

Sermon on Matthew 2:17-18

by pastor Dirk M. Boersma

Preached at: Emmanuel American Reformed Church, Denver CO, December 30, 2007

Title: Turn to the savior who was born for you.

- Rachel's refusal
- Rejected comfort
- Bethlehem's pain
- and you?

Occasion: Sunday after Christmas

Goal: Call everyone to believe in God's promise, even in the worst of circumstances. Do not dwell on your pain, disappointment, or grief but keep your attention focused on God's plan.

Liturgy (from the 'Book of Praise' of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches)

Call to worship: Ps 102,21-22

opening: Hymn 11

declaration of mercy: Jer 33,7-9

response to law & grace: Hymn 33, 1.2

Reading 1: Mt2,1-18 / Gen 30,1-13;22-24 / Gen35,9-20

Response: Ps 56,1.3.4

Reading 2: Jer 31,10-25

Response: Ps 62, 3.4.7

Sermon text: Mt2,17-18

after sermon: Ps 126

thanksgiving: Hymn 43

*I pray this sermon will serve to make your love for God grow
and lead you to a deeper dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ.
Praise him for his grace!*



Congregation / believers / disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ,

What a horrific story in the New Testament. It's not one you want to tell your children. What a heartache and pain in the tiny town of Bethlehem. And for what purpose? Why is this story part of the story of Christmas? Does it need to be in the Bible? It's so bloody and shocking for children!

And Matthew comes across as a cold reporter who does not get involved, but just comments: 'this happened so that this prophecy would be fulfilled...'
You wonder: Did these children have to die because Jesus had to go to Egypt? Are these prophecies some kind of fate that has to be carried out?

We long to know what the gospel, the good news, is in these verses.

What happened in Bethlehem

It is a normal day, the kids are quiet in their home of Saphan and Naomi in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a very small town and there is little horse traffic, so the older children, Barak and Selophnah play outside. Their little brother Josiah is inside. He is too small to play outside, he was born last year and is sleeping now.

They notice a noise: horses are approaching. Saphan steps outside and sees a bunch of soldiers on the road. They are getting closer fast. What do they want? Is this a follow up on the census that was taken a while ago? Bethlehem is not important. What are they doing here? He wonders.

The soldiers go from door to door and people begin screaming. That's a bad sign. Saphan tries to close and lock the door, but the soldiers are already there. One steps inside, he can't stop him. Is there a baby here? He demands, 'We need to know how old your children are.'

Naomi tells the strong soldier: 'The children are playing outside and my baby is sleeping in the room. They have done nothing wrong, they are not dangerous!'

The soldier rushes into the bedroom and grabs her child. Josiah starts screaming. The soldier doesn't care and takes the child outside.

Saphan tries to stop him, but he gets pushed aside. When he stumbles back on his feet he follows the soldier outside and pleads with him 'Please, what are you doing?'

'It is a decree from king Herod', the soldier says, all babies and toddlers 2 years and younger need to be killed.

Naomi is standing in the door opening. She screams 'No, my baby! No!' and faints.

About 20 children are murdered on that fateful afternoon. The town is immersed in grief. Many families lose their babies. And everybody wonders: Why? Why did the king murder our innocent babies?

Questions

Then they remember the Magi, those Eastern astrologers, who arrived a week earlier. They had visited Joseph and Mary and their baby. It was unreal, those presents these men brought. Why did these strangers have to show up? Why did they tip off king Herod and tell him about the baby Jesus? What's so important about him anyway?

Joseph and Mary had left in a hurry earlier that week. Did they know what was coming? Why were they here? Why had they not stayed away altogether? Then this would not have happened!

Those were probably the questions going through their minds.

Their children were murdered because Jesus had been there and was worshiped by the astrologers.

Matthew comments on this event and gives it meaning. He writes:

Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “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.”

If we want to understand this we need to go back in history. What happened to Rachel? What did Jeremiah say about her? And what did it mean that Jeremiah had announced this tragic event?

1. Rachel's refusal

Rachel the mother of Israel's sons

Maybe the children remember Rachel. She was the wife of Jacob. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham.

It's a strange story. Jacob was in love with Rachel so much that he was willing to work for his uncle for 7 years in order to get her.

Then, finally, the wedding took place and Jacob woke up the next morning, only to find Rachel's older sister, Leah, next to him in bed.

It was one of Laban's tricks to get his older daughter a husband.

But Jacob was after Rachel, so Laban gave her to him as a bride, as well, if Jacob worked for another 7 years.

The story doesn't end there.

Leah was aware that Jacob did not love her but her sister. And there begins a sad story of two women vying for the love of the same man, which could easily have ended up in the pages of Hollywood's gossip magazines.

Leah had one child after another and was proud of it. She thought that she could earn Jacob's love by giving him children.

