

“Comfort for the Not-So-Silent Nights” (Matthew 2:13-23)

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Note: This sermon was prepared with my ministry context in mind. It may not work in your context nor is it offered to you as a model for addressing this in preaching. It is offered as an example of preaching to the abused and with abuse in mind.

These are troubling and uncomfortable verses (Matthew 2:16-18). Can't we skip over them, get on with the story, and forget this ever happened? Wouldn't it be much easier on their hearts (and ours!) if the Bethlehem bloodbath never took place? Don't you wish homicidal Herod never ruled as king in Judea, especially at the time of Jesus' birth? Don't you wish this jealous Judean monarch, who had been outwitted by the Magi who didn't report back where Jesus was, would've shrugged his shoulders in reaction, said something to the effect of, "Aw, shucks," and left it at that? Don't you wish the same warning which an angel gave to Joseph - to escape with Jesus and his mother to Egypt - would've been given to all the other parents in Bethlehem? But it didn't happen like that.

Instead Herod ordered the egregious executions of every toddler and infant boy in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. His order was carried out. We like to sing "Silent night, holy night," at Jesus' birth and imagine all really was calm, and all really was bright in Bethlehem. At times, it probably was. But on the night of Herod's massacre, all was not calm. All was not bright. On the nights that followed Herod's massacre, weeping shattered the silence of the night. Mourning darkened the light of the day. Do you know what nights and days like that are like? Can't we skip over this, get on with the story, and forget this ever happened?

Matthew 2:18 cries out, **"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."** Inconsolable laments and lamenters from the past are summoned to Bethlehem to join the inconsolable laments and lamenters of the present. Ramah was a town where Jewish captives assembled before they were deported to Babylon. As exiles were forced away, Ramah wept. Ramah's weeping is summoned to the scene to join the lament of these not-so-silent nights. Rachel was a wife of the patriarch Jacob. She died in the pain of childbirth near Bethlehem. She, also, is summoned to the scene to join the painful lament of these not-so-silent nights. We are summoned too. Romans 12:15 summons, **"Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn."**

Many of us know someone who has battled or is battling cancer. Maybe you are that person. We hurt to see someone we know and love hurting. We decry the suffering that this disease brings to the body and inflicts upon the soul. Now, consider this. Research indicates that the rate of child abuse is 10 times(!) the rate of cancer.¹ As many as one out three girls and one of seven boys will be sexually abused before turning age 18.² This would indicate that many of us know someone like that too. Maybe you are someone like that. We wish the silence of too many nights would never be shattered by bruising fists, abusing words, harmful neglect, violating rape, depressant substances. We wish that bullying, trauma, violence, the murder of children - including unborn children - would never take place. But sadly, it does. And often, the suffering is hidden away - hidden away by time or by shame or by not knowing what to do. Hidden away so that it might be forgotten, and yet it never is. The body, mind, and soul keep the

¹ Source: Blair L. Sadler, *The Summary Chapter—The National Call to Action—Moving Ahead*, 23 Child Abuse & Neglect 1011, 1016 (1999).

² Source: David Finkelhor, et al, *Sexual Abuse Survey of Adult Men and Women, Prevalence, Characteristics and Risk Factors*, 14 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 19-29 (1990).

score with memories that haunt. Anxiety that paralyzes. Pain that lingers. Trust that breaks. Relationships that suffer. Darkness that surrounds. Satan who laughs. Even views of God are skewed and questioned. "Why would God allow this pain?"

Can't we skip over this, get on with the story, and forget this ever happened? No, not yet! Let's not move too quickly that we ever fail to hear the mourning of Ramah, the tears of Rachel, the weeping of Bethlehem, and all those like them. Let's not move on too quickly that we fail to mourn with those who mourn and lament what needs to be lamented. We mourn with parents and children who've experienced firsthand the evil of violence, the grief of loss, and the pain of abuse. We mourn the pain others have inflicted in our lives and seek healing from our gracious God. We lament and repent of the pain we have inflicted in the lives of others. We seek, where it is possible and only by the change our gracious God can bring, to right what is wronged.

But now let's consider how our God doesn't leave us comfortless when facing troubling verses and uncomfortable issues. He who can take tears of sorrow and reaps songs of joy can and still does take sorrowful tears and turn them into joyful songs. He who scatters darkness with his wonderful light can and still does bring light to the darkest of times and the darkest of places. He who is the Resurrection and Life can and still does bring life, hope, and healing to the troubled and uncomfortable. So, what comfort does God speak for these not-so-silent nights? We will consider three truths of his comfort.

The first truth is that God takes sin and evil seriously. Let's look again at verses 14-15. Joseph was told to take Jesus and his mother and flee to Egypt. They did. And in hearing what happened to them, we learn what happened to Herod. **"So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod."** Let's make sure we hear this part of the story. That monster who gave orders to murder baby boys in Bethlehem, died as all sinners do. His evil-doing ended abruptly. Historical reports of Herod's death indicate that his death wasn't pleasant. He had ulcerated entrails and maggots filling, eating, and putrefying his organs. As unpleasant as his that may have been, it would pale in comparison of what was to come. Herod would stand in judgment before a just God. Hebrews 9:27 says of this appointment, "Man is destined to die once, and after to face judgment."

