

Sermon Starter – Weep and Rejoice

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

“Why did Christ do this? Christ is the judge of thoughts and the examiner of minds. Why did he desert those whom he knew would be killed for his sake? He was born a king, the king of heaven—why did he neglect the standard bearers of his own innocence? ... Why did he thus abandon those who were cut down as plunder from the same cradle as himself?”

—Peter Chrysologus (AD 406-450, Ancient Christian
Commentary on Scripture. Vol. Ia. Matthew 1-13, Inter
Varsity Press, 2001, p. 34)

The question “why” in the face of suffering is perhaps as old as humanity itself. The early church writers, like us, grappled with the question “why” in the face of this uncomfortable story of the murder of the innocents by Herod’s army in the wake of the magi’s departure.

The peaceful serenity of a Christmas promise of “good will” toward all is absent in Matthew’s telling of the story. Death follows immediately on the heels of birth, despair seeks to swallow up hope; tears of joy are indistinguishable from tears of grief.

We are prone to forget that the Christmas story is not a pleasant children’s story. The death of the innocents reminds us that we must hold very disparate realities together simultaneously: life and death, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, courage and terror, beauty and horror.

The early Church writers often answered the “why” for the merciless and senseless suffering inflicted on the children, mothers, and families of Bethlehem and surrounding countryside with the assuring word that these innocents were taken up by God as the first martyrs of Christ. But not every death is meaningful, and not every death is made so by bestowing an honored martyr status upon the deceased. Sometimes suffering simply rises from inexplicable chaos, and sometimes the death of innocents is senseless and demands nothing more and nothing less than weeping. Sometimes weeping must give way to justifiable outrage at an injustice done.

Is the wailing from Bethlehem only a cry of grief or is it also a wailing cry for justice? If the wailing from Bethlehem is a cry for justice, then may that cry never be silenced; if it is the cry of grief may it be comforted. Two thousand years ago, both the cry of sorrow and the cry for justice were yet to be soothed by the promised justice and healing sealed in the life yet to be lived by the Christ child. Our reality is not much different: we wait for comfort and justice in

the time between the first coming of Christ and the complete fulfillment of what God has promised.

What are the hard irreconcilable truths, the disparate realities in your life, your congregation, the church, your community, our world that beg to be named this day, wept over, and rejoiced over as seeds of promise for God's future action?

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