A Voice in Ramah, Rachel Weeping For Her Children
Matthew 2:13-18

Christmas has changed forever. At least, for the families of twenty-six school children and teachers from Newtown, Connecticut.
They will never again celebrate this holiday season without crushing sorrow. A holiday which focuses on children – tree, decorations, family, happiness, gifts and feast – now becomes funereal ... initially literally, a seemingly endless series of funerals, and then metaphorically, a lasting well of grief so deep that it cannot be plumbed.
There are no words, no thoughts, to make this right. Not in this life. But hope remains. Because this is not the first Christmas marked by such grief.

Day 1: Exodus 1:15-2:10 The first (attempted) slaughter of innocents
In a time of famine, God’s people fled Palestine for the harvest fields of Egypt. There, under the blessing of God, they not only survived, but thrived. Four hundred years later, they were still in Egypt, now in vast numbers. They grew so many that their simple presence threatened the native populace and intimidated its government. The rulers of Egypt ordered their genocide. More precisely, infanticide: “If they give birth to a boy, kill him, but if it is a girl, let her live” (1:16).
It was in just this setting that God sent his people a deliverer. A young couple from the tribe of Levi gave birth to a son. A few months later, when he had grown too old to hide, they waterproofed a basket, set the child inside, and floated it on the edge of the Nile. In an irony which demonstrates God’s mockery of the powerful, it was the Pharaoh’s own daughter who rescued and raised the child who would one day free his people from her country’s oppression. In a way which no one could have anticipated, God overcame human barbarism and the slaughter of infants to save his people.

Day 2: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 Weeping in Ramah, and an answer to prayer
In the town of Ramah (also known as, Ramathaim) lived a woman named Hannah, loved by her husband, but childless. And desperate and depressed over it. Her husband loved her deeply, and was foolish enough to hope that would satisfy her. It did not.
Since the Lord is sovereign over all, in a sense, it was he who closed her womb. He, who caused her sorrow and weeping. He, who subjected her to family shame and jealous mockery. Yet she turned not away from her God, but toward him. In anguish and grief, she prayed for a son, vowing to give
him back to the Lord. “Go in peace,” the priest reassured, “May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

In due time, Hannah conceived and give birth to a son. She named him Samuel, ‘heard of God’, “because I asked the Lord for him.” And she offered a prayer – more a hymn of praise – to the God who “raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.” Though God required her to surrender her young child for ministry training in a residential program away from home, she would have the joy of seeing him become a prophet, spokesman for God, famous throughout the country, and installer of kings. God heard the tears shed in Ramah, bringing joy to a grieving woman, and guidance to his people.

Day 3: Jeremiah 31:15 Weeping in Ramah, under the judgment of God

The town of Ramah features again, centuries later in the history of Israel, in much more grievous circumstance. God’s people refused to worship him and exploited each other. He sent a series of prophets to urge repentance, to no avail. So finally he pronounced judgment. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the ancient superpower Babylon, marched in and destroyed the nation, its capital, and its temple. Thousands died. The remaining leadership was forcibly deported. The gathering spot for the transshipment of exiles was the town of Ramah.

Jeremiah captures the mood of the time: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.” ‘Rachel’, the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob from centuries before, conveys a double sense. She represents all mothers in Jeremiah’s time, weeping over their individual children, dead from famine and war. She represents the entire people of Israel throughout her history, weeping over the decimation of her populace through invasion and defeat in war. Under the judgment of God for her sin, her children – individual sons and daughters, as well as national populace and noblemen – have been slaughtered. Parents and nation can only grieve at the loss: loss of children, nation, and God.

This text does not imply that the recent murder of school-children in Connecticut is the consequence of sin, whether national or parental. In a fallen world, horror often strikes indiscriminately, not just heinous sinners but also cherubic children, not just the guilty, but also the innocent. But this text does remind us that such horrendous violence and senseless suffering has precedent, whether in the ancient towns of Israel, or in the gas ovens of Nazi Germany. In the midst of such horrors, God remains present among his people, grieving over their suffering.
Day 4: Jeremiah 31:1-14,16-20 Hope for the suffering

Judgment is rarely the final word of God, even under circumstances so severe as the Babylonian exile. To the grief-stricken comes a promise from God of a new day, a day of redemption and rejoicing: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears,” says the Lord, “[Your descendants] will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future.” God promises to bring his people back from exile, “He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd. For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord.”

