

Rev. Seth D. Bode †† Sermon 407, 01-03-2021 †† Christmas 2

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

JEREMIAH 31

¹⁵This is what the LORD says. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. ¹⁶This is what the LORD says. Stop your crying. Do not shed tears, because your work will be rewarded, declares the LORD. They will return from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷There is hope for your future, declares the LORD. Your children will return to their own borders. ¹⁸I have certainly heard Ephraim grieving: “You have disciplined me. I was disciplined like an untrained calf. Cause me to turn, and I will turn, because you are the LORD my God. ¹⁹After I turned away, I was sorry. After I was instructed, I slapped my thigh in grief. I was ashamed and humiliated, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” ²⁰Isn’t Ephraim my dear son? Isn’t he my darling child? I often speak against him, but I still remember him. My heart longs for him. I will certainly be compassionate to him, declares the LORD.



I once got to know a very effective pastor. He’d been called to a church where the previous pastor had been abusing children. He told me that the leaders at this congregation came to a point of saying, “You don’t know what it is like.” That pastor said, “Oh, yes I do.” He had been abused in high school by his coach. He served in a setting where his personal sufferings set him up to help.

The gospel writer Matthew is known for quoting prophecies of the Old Testament that are fulfilled in Jesus. Today we get to dig into one of those cited prophecies and see it in its original context.

God tells us this to arouse our horror, and consider the depth of evil. What nags me is that the Lord didn’t stop these events. It nags me that the Lord somehow cooperates in this evil. And maybe that nags you, too.

OUR LORD SURELY KNOWS INNOCENT SUFFERINGS

1. He permits it

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, for this and many other instances. As Isaiah heard a voice calling out, here in the Spirit Jeremiah heard a voice weeping. This was a woman's voice, the voice of Rachael, one of the wives of father Jacob himself. She was a mother of three of the twelve tribes.

Ramah is not the same as Bethlehem, although it would be nearby. Ramah literally means "the heights." Ramah is among the same mountains as Bethlehem. It lies on the other side of Jerusalem from Bethlehem. It may have been a deportation station for the enemy conquerors of the Hebrews, as they sent away the next generations into exile, most never to be seen again.

What does Rachael have to do with anything in Jeremiah, 1300 years later? She is a mother of the nation, who desperately wanted children, competing for her husband's love with more babies. Instead, she died in childbirth. So Rachael's weeping "voice" is the symbol of maternal tragedy and sadness.

The thing about Rachael is that she died, not in Ramah, but on the way to Bethlehem. That is on the other side of Jerusalem. The wailing from Ramah is so bitter that it is heard over the mountains.

Isn't this what often happens with God? We were just singing at Christmas, "Go Tell it on the Mountain," not "go weep and wail on the mountain," and now we learn that there was wailing loud enough to travel over the mountains. No sooner was Christ revealed to man by the angels and Wise Men than he had to conceal Himself again quickly. It is still that way today. One day Christ gives Himself to be recognized in our heart, but the next day He hides Himself from us and it seems as if He has forsaken us. What next? What are we supposed to do then? Where should we seek Him? Our text tells us, rely on a *future and a hope*.

2. He foretells it

As the Lord speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, He directs his message to Ephraim. This is not unusual; the Lord always called Israel "Ephraim" through the prophet Hosea almost a century before this. After Judah, the mightiest tribe was Ephraim, the most numerous and prosperous tribe, but also foremost in

committing idolatry and worshiping false gods. Ephraim had caused their own destruction, and God warned and warned and warned them. In the end, as a judgment, God let them go their own way.

Does the Lord somehow cooperate in this evil? To be fair, God permits evil. Acts 14:16, *"In the past He let all nations go their own way."* Now God does not permit evil because He is indifferent. Psalm 5:4, *"With you the wicked cannot dwell."* Nor does God permit evil because He is negligent, 2 Peter 3:9, *"The Lord is not slow with you, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you ..."* God does not permit evil because He is powerless. Psalm 50:21-22, *"You thought I was altogether like you... Now consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces and there will be no one to rescue you."* God permits evil as a judgment call ... and as a judgment. Acts 14:16, *"In the past He let all nations go their own way."*

And what happens under the Lord's judgment? When the many are judged, the Lord works true repentance with a few. *"Turn me and I will be turned,"* (v 18) *"for after I returned, I was comforted; and, after I was instructed, I slapped my thigh"* (v 19). God brings people to faith so that they repent, and it is God alone who converts. Scripture plainly says that God must convert us, *'For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose'* (Php. 2:13).

That is why Lord commands Rachael and anyone else who mourns to withhold her weeping. *"Stop your crying. Do not shed tears"* (v 16). The mourners are not to weep as if they had no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). *"Your work will be rewarded" and "there is hope for your future."*

When we no longer feel Christ in our hearts, we must still seek Him in the Word. There He holds out eternal hope, a sure hope, and a future by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Whoever firmly holds to Jeremiah's teaching will soon be rescued from suffering. How can we say this?

3. He suffered it

Today's gospel teaches us that Jesus Christ's family ran away in order to save his life for the salvation of the world. Although Joseph took his wife and her son Jesus Christ to Egypt, King Herod was filled with rage. He was so insulted that foreigners would come looking to praise a King who was not Herod himself.

Herod hated boy Jesus enough to send out his soldiers to put to death little boys anywhere in that age category.

But if we want to blame God for this kind of suffering, and for the suffering of the time of Jeremiah, then we must also wrestle with the concept of God as He delivers it to us. God did not leave us to suffering, but took on innocent sufferings and death. **The Lord surely knows innocent sufferings**, for He took on the work of bearing our grief and dying under the weight of our sins. That includes the sins of Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, and all little boys and girls. Jesus Christ became a man to set us free and to win our way to the true homeland, heaven. That is what the Lord means when He says in verse 20, *“For as often as I spoke about him, I surely still remembered him. Therefore my heart longs /stomach churned for him. Surely I will have compassion on him, decl. the Lord.”*

In so doing, The Lord prevents further evil. In crucifying Jesus, the Jewish leaders and Romans, *“did what [the Father’s] power and will decided beforehand should happen”* (Acts 4:28). The Lord directs evil. Through all the exile, the Lord would preserve Hebrew people that were truly repentant for their idolatry and trustful in the Messiah. The Lord limits evil. He would bring back a measure of these sons to live in their land of promise again.

If we want to remain with Christ, we cannot expect anything in this world other than the dear cross: persecution, distress, and death. As soon as the world learns that our heart and mind live in Bethlehem, we must be prepared to find Nebuchadnezzars and Herods pursuing us, and we must sign our confession with patient suffering—even, perhaps, with our blood.

We should also learn from our text, however, that if we want to reject God out of anger over the question of evil, that will not free us from suffering. We face real sufferings due to sin in the world. Our fathers suffer. Our mothers suffer. Our children suffer. Our scientists and medical workers and educators suffer. Yet when we are tempted to complain to God, we have a choice to make. We can suffer with Christ now, and then enter with Him into glory. Or we can rejoice without Christ, and then go without Christ into the land of eternal tears.

So then let us take courage at this time of falling away. Jesus Christ still lives and His Church will remain even if the whole world should conspire against Him. Let us faithfully follow Him, though He may lead us through wilderness and desert. We know we will finally arrive with Him in the true homeland. Amen.