

Sermon for December 31, 2017 – “There is Hope...”

First Sunday after Christmas, Year B – Texts: Jeremiah 31:15-17; Matthew 2:13–23

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It's still Christmas, the 8th day, the first Sunday. Did Christmas change anything for anyone? Did we really think it would? What about this new year that begins tomorrow? Do we think that 2018 will be any better than 2017? Or do we believe, as the popular song from the rock group U2 says “...nothing changes on New Year's Day.” Sometimes it seems that nothing will ever change, that things will never get better, that they will in fact only get worse. A quick glance at the news would seem to confirm that. So, why in the world would I choose today's readings, the story of the massacre of the innocents? The story of the murder of all the toddlers and babies in Bethlehem is not an easy story to hear. Our hearts can ache simply hearing about the death of children. We just know somewhere deep inside of us that this is unbearably sad. There's no need to compare it to the tragedies of human history that have followed since. We know what the slaughter of children was like for that town of Bethlehem because it hasn't stopped. Children die each day all over the world of hunger, war, disease and poverty. This isn't just an entire community in grief and mourning, it's the entire world. A world now even more desperate for a Messiah.

Today, on the 8th Day of Christmas, Jeremiah speaks for us all: **“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.”** Jeremiah's words first expressed the grief of the people, the mothers of Israel, as they wept for their children who'd been taken away to exile in Babylon. They are words that the people of Bethlehem would have known, but they now carry new meaning as they are stamped again on the hearts of the mothers of Bethlehem. Tragedy upon tragedy. Heartbreak upon heartbreak. The words that have been stamped upon the hearts of parents again and again through time. The darkness is still lingering in our world. And yet, Jeremiah's words do not go unheard. The weeping of Rachel and all the mothers of Israel is **not** ignored. God speaks to their suffering. God speaks to the people that Jeremiah first wrote to. God speaks to the mothers of Bethlehem. God speaks to all who know tragedy, pain and loss. Thus, says the Lord: **“Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears...for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord...they shall come back from the land of the enemy...there is hope for your future, says the Lord...your children shall come back to their own country.”** There is hope for your future, says the Lord. God has not forgotten the cries of His people and God's Messiah has come into the world for a purpose. He has come to travel the path of His people. The Messiah goes down the roads they have traveled and gathers His people along the way. Just as the nation of Israel fled from Pharaoh in the Exodus so too will the Messiah follow their path to Egypt and back to the Promised Land. And, just as the exiles of Jeremiah's day returned from Babylon to Jerusalem – the holy city, the Messiah is also on His way to Jerusalem. Egypt and Babylon are just the beginning of the Messiah's journey and the Messiah becomes Israel's journey. As the Messiah escapes to Egypt it's truly only a delay of King Herod's order for death. The destination of the Messiah from the moment He was laid in the manger and was worshipped by shepherds and magi is the cross. Christ the Messiah is going to the land of the dead.

This is the hope. This is the promise that the Lord speaks to the people of Israel. This is the promise that's beneath the star, that's born into the stable, that's in the little baby in Mary's arms. The promise isn't just a baby, but a baby that will one day die. But that baby will not just die, that baby will rise again. And, He will not just rise again, He will bring us back from the land of the enemy. He will call us to rise from our graves too.

Today we are on the eve of a new year, hopefully better than last year. Matthew's Christmas story is an ominous beginning. And while we may have hope for 2018 things look bleak. The world seems to be headed further into darkness, perhaps even worse than we've known in recent years. And still, it is into this troubled world that God comes to us. God comes to us as a baby shining light into our darkness. **"There is hope for your future, says the Lord...your children shall come back to their own country."**

Jesus Christ, the newborn Messiah, born in a stable manger has come into our world to bring us out of the land of the enemy, to pull us out of chaos from the despair of grief and loss, from tombs where we do not belong. And Christ shall bring us back to our home, back to the love of God, reconciling us with our Heavenly Father. **This** is the promise of Christ's coming. **This** is the Hope that the Angels proclaimed. **This** is the Good News of Great Joy that was given to the Shepherds. Good news that's been passed on to us this day.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.