



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Only God”

Jeremiah 31:15-17, Matthew 2:13-18  
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Yesterday I spoke to a friend I hadn't seen in a month. During that time, she and her family had taken a trip. My friend had posted regularly on Facebook and it looked like she and her husband and kids had a wonderful time visiting her husband's parents in Florida.

That was not the case. I learned that the trip was a disaster. From start to finish. The airlines lost their luggage. Her oldest daughter got food poisoning. The apartment complex that her in-laws lived in didn't welcome anyone under the age of 18. When she and her kids went to swim in the complex's pool, the security guard came and hauled them out. She spent most of the week driving her in-laws to and from medical appointments.

There was a huge gap between what she posted on Facebook and the reality of the experience. That got me thinking about the Christmas story. In our Christmas cards and pageants, we tend to focus on the Facebook version: idyllic snapshots of happy parents, a smiling baby, picturesque shepherds, photogenic farm animals, well-dressed wise men.

Today, Epiphany Sunday, we focus on those wise men, also called the Magi, who journey from the east in search of Jesus. The Bible doesn't identify them as kings or tell us the number of visitors but that hasn't stopped us from imagining them as a royal trio arriving on camels. These glamorous out of town visitors humble themselves before the infant son of peasants, all in the glow of a starlit sky. That's the Epiphany story as curated on Facebook.

Then there is the reality of the situation. The journey of the Magi is long and hard and their backs ache and their feet are sore and they are cold and hungry and they miss the comfort of their own beds. And then there is Bethlehem. There are soldiers in Bethlehem. This is occupied territory after all. And, by the end of our story, the soldiers have orders from King Herod. He has identified a newborn as a potential threat to his power. Herod is furious at the Magi's refusal to help him find the baby and he orders the death of every child in and around Bethlehem under the age of two. This results in

Lamentation and bitter weeping  
Rachel is weeping for her children.

What on earth is Rachel doing in the Christmas story?<sup>1</sup>

The Rachel referred to in this text is the wife of Jacob. Her story is told back in the book of Genesis. We first see her as a beautiful shepherdess standing by a well. There, Jacob takes one look at her and falls deeply in love with her. They marry, prosper, have children. The time comes for the family to return to Canaan, Jacob's

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<sup>1</sup> I was first introduced to the significance of Rachel in the birth narratives by Christopher Morse, Union Theological Seminary Professor of Theology. His insights are captured in his book *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

homeland. Rachel is pregnant when they begin that long journey and along the way, she dies in childbirth – a hard, painful death. Jacob buries her by the side of the road.

This is a puzzling thing. Jacob’s family has a burial tomb – a grand place where Sarah and Abraham and Isaac are buried. How odd that Jacob buries his beloved Rachel on the side of the road. I think of the roadside crosses that are to be found on so many American highways. They remind the person driving by – someone died here – a life ended here. Those crosses remind us of our mortality. They remind us of the fragility of life.

Maybe that is why Jacob chooses to bury Rachel by the side of the road. Perhaps Jacob knows that much later, centuries later, the people of Israel will be captured and led away toward Babylon. As they pass along the road, the same road where Rachel is buried, according to Jeremiah, a cry is heard:

Lamentation and bitter weeping  
Rachel is weeping for her children.  
She refuses to be comforted,  
Because they are no more.

It is an unsettling image – this woman weeping uncontrollably, watching her people head off into captivity, rejecting any attempts to comfort her. And then she appears again in this morning’s story as the infants of Bethlehem are killed by Herod’s soldiers. Once again, she refuses to be comforted by human words.

I was at the funeral home waiting in the visitation line. A neighbor’s child had died. Another neighbor was in line looking very anxious. She started talking: “I didn’t know what to wear. What does one wear for a visitation? Is this OK what I am wearing?” Then the true source of her anxiety emerged. “I don’t know what to say. What does one say to someone whose child is dead? What am I supposed to say? I don’t know what to say.”

I don’t think she stopped talking long enough for me to respond. This is what I could have said to her. “At such a time, there is nothing that we can say that can make a difference. Your being here says everything that needs to be said, that can be said. At times like this, silence is the best possible means of communication.”

I learned that early in my ministry career as I tried to figure out how to be helpful to people experiencing great loss. Oh, at first I thought I didn’t have the right words because I was inexperienced, I hadn’t read the right book, didn’t take the right class, didn’t have the right theology. But I have learned over time the utter inadequacy of human words in the face of suffering. How can we comfort a mother whose child has died? What can we say to a person who has lost their spouse of 65 years? We show up, we visit, we sit, we listen but there are no magic words that can provide comfort in the face of loss.

Rachel’s refusal has the ring of truth to it. There are situations in which only God may speak a word of hope.

Ann Weems is an author and poet who lost her son the day of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. In the long months following his death, she wrote psalms of lament. Here is part of her Psalm Forty-Four.

Your people, O God,  
are trying  
to comfort me.  
Tell them there is  
no comfort.  
They’re trying  
to cheer me.

Tell them there is  
nothing  
that can make me feel  
better.  
Tell them my name  
is Rachel.  
Tell them to leave me  
alone.  
Tell them there is  
nothing  
on earth  
that can help.<sup>2</sup>

Weems refuses to be comforted by the words of others. There are situations in which only God may speak of hope.

This month and next, we are focusing on silence. This morning's story reminds us that silence is at times the appropriate response, the only response. Silence creates room for God to speak, for God to comfort, for God to offer the peace that is possible only with God.

Maybe that's why Rachel and her stubborn refusal to move past her grief keep appearing in the Biblical text. She is a buffer against simplistic responses to suffering. She reminds us that our human words are inadequate in the face of suffering and pain – the only hope that is real to Rachel is that hope which comes from God.

Her story is not the one we like to tell in our culture. Grief is something to be worked through. Sorted out. Put behind us. Resolved. At the very least, we should learn something from suffering. We should become better people – more committed to a cause – more loving to those left behind. That's the narrative of Facebook posts, self-help books and morning talk shows. Rachel has never been a guest on any of those shows. She refuses to resolve her grief. She refuses to become a better person or learn meaningful life lessons because of her pain. She is patron saint of unresolved grief.

So from now on, whenever you see a roadside cross, I invite you to think of Rachel. Rachel who is our companion, our guide. She reminds us that we are not alone when we are in sorrow. She offers to all who suffer not cheap comfort but deep solidarity. She breaks through the isolation that so often accompanies grief. She reminds us that we are in the sorrow together, in the community of those whose hope rests in God. Rachel invites us to focus on the promise of God to give us comfort and hope.

Because the story does not end with Rachel's weeping – the text of Jeremiah continues

Thus said the Lord:  
Cease your weeping,  
Shed no more tears...  
There is hope for your future.

God speaks a word of comfort. Back to Ann Weems and her psalm. After she begs God to send away those who would comfort her with their words, she writes,

And when they're gone,

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, 1999, p. 98-99.

O God, come to me ...  
Don't leave me  
alone,  
O holy God.  
Don't leave me  
alone.  
You, oh my God,  
are my hope.

Of course, Rachel is present at the birth of Jesus. I like to think that Rachel is at Golgotha as well and that as Jesus is crucified, Rachel weeps for Mary's child and she refuses to be comforted. I like to think that her suffering is somehow taken into the tomb with Jesus – that God's story has a place for her pain – her suffering is not resolved but rather becomes a part of something deeper, something holy, something that is all about hope and redemption and life.

On Easter morning, I like to think that Rachel is able to raise her voice in praise. That every Easter, she joins the chorus of those singing Alleluia.

May we all join that chorus.

Amen.