rising above the land of Ramah—a voice of lamentation and bitter weeping. The voice was Rachel, weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they were no more¹.

¹ Jer. 31

So when Matthew surveys the massacre of children in Bethlehem and reaches for words to describe the sadness, he once again summons Rachel to weep over her children who are no more.

Now, admittedly, Luke's is the more pleasant nativity scene. When I walk out of this sanctuary on Christmas Eve, I like it to be to the sound of angel choirs singing glorias, not to the noise of Rachel wailing. I don't want to pull back the Kleenex from my mother's cardboard box and find King Herod scowling beneath its wrappings.

But I think we must be careful about choosing which characters we let near the manger. Earlier this month I read something about Christmas that continued to work on me all through Advent. The author was reflecting on the "war on Christmas," noting how some were screaming about the threat of secularization...how could Christmas survive if store clerks switched from saying "Merry Christmas" to "Happy Holidays?" And others were screaming about commercialization...how could Christmas survive if all of our attention was diverted to the number of shopping days remaining? But this author suggested that the greatest threat to Christmas is neither secularization or commercialization, but sentimentality.²

Sentimentality is what happens when we linger so long in the candlelight that we ignore the pain that lingers in the same sanctuary. Sentimentality sneaks up on us when we get so caught up in the sweet baby Jesus' chubby cheeks that we forget the sin from which he came to save us. It happens when we ask wailing Rachel to kindly step outside the stable because her cries are hurting our ears.

² tamedcynic.org 12/17/12

Sentimentality happens when we sanitize the nativity scene, ridding it of all that is not happy and merry and bright.

The problem is that if we push Rachel out of the nativity scene, we must also ask her fellow mourners to leave. Politely excuse all those who wail for the children of Newtown. Usher out Syrian mothers who watch their children gunned down in the streets. Escort to the door all those who have wept over children they could not conceive. Turn our backs on the parts of ourselves who cry for children who are no more. And so we must then say that the good news of Emmanuel is not, in fact, good news for everyone.

If we locate Christmas in the middle of a bunch of porcelain figures whose faces are frozen in serenity, we do damage to the gospel. If the birth of the Savior is to be—as the angel said it was—good news of great joy for all people, we must locate that Savior in the middle of a violent and heart-breaking and wailing world.

In the end, that story is all we have to offer the Rachels who wail in the dark of Christmas night. In the face of the Herods and the tsunamis and the barrel of a gun, we can offer no elegant proof³ of the existence and ultimate triumph of a good God. We can offer simply the story that sustains us.⁴ The story of God's work in this world, which is not some highly sanitized bedtime story, but a gritty affair.

It begins with a God so willing to get his hands dirty that he dug around in the earth's soil to fashion human beings. It goes on to tell of the way that those humans almost immediately descended into a sinful cycle of violence and despair,

³ "elegant proof" is W.H. Auden's language...too beautiful not to use!

⁴ For this insight, I'm indebted to Ross Douthat, referencing Dostoyevsky, in "The Loss of the Innocents," *NY Times*, December 17, 2012.

and how God's solution was to draw closer still, binding himself to the people with the cord of covenant. The story is full of wailing—the wailing of a people whose backs broke under the weight of slavery, the laments of those who wept by the waters of Babylon and could not hold up their harps to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, the wailing of all creation as it groans for redemption. But the story is also full of God's presence—a pillar of fire, a still small voice, a hem of the robe filling the temple. As time went on, God became less and less content to hover outside of the human world; God desired to draw closer still.

What happened next has lost a bit of its shock-value after so many years of telling it, but believe it or not, the God of all creation decided to step out of the heavens, take on the frail flesh of an infant, and dwell among humanity. And while this bold move did not stop the wailing—Herod saw to that immediately—it meant that God was with us in a way that God had never been before. The Word made Flesh walked among us in all our messiness, in all our pain. Jesus also proved inclined to get his hands dirty, washing the feet of fishermen and tending to the sores of lepers. On the night that his frail flesh was pierced by nails, the world itself wailed, with great shuddering sobs that made the earth quake. But three days later, that wailing turned to rejoicing when the body God took on proved stronger even than death, and that God-made-flesh walked out of the grave.

That's the story that was set into motion that night in Bethlehem...and that continues even to this day. The nativity scene is rooted not on a chest in my parents' living room, but right in the midst of the chaos and violence and messiness of the world. The stable gets a little more crowded, as shepherds scoot over to make

room for the lepers and fishermen. Mother Mary is joined by Mother Rachel, who brings along all the children of exile and the children of Bethlehem and the children of Newtown. And the three kings from the east see King Herod across the way, for there is no darkness the Christ child's light does not pierce. Porcelain faces of serenity soften into real human faces of awe and fear and heartbreak and joy. War and famine and death rage all around, but there in the center sits the Christ child, flanked with squirrel and bluebird and lion and lamb. Hope of the world.