Scripture does not ascribe all – or even most – suffering to the judgment of God on sin. But this text assures us that even when our suffering is due to our sin and the judgment of God, redemption and restoration are always available to the repentant.

How much more, when horror and suffering are not punishment for sin, but simply the toxic byproduct of life in a corrupt world: the promise of God is that his love for us persists, that redemption and restoration will come, and along with them, joy and rejoicing. It may not come in this life, but the promise of God is that it will come, because he will bring it. He did so in Jeremiah’s time. He can be trusted to do so in ours.

Day 5: Matthew 2:1-18 Weeping in Ramah, at the slaughter of innocents

Some of our Christmas carols pour saccharine sentimentality on the original events, and, in so doing, trivialize the robustness of the biblical text. Our carols sing, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,” or “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” No, it was not. Not in the original Bethlehem, no more than in Bethlehem today.

King Herod was a murderous regional despot. Early in his reign, he executed rivals to his rule; later, his own family members (including his favorite wife and his three elders sons!). So it is entirely in character that, misunderstanding the nature of Jesus’ kingship, and anticipating a threat to his throne, Herod lashes out. Warned in a dream, the magi took a different route home, so that they would not have to identify the child for the wicked king. Herod would not be outmaneuvered. Unsure exactly which child to kill, he slaughters all the infants in the village (probably somewhere around 20 children, in a town of around a thousand).

Rather than treacly carols and sweet bedtime stories, funeral dirges and hushed silence better capture the tone of the original Christmas. Empty arms ... bare cribs ... grief-stricken town ... bitter lamentation. This
may not fit our cultural preference for fluffy, bouncy optimism. But Scripture trades in ruthless realism, not in the superficiality of cheery bluster. And only a faith forged in the furnace of despair can withstand the heat of life in a corrupt and fallen world.

In middle-class America, we generally have sufficient comfort and safety to cocoon ourselves from the harsh realities of poverty, violence, and suffering. Only in occasional acts of random violence does hard reality intrude. But in many pockets within our own country – and in large tracts of the rest of the world – daily reality is every bit as grim as first-century Bethlehem in the weeks following Jesus’ birth (or in the wars of today). The Christmas story affirms that God knows what our world is like at its worst, because he sent his child, his only Son, into that danger.

**Day 6: Matthew 2:19-23  Death ... and life**

This closing episode in the Christmas narrative carries the seeds of what is to come. It conveys mixed emotions. On a positive note, Herod dies, and an angel of God appears to Joseph to invite him to return home: “Those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” But the passage is not entirely positive. As Joseph returns to Judea (where Bethlehem is located), he hears that the despot’s violent son is on the throne, and he is afraid. Warned in a dream, he moves north to the district of Galilee, and the town of Nazareth, where his young family can live in peace and safety.

So it seems.

But with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, we see irony between the lines of this text. “Those who were trying to take the child’s life” may be dead, but he is not safe. He will never be safe. Others will later try to take the man’s life. And they will succeed. Not because the latter murders are more clever than the former. Not because God was distracted or fell asleep, and failed to rescue the adult as he had saved the infant. But because this is the purpose for which God sent his child, his only Son into our world. To die. To be killed. In brutal execution, by trained sadists. For us. To atone for our sins.

Our God knows what our world is like. He entered that world at great cost to himself, and at great suffering for his Son. To save us, and because he loves us. In a time of senseless violence and unspeakable horror, we do not turn from God because he failed to prevent our children’s suffering. We turn to God because he took our suffering on himself and his Son. This is the meaning of Christmas: that God knowingly and willingly sent his Son, his beloved child, to die for us, that we might live with him.