

Title: Grief held by Hope
Text: Matthew 2.16-18
Theme: What do you do with evil?
Series: Matthew #5
Prop Stmt: The reality of evil will drive you to despair or to Christ.

Read Text:

This message has three parts: Why is this here? How does this apply? And the question that no one wants to discuss. First of all,

1. **Why is this here?**

Newtown, Connecticut will fade in the memory of those who from a distance knew about the tragedy that she experienced. But, for those who lived there, Newtown will forever be associated with unimaginable sorrow. When we try to explain our feelings, or attempt to help others understand our emotions, we look for descriptions or experiences that others will immediately connect with. Such is the case with the word Ramah.

Ramah was a city that was just north of Jerusalem about five miles. It was the gathering spot for the Jews who were driven into exile by the Babylonians. This forced exile took place on three different occasions, so this staging location became associated with incredible loss. Husbands would be torn away from families. Mothers would say good-bye to sons and eventually, thousands of Jews would be taken from their homeland. Ramah would be akin to the train stations in Germany that took the Jews to the concentration camps. Most would not return.

Many of us are a transient people. We look at houses as investments, or convenient places to live. Some of us live in condos, apartments, or if we live in a house, we may even hire someone else to cut our grass. The idea of a homestead, or a land that belongs to your family, is a concept that is not experienced by many. Family on my mother's side owns farmland in Iowa. In the midst of acres and acres of ground sits a cemetery, where my ancestors are buried, including my father. This is family land. This has our name. It tells our story. It gives a sense of rootedness and belonging. To be driven away from your family and your land, not knowing if you will ever see them or it again would only compound your grief. Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel, buried his wife Rachel, not far from this spot. So, Rachel, a prominent mother in the story of the nation, is imagined as weeping from her grave at the sight of thousands of her children leaving the land.

This is the scene that Jeremiah describes in his prophecy. This prophet of sadness who saw and predicted the coming invasion of the Babylonians and lived long enough to experience it wrote about it. The grief that the mothers experienced at Ramah, was a preview of the grief that the mothers in Bethlehem experienced in the loss of their boys to Herod's slaughter squad. Now, the mothers of the children are

all connected in their grief at Ramah, weeping at their loss. But, there is something more that we need to remember. The Babylonian exile was the direct result of Judah's ongoing rebellion to God. The nation as a whole rejected God. However, there were amongst the nation people who were faithful to God, who nevertheless were swept up in the chaos and destruction. On a personal level, they experienced the collateral damage of the sins of others.

Matthew includes this to show how:

A. Christ experienced what his people endured.

Christ was the perfect representative for his people, and for all people because he faced every kind of temptation and trial that we face. The history of the Jewish people is a history of rejection and suffering. We should not be surprised then that the life of Christ on this earth was marked by rejection and suffering as well. When he presents himself as their king, no one could accuse him of not understanding their history or their plight. He lived it. He was hunted. He was hated. His existence was a story of escape. He knew sorrow. He was born in it.

B. Christ fulfills another OT promise.

When we think of Christ fulfilling a prophecy, we tend to think simply of how a prediction was made in the past now comes about. While that is true, Christ fulfills prophecy in an even greater way in that He actually accomplishes the very purpose of the prophecy. He is the ultimate fulfillment because he leaves nothing undone. This is a great example of one.

This prophecy comes from Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah, as I mentioned is known as the weeping prophet. I find this fascinating. Jeremiah is known as one of the major prophets. His book is large and most of it is rather depressing, although there are places of hope. This pattern of grief and mourning with a little bit of hope is completely reversed in chapter 31. In Jeremiah's 31st chapter he is looking forward to the day when the Jews will return from exile and will be back in the land. He writes about the joy that the future holds for his people. Speaking on behalf of God Jeremiah writes, *"Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness declares the LORD."* (13-14) It is an awesome promise designed to let his people know that although their grief is overwhelming and that even right now, they refuse all attempts from others to be comforted, one day, they will see that grief will not win. Death and mourning will not have the final word. Then Jeremiah says, *"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."* (15) This is the only verse of grief in the entire chapter. The very next verse encourages the mothers not to cry or weep because this will not be end. They will return. There is hope. Why