Rachel could not get pregnant and became desperate. Her response is significant. She told Jacob: 'Give me children!' She became demanding and took it as a personal disgrace. She had to have children or she could not be happy. She could not stand the thought that Leah had children and she had none.

So then both Rachel and Leah gave Jacob their woman servants so that they would bear children who would count as theirs.

It turned into a personal vendetta and a competition between the two wives, which went on for years. The names of their children bear witness of the fight between the two: 'God has vindicated me', 'the women will call me happy', 'now my husband will treat me with honor'.

Then, finally, Rachel became pregnant and had her first child. She names him Joseph: 'God has taken away my disgrace'. And she adds: 'I want more! Give me another son please!'

This is the background of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Who is Rachel? What is her attitude?

It is natural for a woman to want to have children. Rachel, however, turns it into a competition and is pursuing her own honor and happiness.

She does not see her place in God's plan, as the mother of Israel's sons, who were to become the 12 tribes.

The sons God gave to Jacob were not meant as trophies for Rachel and Leah. They were God's gifts to fulfill his promise to Jacob and to secure a future for his people.

But Rachel does not look at this in faith. When her second and last son is born and she is dying, she refuses to be comforted. The last thing she does is naming her son Ben-Oni: 'Son of my grief' (Gen35,18).

He should have been her prize, the son who gave her the joy and status she wanted. But in her eyes, her life is a failure: now she finally has two sons but she is dying so she cannot enjoy them!

Her grief and pain fill her mind and her son must carry that with him in his name his entire life. Rachel refuses to be comforted. She does not want to look at her life and her sons with the eyes of faith.

Thankfully, Jacob does not go along. Jacob does not want his son to bear a name that perpetuates Rachel's grief. He changes his name: Benjamin: Son of the right hand: the important one.

Jacob does what God wants him to do: he believes God's promise. God knows Rachel's sorrow. Her sorrow was real, and Jacob's grief over his beloved wife is real, too. But it does not determine the future. God's children can grab hold of the promise. God opens the future by showing that he keeps his word. He will make Jacob into a great nation and give him and his descendants the land Israel.

God's plan is bigger than our desires, our sorrow, and pain. This is the message: hold onto God's promise. Let God's grace comfort you and open your eyes for what he is doing in the world and in your personal life.

2. Rejected comfort (the exile)

Rachel's lament and pain have become proverbial for the history of the Jews.

The descendants of her children were killed on a large scale in the time of the exile. Jeremiah witnessed the deportation of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The town of Ramah was the collection point before they were forced to walk to Babylon. The exiles were driven together there like sheep.

It was like the Holocaust in the Second World War: there were collection camps in Holland, for example, where the German soldiers herded the Jews together in order to ship them off to extermination camps like Auschwitz.

The human suffering was enormous. Innocent people were treated as criminals, the Babylonian soldiers herded children and women together without mercy or compassion.

Some of them were too weak to make the trip of thousands of miles on foot. They died on the road. Small children were there, families broken up and separated. What a misery!

At that moment God sends Jeremiah to give the exiles a prophecy:
You will return! God who scattered his people will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd. He will ransom and redeem the sons of Jacob.
Your mourning will turn into gladness.

What would you expect? Don't you think the exiles who lost all hope would receive this great promise with open arms?
Of course they would be grateful that God had not forgotten them and that he promised to save them!

But ... that's not the case.

They did not believe the promise.

All they do is bemoaning their own fate. That's why Jeremiah speaks these words:

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

It is as if Rachel is there, weeping for her children. The exiles respond in the same way she did: there is only sorrow, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. They refuse to be comforted by God's promise. They put their fingers in their ears and turn away from Jeremiah.

In other words, God says: Your crying is not right. You are only concerned with your own grief. You do not see that this punishment has come over you because of your endless sins by which you have rejected me and spurned my love. You do not grab hold of my promise that I will restore you after you have paid for your many sins.

Even though those exiles did not accept God's promise, God will still bring his people back to their land. Their grandchildren will return. God says:

"Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land." (16-17).

That's God's grace. And his faithfulness: he keeps the promise to Jacob even though his descendants do not turn to God in their grief.

And as a consequence of this promise, Jesus is born. He will set God's people free forever.

3. Bethlehem's pain

How does this apply to Bethlehem?

Now we return to Bethlehem, after this detour to Genesis and Jeremiah.

I think we can now understand the reason why Matthew quotes the words Jeremiah spoke to the exiles and applies them to the people of Bethlehem.

This must mean that the people of Bethlehem are grieving without seeing and believing God's plan.

Of course they grieve the loss of their children. Parents don't want to lose their own children. And to see them murdered is even worse. This is horrible! No wonder they have deep sorrow. Christians do not ignore it and we should not act as if it doesn't mean anything to us, saying 'this is the will of God'.

