

“A Christmas Reality Check”

Romans 8: 16-26

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INTRODUCTION

My friends...good news...it's not over, not yet anyway! For according to church tradition and to the Christian calendar, the season of Christmas is not over. Now I know it feels like it's over. I know we're being told it's over. I realize that the Christmas trees are being put away or thrown out, and that the lights are coming down, and that the stores are no longer playing Christmas music. But yet in spite of all of this I tell you...Christmas is not over. As a matter of fact, according to Church tradition, today is only the fourth day of Christmas, the fourth day out of a total of twelve days. I'm sure you all sang the song at least once in the past month or so:

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me: **A Partridge in a Pear Tree**

On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me: **Two Turtle Doves**

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me: **Three French Hens**

On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me: **Four Calling Birds**

You see, this well-known song is a song that refers us back to the tradition of celebrating the Christmas season over a span of twelve days starting on the 25th of December and ending on January 5th. And today, December 28th, is the fourth day of the Christmas season. It's a day when the Church recalls not so much my true love giving me four calling birds, but rather remembers the story we read from Matthew, remembering the massacre of tiny baby boys in the small village of Bethlehem, the birth place of him who is the King of the Jews, the Lord Jesus Christ. In remembering the birth of THE baby boy, Jesus, the Church also remembers the death of the baby boys in Bethlehem.

Now many of us may find it hard to understand why the Church would want to take a whole day to remember and even celebrate this atrocious event in the midst of such a happy season. I mean, we get that it's a part of the story, as much a part of the story as the shepherds and the wise men, but still, why would Church tradition dedicate a whole day to the remembering of it? Well, I think the answer is simple and it's this: the reason why the Church has, and needs to focus on this story during this season, is because there's a very real tendency in us to lose sight of the darkness into which the Light of the world was born—we tend to lose sight of it either through neglect or through willful ignorance, and subsequently forget what should be our response to this darkness.

The text that's before us this morning is not a pretty story; as a matter of fact it's horrific. It's a story that we would like to pass over quickly especially during a season that's meant to focus on the joy of birth, not the sadness of death. Give us the manger, not the massacre. But it doesn't work that way. For you can't have one without the other. The manger and the massacre go together. Life and death are interlocked in the Christmas story. Simply put, the joy of the world can never be divorced from the pain of the world.

And that's the theme of this story. Jesus was born into a world that did not want him. He was born into a world filled with violence and brutality, a world of bondage and alienation, a world where weeping is more the norm than rejoicing. Christ was born into a groaning world, a groaning that he came to alleviate, but not through some 'abracadabra formula,' but rather through his taking the groaning upon and into himself, a groaning that he experienced so that the world might be healed. Jesus was born into dire days so that his day of healing might dawn. Dire days that the text before us refers to as the **DAYS OF HEROD AND THE DAYS OF WEeping**.

THE DAYS OF HEROD

First then, the days of Herod. *Matthew chapter 2* begins by telling us that Jesus was born '*In the days of Herod the king*' (v.1) This is shorthand for saying that Jesus was born into days of violence and brutality, violence and brutality that more times than not stemmed from fearful anxiety and suspicion. It's no secret that King Herod was an evil man. He was a bully consumed only with himself and his reign. Anytime he felt threatened he acted on it in decisively brutal ways. What we're told from history is that he had one of his own wives killed (he had ten), but it was the wife he was said to have cherished most, when she was suspected of plotting against him. He also had three of his sons killed so they wouldn't challenge his throne, killings that prompted Caesar Augustus himself to once say, 'I'd rather be Herod's pig than his own son.' Herod was so violent and narcissistic that he even gave an order on his deathbed to have some of the leading officials in the city of Jericho killed on the day he died so that he could be sure people would weep at his own funeral.

The days of Herod were dark days. They were days filled with the belief that life can be made secure through violence perpetrated, an awful violence that not only touched conspirators and enemies, but that touched even the little ones among us, even little vulnerable baby boys in an unnoticed and unpretentious town—the town of Bethlehem. Notice the progression of the story that's before us. In *verse 3* we see that Herod is *troubled* when he finds out from the wise men about the birth of a potential challenger. He's troubled because of the possible threat to his old and tired reign, troubled at the threat of it being usurped by

newness and vitality. But he's not only troubled, he's *deceptive*. He tells the wise men in *verse 8* to go and find the child so that he too can go and worship him...It's a lie crafted so that he might carry out what *verse 13* tells us was his real intention which was to *'destroy the child.'* But as we know from the story his plan failed and once it failed he, as we're told in *verse 16*, became *'furious and had all the male children under the age of two killed'* – killed in hopes of snuffing out the potential King of the Jews. Panic, Deception, Anger, and Violence. These were the days of Herod, days that were filled with abused power; abused power propelled by anxiety and acted out as brutality. It was these days into which Jesus was born, born so that one day he might be the recipient of this brutality in his own death on the cross. You see, Jesus came to take on the violence, and to do so not through his own violent means, or through the wielding of his sword, but rather through love, through suffering love that submitted itself to the violence of the cross. What we see in this story from *Matthew 2* is that even at Jesus' birth hung the shadow of the cross, of the shadow of a world that wanted to destroy Jesus. But here's the beautiful irony: Jesus came to be destroyed so that through his destruction on the cross he might give life to the world and so that he might undo the Herod mentality that's in us all to one degree or another. He was born into the days of Herod in order to undo the days of Herod through his own love displayed on the cross.

