

Monday, December 28, 2020
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The Holy Innocents

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:15-17

Jeremiah is primarily concerned with Judah, yet these verses are a lament on the defeat and exile of the Northern Kingdom. The oldest tradition located the tomb of Rachel, mother of Joseph and Benjamin, in Ramah, north of Jerusalem. The later tradition followed by the author of Matthew placed it near Bethlehem.

15 Thus says the Lord:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

16 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;

17 there is hope for your future,

says the Lord:

your children shall come back to their own country.

Gospel: Matthew 2:13-18

Whether or not the slaughter of the Bethlehem children is a historical event, the story's inclusion in Matthew's gospel makes the point that Jesus was God's chosen leader of the Jewish people as well as of the Gentiles represented by the magi. Herod's fury over the birth underscores the claim.

13 Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother,

and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

16When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18“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.”

130 years ago, events in South Dakota took place that still affect our lives today. The United States had outlawed the Ghost Dance, a Native American religious ceremony, in an attempt to take control of the tribes and people. Lakota leaders like Sitting Bull and Spotted Elk resisted, and the US army was sent to put a stop to the practice. Tensions ran high. Here is a telegram sent by General Nelson Miles of the US Army in Rapid City to Washington DC, on December 19, 1890.

"The difficult Indian problem cannot be solved permanently at this end of the line. It requires the fulfillment of Congress of the treaty obligations that the Indians were entreated and coerced into signing. They signed away a valuable portion of their reservation, and it is now occupied by white people, for which they have received nothing."

"They understood that ample provision would be made for their support; instead, their supplies have been reduced, and much of the time they have been living on half and two-thirds rations. Their crops, as well as the crops of the white people, for two years have been almost total failures."

"The dissatisfaction is wide spread, especially among the Sioux, while the Cheyennes have been on the verge of starvation, and were forced to commit depredations to sustain life. These facts are beyond

question, and the evidence is positive and sustained by thousands of witnesses."

Ten days later, violence erupted between the US army and a large group of Lakota at Wounded Knee Creek. While blood was spilled on both sides, the event has come to be known as the Wounded Knee Massacre. In an attempt to disarm the band of Lakota, shots were fired. While 25 soldiers were killed and another 39 were wounded, hundreds of Lakota were killed. However, that count includes women and children. Historical eyewitness accounts describe soldiers firing rifles and then cannons into the camp, not just at the Lakota soldiers but at the tipi camp housing women and children.

When General Nelson Miles toured the scene days after the encounter, he found bodies of women carrying babies up to two miles away, who had been hunted and murdered as they fled for their lives. General Miles would later testify that the battle was an intentional massacre, rather than an unfortunate accident.

Days later, L Frank Baum, who would later write the Wonderful Wizard of Oz, put forward this opinion in a newspaper:

"our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries, we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth."

His views may not have been held by everyone in the United States, but it was certainly a sizable portion.

Prophet Jeremiah acknowledges the painful reality that follows warfare. Remembering the defeat of the Northern Kingdom and the feelings of the Israelites:

lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

Both in the ancient world of scripture and in our modern world of South Dakota, we wrestle with the legacy of past violence. God knows the pain and suffering of this world, and gives us a promise in the midst of it.

16 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;
17 there is hope for your future,

God hopes for a better world for us. Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the holy coming to be with us in the mess so that we know that we are never alone. God does not want the suffering, hatred, or violence that often shows up in our world.

The birth of Christ, Christmas which we just celebrated, is a partial fulfillment of God's promise of a better future. Yet that is quickly followed by an act of genocide. King Herod sought to keep his hold on the power that he had, and hearing that there was a new king, decided to slaughter infants to keep what he had. Even though God had just been born into the world, this horrible action is taken by a leader.

But that doesn't change God's promises for us. Although Christ doesn't show up and make everything fine and dandy, Good News is promised for the world. Through the cross and the empty tomb, God turns the world upside down. The pain of death is not taken away, but it is followed up by the hope of new life. God's power is greater than death itself.

The reason we tell stories like the slaughter of the innocents, and the Wounded Knee Massacre, is not to guilt people into something. It is to honestly acknowledge our history, to name for one another the broken places of our world, to plead with God that they should never

happen again. Only when we have seen the hurt in our world can we do something about it.

God promises a better future, a brighter world, a life without weeping or pain. While we wait for that perfect, eternal life, we are also called to build the kingdom of God here and now. We are called to love our neighbors, to confront hatred, to stand against violence. When we do so, God's love shows through us, and the Kingdom is a little closer.

We know that the holy innocents and those killed at Wounded Knee are not the only places of brokenness in our world, they are simply the places we name today. I invite you to name the brokenness you see, to name out loud the hurt in your life, in your community, in your story. Name the brokenness, the cracked painful edges where things have fallen apart, and remember the promise that God will breathe new life into what is broken, that resurrection is stronger than death, that the Holy Spirit is with you no matter what you have been through.

And remember that God has more in store for you. Thanks be to God for that hope. Amen.