However, they are blinded by their grief and refuse to be comforted by God's promise. Their own loss fills the horizon, in the same way the Israelites who went into exile responded. They bewail their fate, but they don't open their eyes for what God is doing.

Bethlehem had not accepted Jesus!

We can see this better when we realize who these people are.

They lived in the town where Jesus was born. They had heard the good news of his birth: the shepherds had told the whole town!

And Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had stayed there for several months. Apparently, the townspeople had not paid any attention. They had not recognized Jesus' birth as the work of God: the birth of the savior, the long expected fulfillment of the promise to Jacob.

Then the Magi, the astrologers, came to worship Jesus. Their arrival and presents must have caused quite a stir. Their king was born! God was fulfilling his promise to David: a king would sit on his throne forever and set his people free. But still, no response from the townspeople.

They didn't worship him and didn't bring presents. They ignored him.

But there is a response when Herod murders their children. When they suffer under the attempt of Jesus' enemy to kill the king of the Jews, they do not call themselves worthy to suffer for their Lord but they can only sit down in grief.

History repeats itself: Jeremiah's prophecy shows that Israel's attitude has not changed: all that counts to them is the lives of their children. They don't realize their future depends on the King who was just born.

They probably blamed the Magi for the grief they caused: 'Why did they have to come and wake up king Herod? And why do our children have to suffer while this baby Jesus escapes to Egypt?'

Rachel's grief still dominated the hearts of Israel. They did not recognize God's work and rejoice in the birth of their savior and king.

4. And you?

This passage forces us to consider the consequences of the birth of Jesus. He brings change in the world. From the very beginning, he demands a response of faith. The birth of Jesus is a decisive moment: there is a separation in the people of Israel between those who view him as the savior and turn to him in faith and repentance and those who don't want him.

This is the question Jesus asks you since he has been born on earth: Will you find everything in me and accept me as the fulfillment of all God's promises?

This is the decision each one of us needs to make: will you and I accept God's promise? Not only when Jesus seems to solve our problems, but also when he seems to cause trouble in our lives, consequences we had not expected, had not counted on.

Do not hold on to your own life or that of your children. Do not place anything higher than Jesus and his kingdom. Live by faith alone, even when he demands huge sacrifices from us.

No, you and I should not ignore the immense suffering. You must take it seriously: Rachel's pain and disappointment, the sorrow of seeing God's people deported to Babylon in Jeremiah's time. Don't minimize the depth of the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust, much less deny it.

Nor should we live superficial lives, just focused on our own fun and happiness, without realizing what has been going on in the history of our world.

As Christians, we are touched by the suffering around us. We notice it in our time: oppression in China, genocide in Rwanda and Sudan, poverty in Mexico City.

The world we live in is a horrible place in many respects. We often cannot see with our eyes that Jesus' birth has changed anything. We may even be called to suffer for his name so that it seems that our lives get worse when we follow him.

Jesus' birth is God's promise realized.

We should not think that all the misery in the world is proof that it is out of control, that God is sitting down with his arms folded, or with his hands in his hair – I don't know which one would be worse: people think God is unable to do anything or he does not care.

Many use the disasters and atrocities in the world against God, like 'now I can't believe in God any more'.

God does care about his world, about real people, about their souls.

That's why he sent his Son.

God sent him as God's answer to the sin and misery of the world. He puts an end to the rebellion and slavery that we are stuck in. And he brings the beginning of God's wholesome, life-giving reign over the world.

Forgiveness puts an end to the past. Regeneration changes hardened hearts. The promise opens a door to the future.

Now God demands from the world and us that we recognize him as our king.

Open your eyes in your grief: Jesus is king! He was born to restore your life. Look at him through your tears. Let your grief not block your view of Christ. Believe that he redeems your life and has ransomed you, set you free from sin and misery.

Put your faith and hope in God's promise: "I will wipe away all tears. I will make all things new". And you will see the new Jerusalem descends from heaven on earth. God has prepared it for us, brand new, without sin, pain, and death.

Rachel's barrenness and disappointment, the oppression in Egypt, the exile in Babylon, the death camps in Germany and Poland, the Inquisition, the persecution of Christians, genocide, abuse, divorce, the death of your spouse, your worries about your children, and hurtful words – they will be forgotten and not be found on the new earth. Jesus will heal all that pain.

His blood is so powerful that it will cover the guilt of what believers have done. His reign as king of the world is good and wholesome: all wounds will be healed. The smaller ones, caused by hurtful words and lack of attention, but also the deep gashes left by horrific acts of violence.

His kingdom of love and justice will bring life, true life in every way.

Will you believe it? Trust him and you will feel the healing.

Amen