THE DAYS OF WEeping

Not only was Jesus born in the days of Herod, he was also born in the days of weeping. Now, in order for us to see this we have to look at the text carefully and listen to it attentively...and when we do we'll notice that Matthew gives us some Old Testament hints to help discern what he, and more accurately what God, is saying to us through these historical events that surrounded Jesus' birth. And here are the hints: EGYPT, MOSES and MOTHER RACHEL.

Notice how they work. When Joseph is warned by an angel concerning Herod's desire to kill the baby Jesus he is told to flee. Flee to where? To Egypt. Now isn't that odd? You see, the primary event in the history of Israel is their going away from Egypt, their exodus from Egypt. And now God, through the angel, tells Joseph to take Jesus into Egypt. In other words, there is to be a sort of reverse Exodus for Jesus. God had led Israel out of the place of bondage and now he sends his beloved son back into it. This is the first hint concerning the deep meaning that Matthew is trying to get across to us, his listeners.

The second is similar. Can you think of another place in the Bible where we see a tyrant-king killing baby boys in order to pacify his fear of being overthrown? It's in Exodus, right? For there we see the story of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, ordering his cronies to throw all the baby boys of Israel into the Nile River. It's

also in that story that we see God sparing one of those baby boys, a baby boy who would grow up and eventually be used by God to deliver his people out their place of bondage and into the place of freedom. As you know, that baby was Moses.

Egypt, Moses, and then finally the third hint, Mother Rachel. We see her in *verse 18 of chapter 2* where we read:

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.

Do you remember Mother Rachel? Mother Rachel was one of the matriarchs of Israel. She was married to Jacob, grandson of Abraham, and she ultimately, or we could say untimely, died as a result of giving birth to a son, a son whom she named Ben-Oni, which means, 'Son of My Sorrow,' (we know him as Benjamin because his father Jacob changed his name after his had mother died). This was Rachel's story, and because it was her story she became a prime candidate to think about and recall during times of grief and sadness. The prophet Jeremiah calls on her memory in light of the children of Israel being taken into exile by Babylon. As a matter of fact, this was the original context of *verse 18 of Matthew chapter 2* – Rachel weeping for Israel as they were taken off into exile, without any prospect of ever returning to their homeland. Then, much later, Matthew recalls her memory when he quotes *Jeremiah 31:15* in light of the young boys being slaughtered in Bethlehem. Notice how he puts it: *'Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more.'* Now, when Matthew says this fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah he wasn't saying that the slaughter of these baby boys was according to God's will, but rather that Jeremiah's prophecy was ultimately referring to Jesus coming into a world of weeping and lamentation, into a world where any prospect of comfort and hope seemed to have been dashed.

Now when you put together the Old Testament hints that Matthew gives this is what we get: In addition to Jesus coming into a world riddled with violence, he also came into a world filled to the brim with grief, grief that was the result of loss and alienation, of bondage and violence. It's into a world such as this that Jesus comes near, that he comes as our Immanuel, as the God who has come to dwell with us in all of our brokenness. What *Matthew 2* is telling us is that Jesus entered into our world of bondage, bondage not ultimately to Egypt but to sin. Jesus entered into this world climactically when he died on the cross for the sins of this people and as a result of his death he is now leading his people in a better exodus, for in Chris, God is leading all of his children out of the Egypt of their

sin and into the freedom of his life. Not only does he enter into our bondage he enters into our grief and groaning that's the result of that bondage. He enters into our groaning by himself groaning for us on the cross, by experiencing in his person deep loss and alienation. For you see, he is the one who ultimately takes the place of Mother Rachel, weeping and groaning for his children in his own death so that his children, you and I who belong to him, might be assured of the comfort to come as a result of his groaning death. He groaned so that we might be comforted.

The amazing thing about Matthew's quoting of *Jeremiah 31* is that the context isn't only about exile and loss, it's also about homecoming and restoration. After saying that Mother Rachel weeps and refuses to be comforted, God through the prophet tells Mother Rachel, and his people, '**Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears.**' In other words, God tells her that the tears will not last, that they won't last forever because restoration will come. As *Jeremiah* says in *chapter 31, verse 17*, '**There is a hope for your future.**' Christ came for that future, for yours and mine, a future of hope and healing, a future of peace and reconciliation. Jesus was born for this very thing and he accomplished this very thing in his own exile-like death and restorative-resurrection.