will grief not win? Because as Jeremiah 31 goes on to say, there is coming a day when God is going to establish a new covenant with his people. The people broke the old covenant and just about lost everything, including the land. But, God is going to make a new covenant. This one will not be laws written on stone, but his law written on hearts. But, in order to pull that off, there has to be a priest, like no other, a prophet like no other, a sacrifice that will end all sacrifices and a King, who cannot be dethroned. That is all part of Matthew's point. Here he is!

C. To show that Christ is the source of the New Covenant.

Here is the fascinating convergence of all this. Moses was the representative and prophet who established the first covenant with Israel. Christ, like Moses, escaped an attempt on his life, and like Moses was exiled from his people and like Moses and like Israel was called out of Egypt. Now, unlike Moses and unlike Israel he is going to do what they could not do. He is going to be the perfect leader, the perfect prophet, the perfect son, and in one person, he will be the perfect nation. And now we begin to see the picture. The Old Covenant, which was the law of Moses revealed our need. It revealed not only the sin in our hearts, but it revealed that it was impossible for us to achieve righteousness in the eyes of God. I sometimes joke that every year at this time I give up lent for lent, but the truth is, it is not really a joke. Regardless of what it was originally intended to be, for many people, lent is the attempt to earn God's favor through giving up a pleasure, or to the "more dedicated" making an actual sacrifice. In other words, my self-righteousness is going to earn God's favor. NO it won't!! Our self-righteousness is so corrupted by our self-centeredness that the only thing we do is add to our own condemnation. We need someone else's righteousness that is absolutely perfect because ours is totally polluted. That is what the OT law was intended to reveal. It was a mirror from God to hold up before the human heart so that we could see how corrupt we were. Instead, what Israel did was become proud of the fact that their mirror was shinier than anyone else and they stopped looking in the mirror. But, I digress.

Christ is the only one who could establish the New Covenant because he is the only one who could fulfill the Old one. Finally, Matthew puts this in here because it reveals the point of his gospel.

D. Behold, your King!

The reason why weeping will not win and grief will not endure is because the attempt on the life of Christ was not successful. No one can take his life. The only way he will ever die is if he lays down his life, which, he does. So,

2. How does this apply?

A. Christ is a threat to all pretend kings. (16-17)

Christ is the real king, which makes him a threat to all who presume to be king. It is not that he has an army or a political movement that threatens other kings. He is truth. He is righteousness. The very thought of standing in his presence is terrifying. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and John all fell upon their faces in fear for their lives. His righteousness is so intensely pure that all unrighteousness is exposed and all imposters revealed for what they are. In this text, there is a major contrast between the exceedingly joyful magi (10) and the exceedingly furious Herod (16). Both intense emotions were in response to Christ. The magi came to worship and they were exceedingly joyful. Herod came to murder and he was exceedingly furious.

Two Questions:

1) Who or what is your king?

This is a tough question? So, let me ask it in another way? What do you turn to when you are under stress? Food? Pleasure? Hoarding? Prescription drugs, pain killers, cigarettes, Isolation? Channel surfing? Sports? Money? Surfing the Internet? Dumping on social media? Who or what do you look to save you? Who or what do think you have to have in order to be successful? Power? (like Herod) Fame? Reputation? Influence? Respect? Love?

If the king that rules your heart is not the real king, then your king is going to be threatened by the real king because your king is an imposter. Besides, your king does a really lousy job of handling life, but you do not want to admit that and whenever someone points it out, and that which is ruling your heart is exposed, you become furious. Who or what is your king? Another way to find that answer is to answer the question, "what makes you the most angry or depressed?" What is it that rules your emotions?

2) How does your king compare to The King?

