

“Rachel Weeping for Her Children”

Matthew 2:13-23

This is the first Sunday in 2023. This is the first Sunday after Christmas. Church attendance is down. Special music from our choirs and band, the Christmas Eve services, the Christmas parties, the flowers, the exchanging of gifts, are all in the past. By this time, maybe you're fed up with Christmas. Maybe you're fed up with 2022. And maybe, you're just plain tired. I am.

After all, we should be tired. Look at what we've put ourselves through in the past few weeks. We've driven some miles and eaten even more food than usual. Finding corners in our stomachs to store away all that food is hard work and it makes afternoon naps a necessity.

For many of us, Christmas is a time for traveling and vacation. Which, of course, are harder work and much more tiring than staying at home. For our college students it's a time to drive home and take advantage of home-cooked meals and clean clothes after months of pizza and wearing the same pair of blue jeans because it's too much of a hassle to wash clothes.

Christmas is a time for family gatherings and reacquainting ourselves with that aunt or uncle or nephew or cousin that we rarely see anymore. We put on our nicer clothes and our smiling faces and our best manners for a whole day and it's very tiring. The smaller children simply cannot keep their nicer clothes nice, and cannot keep their smiling faces smiling, and cannot keep their best manners for a whole day or a whole week. As the children get tired, their clothes get ragged, the smiles turn to frowns and screams, and they have no manners.

It is about then that Dad and Grandpa have passed out on the couch from an overdose of food and drink. So it's up to Mom to round up the smile less, shoeless, and manner less children and to get Dad woke up at the same time. We are so tired.

Maybe, by now, we're fed up with Christmas. And we still have to take that darn Christmas tree down. And we are so tired as we face New Year's Day. Are we really going to get up and worship and give God thanks for a New Year on New Year's morning?

Maybe we're looking forward to 2023 because we're ready for a change.

Certainly God must know and understand how rough and tiring our lives have been in the past year. Certainly the matriarch Rachel looks down on the lives of her offspring in 2023 and she weeps for her children. Certainly someone knows of our plight.

St. Paul knows when he writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the suffering of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed".

Rejoice that we are so tired? Rejoice that 2022 has been so tough? Rejoice that we've participated in the suffering of Christ? Are we really that tired? Has 2022 really been that tough? Have we really participated in the suffering of Christ? Or are we just chronic complainers who really have a pretty easy life and really have no reason to be tired?

We really have no reason to be tired when we look at the story of Mary and Joseph and how they spent that first week of Christmas and the weeks to follow. They had been forced to leave their home in Nazareth and make the eighty mile trek to Bethlehem at a time when Mary was nine months pregnant. Just so that a government census could be taken for taxation purposes. Today we tell the government where to go if they even suggest raising taxes.

Could you imagine the uproar if we all had to go back to our hometown for a census exactly when the government told us to go?

When they arrive in Bethlehem of course there are no rooms because of the census and so they stay in a cave with a stable of animals. Mary is forced to give birth in an unclean place with no midwife. Then she starts getting visitors right away. First the shepherds and then the magi.

No sooner had the magi gone, when an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

Here are Joseph and Mary who are totally worn out from the trip to Bethlehem and then the immediate birth of Jesus upon their arrival. And now an angel appears to Joseph and tells him he cannot return home to Nazareth or his new son will be killed by the same Herod who had forced him to come to Bethlehem in the first place. If I was Joseph, I'd be steaming about now and I would have probably told that angel something I'd be sorry for later.

But Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet Hosea; "Out of Egypt I called my son."

It was obviously a rough couple of weeks for Joseph, Mary, and the newborn Jesus. Much tougher, much more tiring than anything most of us have experienced. Jesus and his parents began to bear their crosses from the very beginning.

Upon arriving in Egypt they had to find a temporary home until they heard that King Herod was dead.

For Jewish people like Joseph and Mary to find a home in Egypt would not be that difficult. Jews had been fleeing to Egypt for centuries. Every city in Egypt had colonies of Jews. So it was a natural reaction for Joseph to go there to avoid persecution.

Soon after arriving in Egypt, Joseph and Mary probably heard what happened in Bethlehem shortly after they left. Herod had given orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.

This tragic event is probably exaggerated as far as how many baby boys were murdered. Because Bethlehem was so small, most historians agree there couldn't have been more than twenty boys under age two that were killed. Still it was a tragedy. It was the reaction of a threatened and mentally ill King who was soon to meet his own death.

Jeremiah had said that when the Israelites were conquered and driven into exile; as they walked past Rachel's tomb in Ramah, she wept for her children. And now, once again, Rachel has reason to weep for her offspring as they are murdered in Bethlehem.

Does Rachel still have reason to weep for her offspring as we begin the New Year of 2023? Are we as tired as Joseph and Mary were during that first Christmas? Are we still participating in the suffering of Christ because of our faith as those first Christians did? How tired are we?

As we look back on 2022, we remember many things that could cause Rachel to be weeping for us. We remember other things that might have her smiling.

Rachel is most certainly weeping over the deaths of thousands of women and children that have been killed in the Ukraine. She weeps over refugee bodies that are washed up on shore when small, overcrowded boats capsize at sea.

Rachel may have been smiling over Cleveland fans when Tito Francona was named manager of the year and the Guardians won our division and the first round of the playoffs.

Rachel is most certainly weeping over the families who have lost their homes to forest fires and hurricanes and families who have lost their loved ones in mass shootings. But she is smiling over the emerging Christian church and the ministry of our missionaries in many African countries.

Rachel is most certainly weeping over those families who are going hungry in the wealthiest country in the world but smiles at the ministries of our churches so effectively feeding our hungry brothers and sisters.

Rachel is weeping over so many churches closing in Europe and the United States where the un-churched are the fastest growing group. But she's not surprised at the amazing growth of churches in places where Christians are being persecuted in Africa, India, China, and Russia.

As we begin a new year, I remind you that what really matters is that we are citizens of another country, with a different agenda and different mission. We are ambassadors for Christ and this transcends whatever is happening politically in the United States.

It is the vision articulated by the prophet Micah: "To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God."

Finally, we must remember and put into practice our theology which transcends human and artificial labels. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

So in this new year, I join with the apostle Paul in begging “you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

May the peace of God . . .

#250 – Blessed Be the God of Israel