DAYS OF GROANING

He accomplished it and is even now applying it, working it into us and into his not-yet healed world. Jesus was born into a world bent on violence and death. He was born into a world of sorrow and grief. And these things have been dealt a death blow through his own death and resurrection, yet they still remain with us and will remain with us until he returns to his world to make all things completely and wholly new. It's for this reason that the apostle says in *Romans 8* that the days in which we now live are days of waiting and groaning, days that touch the heart of creation, that touch the heart of those of us who look for Christ's return, and that even touch the very heart of the Living God...waiting and groaning and doing so in hope, these are the days in which we now live.

Christmas, with it's focus on the manger and the massacre, on life and death, on violence, as well as forthcoming triumph is a call to us, a call to receive, a call to enter in, a call to notice and to feel, a call to pray and to hope.

Before us, around us, and even in us is a creation that's still filled with violence and grief and suffering. We live and work and play in a world that has been and is subjected to the futility of decay, to the futility of destruction as a result of humanity's rebellion—our rebellion—rebellion against the One who made us and set us up to be stewards of his good world. Spread before us day after day is a creation that groans for newness, that groans for something other than hatred

and violence...that cries out like a mother in labor for something other than abuse and greed. The world in which we live and breathe is a broken world, a world that is still plagued by the days of Herod and the days of weeping. The questions are: Do you notice? Do you see? Do you care?

Romans 8 tells us that the creation groans. But, it also says we, the followers of Jesus, are to be groaning as well. We are to be groaning inwardly as we wait for the day when Christ will fully renew us and his creation. My friends, our place in this groaning world is one of solidarity, not one of sitting on the sidelines or of building a fortress around us so that the groaning does not affect us. No. We are called to be in the middle of the groaning. We are called to notice it fully and feel it deeply.

- We are to notice, feel and grieve the pain of loss in our world and in our own lives
- We are to notice, feel and grieve the ugliness of violence in our world and in our own hearts
- We are to notice, feel and grieve the greed in our world and in our own hearts

When was the last time you truly noticed the pain of the world, the pain of say Iraq or Afghanistan, or the pain of the current economic fears, the pain of our own city...or noticed the pain of your neighbor? And yes, even noticed the pain of your own heart? When was the last time you groaned about it in the presence of God? These are the questions of *Romans 8*. These are the questions of Christmas, of the Christmas message that never separates the manger from the massacre...that never separates Jesus' birth from his death...that never separates joy from groaning.

Christmas, when seen rightly, opens our eyes to the reality of our broken world. Not only to the brokenness that's out there but that's in here as well—in our own hearts and lives. Christmas calls us to groan and grieve, to enter into and feel the pain of our hurting world. What's amazing is that as we do this we discover that what we're actually doing is entering into the very heart of God himself...that we're entering into his groaning. For you see, not only does *Romans 8* say that the creation groans, and that we the church groans for it and within it, but that even the Spirit of the Living God groans. He groans in us and through us as we **pray** and **serve** and **hope**. God is under-girding and upholding all of our grief and all of our groaning and his groaning. We can groan over the ugliness of our broken world and of our own broken lives only because God has groaned over it first. For...

- It was his groaning that led him to send Jesus to restore us and his creation in the first place

- It was his groaning that was expressed perfectly and that accomplished fully our salvation in Jesus
- And it's groaning that is even now carried out by his Spirit within us

We are to groan over the not-rightness of creation and the not-rightness of our own lives because we belong to the God who has groaned first. We groan because he first groaned over us.

What a strange and difficult calling! It's not a calling we normally want to think about during Christmas. Give us the joy, not the groaning. Yet when we're given a Christmas reality check we begin to realize the two can't be separated. Christ came to bring us joy, but he did so through groaning. Because of Jesus the fullness of our joy is coming, yet the road to this joy lies along the path of groaning. The call of Christmas is to rejoice in the truth that Christ has come and Christ will come again AND it's also the call to join in the groaning of God over his not-yet fixed world, trusting and believing that God is somehow using these groanings to bring his healing to the world—for as we're told in ***Romans 8.28*** God is using all things to accomplish his good purpose and all things certainly includes our groaning.

My friends, Christmas is the call to join with Mother Rachel in grieving over the violence of the world and over all that is ugly within God's good world. But, unlike Mother Rachel we don't refuse to be comforted, rather we receive God's comfort, a comfort that comes in midst of groaning, that comes because the Spirit of Jesus dwells in us, and because the hope of our full salvation and the complete renewal of his creation is sure. It is sure because the baby came. It is sure because the baby was rescued. And it sure because the baby grew up and gave up his life willingly for the life of the world.

And so therefore we, on this fourth day of Christmas can rejoice, we can rejoice because our true love has given us, not four calling birds, but rather he has given us the assurance that he will make things right; he has given us the joy of his presence; he has given us his own Spirit to help us and sustain us as we wait patiently for him to finish what he has started, and he has given us the capacity to groan as he himself groans, groaning that is not in vain but that God marvelously uses to heal his broken creation. Praise him and thank him for he has given you marvelous gifts this Christmas season. Amen.