Did God show Herod the baby pictures of those he had slaughtered in Bethlehem? Did God play recordings of the parents' weeping and mourning all those not-so-silent nights in Bethlehem? Did God read Matthew 18:6 to him where Jesus said, "If anyone causes one of the little ones who believe in him to sin, it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea," and then say, "Herod, you are about to find out why a millstone would be better the better option?" We might not think the Bible's teaching about hell and of God's just and eternal judgment as teachings of comfort. For the unrepentant evildoer, they are most certainly not! But to the victim of the violence, to the victim of the abuse, to the victim of the rape, they are. Will God show angry aggressors and terrorizing torturers and violent offenders the pictures of those they hurt? Will God play recordings of the tears they (...that you...) cried at their expense? Nothing escapes God's notice. The evildoer will have to answer to him, and God will right what is wrong. And if you really want to see steam come from God's nose, pay attention to how he speaks in verses like Matthew 18:6 of how children are to be treated and raised. Pay attention to what he says about defending and looking out for the weak and vulnerable. God takes sin and evil seriously.

A second truth of comfort for the not-so-silent nights is that God gives hope in Jesus. Think back to the last point for a moment. We might wonder, "If God takes sin and evil seriously, why didn't he stop the

Bethlehem bloodbath? Why didn't he warn the other parents as he warned Joseph? Why doesn't he prevent the violence and stop all abuse today?" Here we must respond in humility, "I don't know." Maybe God had in mind to teach his mighty power over evil. Not only can he deliver from evil before it happens, but he can also deliver from and bring through evil even after it happens. Is that what he was teaching here? Maybe. But I don't know because God doesn't say. Job, the Old Testament believer, wanted to know why God allowed all the hardship in his life. God didn't answer why.

Does this mean God hasn't given us answers when we ask why? Far from it! Instead of having us concerned with why, he has focused on "how" and "who." The Psalmist picks up on this in Psalm 131, "I do not concern myself with matters too wonderful for me, but I have stilled and quieted my soul...O Israel, put your hope in the Lord." How will we get through troubling and uncomfortable issues? Three times in these verses (Matthew 2:13-23) the word "fulfilled" is mentioned. God made promises in his Word. God kept those promises of his Word. Others might not be trustworthy with their words, but God always is! Where does his Word direct us to find comfort? Where does his Word point us for hope? Our hope is in Jesus!

Isn't that the one Matthew's account and gospel keeps following with riveted attention? Victims of abuse, rape, or violence do not choose to be violated and hurt. Jesus did. In a love that astounds us, he chose the lowly Bethlehem birth, instead of a first-class nursery. He chose to endure the night flight to Egypt reliant on his foster father and birth mother to keep him safe. He chose to face every temptation and evil that Satan could throw at him. He chose to let human spit and angry spite run down his cheek and reputation as many abused have felt. He chose to let nails, thorns, and a spear pierce him through. He chose to bleed and die in the sinner's place. God spared his own Son from Herod's wrath in Matthew 2. But the time came when God didn't spare his own son but gave him up for us all on a cross. Jesus would not let Herod or anyone else say that they took his life. If Jesus would give up his life, it would be because he himself gave it up. And he did! For you. This is how great his love is for you! There is no amount of abuse or pain or violence that we could bear that Jesus hasn't already borne in his flesh. This is how great his love is for you! He can relate to everything we could lament and can help through everything we could lament. This is how great his love is for you!

The third truth of comfort for the not-so-silent nights carries on that hope to its completion. Because God gives hope in Jesus, the story of God's people doesn't end in tragedy, but triumph. We began with Matthew 2:18, a sad verse summoning us to lament. It cries, "**A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.**" Did you notice the quotation marks? These words were first spoken somewhere else, in Jeremiah 31:15. If we would turn there and keep on reading, the Lord tells people, "There is hope for your future" (31:17). What is God saying to these people who thought there would be no comfort? He is summoning them to hope. He is summoning us to see, "There is hope for your future because of Jesus!"

You may have much to mourn and lament in your life right now. But it won't always be this way! There is hope for your future because of Jesus! In the short-term, Jesus can take wounds and turn them into healed scars. Jesus can take what is ugly of our lives and transform it into a beautiful testament of his grace and support. Jesus can take the cross you carry for a time and lift the burden so that it is light. You may have much to mourn and lament in your life right now. But it won't always be this way! There is hope for your future because of Jesus! In the long-term, Romans 8:18 summons us to see, "I consider that our present sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). God summons us to see the glory that is ours in Jesus!

A woman who survived horrific abuse tried to capture this in a poem.³ She recognized that Jesus could identify with her suffering and she could identify with his glory. She wrote, “Abused, abandoned, battered, broken, emotions ridiculed, body penetrated, soul invaded, stripped, taunted, cursed, beaten, The Victim lay prostrate – on a cross. Robed in light-years of grace and glory, love incarnate now exalted, blessed, and lauded, praised and honored, the Victor sits beside his Father. Cherished, chosen, redeemed, radiant, gowned in perfect bridal splendor, cleansed and glowing, guilt-free, blameless, the bride will stand beside her bridegroom.” He will. He does. The pain will end. The gates of hell will not prevail. The story of God’s people doesn’t end in tragedy, but triumph. And the Comforter who comforted his people through all those not-so-silent nights will comfort them forevermore.

³ Source: “Suffering and the Heart of God”, Diane Langberg, pp. 99-100.