I recently talked with a lady who was told by her doctors that if she wanted to live at all, she had to stop smoking. This was not a warning in theory, this was in response to a serious disease process that was killing her. When I asked her what she was thinking, she said that she could not imagine how she could live without smoking. Her king, her god, her idol, was her cigarette. She depended on it for security, pleasure and to help her deal with stress. She looked to it, for life, and therefore could not imagine how she could live without it, when in reality, while she was sucking on it; it was sucking life right out of her. The very thing that was killing her was the very thing that she worshiped. That is what our idols do to us. We think that in order to be in control, to be calm, to have security that we have to have our idol, but all of the kings of this world are imposters. Look at the contrast that we see in Christ. Herod is like every idol of our hearts. He will kill anyone, including you, in order that he might stay in power. Compare that to Christ. Here is The King. He will die that you might be able to live.

There is only room for one king. Christ will not share his glory, nor will he share his throne with your idols. He will kindly, relentlessly and purposefully expose your idols so that you can see what you are trusting in.

B. Christ is the hope for all who grieve. (18)

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah...who told the mothers in Ramah that their grief would not have the final word. That one day, their grief would end because the New Covenant would forever secure God's people in such a way that they will live forever with him. Your grief is held by an unshakeable, immovable hope. Now, the mothers in Bethlehem joined with the mothers of their ancestors in weeping for children that were no more. But, while they were grieving the loss of their children, the one who would destroy the ultimate source of their grief had escaped.

Jesus escaped death, so that he could die, in the right time, in the right place, as the full and final payment, so that one day, all death will die, all sin will be removed, all rebellion will be gone, and we will forever be with Christ.

Today, we grieve, but one day, our faith will be made sight. Today, our grief is held by our hope. I could conclude the message right here. But, this text speaks to an issue that we all struggle with. It is perhaps the greatest tension that you will ever work through. This is not simply theoretical, this is a real issue.

3. Finally, the questions that no one wants to discuss.

Why did God plan this? Why did God allow this? What is the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the evil of man? How does it all work?

Honestly, I am not certain. There are two truths that are presented in this text that on the surface seem to stand in tension with each other. The tension is perceived on my part, but not on God's.

A. Truth #1 – Man is evil and is held accountable for his evil.

B. Truth #2 – God is Sovereign over all, even over man's evil.

Therefore, even though man is evil and he does evil things that are devastating, yet his actions unintentionally carry out what God had predicted, in fact determined from before hand. God knew that Herod was going to react this way. If God predicted this, then God knew it was going to happen. If God could tell Joseph in a dream to get Mary and Christ out of Bethlehem, couldn't he have told the other families? Why didn't he? The text does not answer this directly. What I can say is that the accomplishment of our salvation by the death of Christ was and is more important than saving the lives of these children. God allowed the evil of Herod to be the occasion for his Son to go to Egypt in order to fulfill his role in identifying with

his people. This does not make the evil of Herod any less evil. This does not make Herod any less responsible. Just because the death of Christ on the cross secured the pardon for my sin does not make Pilate's decision to have him crucified any less horrific. Man is evil and is held accountable for his evil. But, man at his worst, is still under the sovereign control of God. The question for us is:

If God allows evil to affect my life, can I still trust him?

- Yes, because the biggest threat to my life is not the evil that is outside of me, but the evil that is inside of me.

- Yes, because God is sovereign over the evil and has used and will use the evil of man to accomplish his glorious plan.

The greatest injustice was not Herod killing these children, it was Jesus being rejected by his own creation and dying on the cross.

The 1st coming of Christ did not mean that all circumstances were now changed. It meant that the only One who could conquer sin was here. In order to conquer sin, he had to endure it and be identified with it. God allows this evil to occur, in order that its defeat may be secured.

In the grief, we cry out and we should. We live in an evil world and we are broadsided by the evil in it and in us. But evil will not win. The empty tomb is proof of that. So, cry, if you must, and there are days when you must. But, if you are in Christ, your grief will end, and your joy will be forever.