

## Watered with tears

Menno Mennonite Church

January 3, 2020

**Purpose:** To temper celebration with the reality of a world that is still often watered with tears

**Message:** As people of hope, we celebrate the coming of the lord, knowing full well that our world is still one of trouble.

**The Big Idea:** We must cry—in both joy and out of grief and injustice—for our reality of God with us to be real.

**Texts:** *Matthew 2: 13-23 [I will read]*

**Synopsis:** This text is kind of like drawing the short sermonic straw. This is not what we want to hear the day after Christmas. Gone is the charming children's story, instead we are thrown back into a globe of genocidal rage being carried out on the most innocent of society. It is enough to weep. And weep we should; there is much to mourn. But we always need to understand why we weep and allow ourselves to weep both for joy and for sorrow and injustice. Is this cry one of grief alone, or the on-going cry of the world for justice to be heard yet again? We celebrate the coming of Immanuel even in the midst of knowing those areas where God's presence still remains a crying need.

**Matthew 2:13-23** <sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." <sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." <sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: <sup>18</sup> "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." <sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." <sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, <sup>23</sup> and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

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I am just curious: how about a quick show of hands—for how many people is this the first time that you have heard this text as a sermon. I am guessing it is few and far between. For the record, I chose this text. It is part of the lectionary for this particular Sunday, though not for this year's cycle. Even when it does come up our most common response to this dud of a white elephant gift—the one that keeps getting slid of on the unfortunates with the good presents—is to remember that we are not at all tied to this lectionary thing at all, embrace our radical reformation roots and say “so there”. I have been literally dared before to take up this text before. It's the nativity scene turned perversely on its heads, recreating Pharaoh of Israel's flight FROM Egypt with epic detail—no small part of the irony that the Matthew audience was no doubt being primed for.

Who wants this kind of whiplash when you have the magi and all the rest to work with? Yet, here it is—part of the story, part of the coming all the way. As I said, better to walk around it, or just give a basic nod to existence and get on with the more familiar and friendlier fare we have on hand. Because that is what we do with stories like these. Christmas may well be over, and after today we cannot reasonably hold ourselves to be on holiday time any longer, but that doesn't mean that we want to deal with the tearful story from the past, especially one as complicated and depressing as all this.

Its not like we aren't used to doing this. We are far from at a loss to name the points at which we must confess the brokenness of the world. As horrific as Harrod's rampage is it is far from unique even in our memories, let alone in the long histories of the world. We don't do well with weeping, and most of the time we keep the disappointments of life well hidden. These are big impossible things to deal with, and by in large when the weeping starts is about when we become uncomfortable. When there are tears—our own or others—we find the quickest possible way to stop it all. There, there; it's alright; Don't cry, or doing the strangled man cry that many of us know so well. Tears are to be avoided, even those of joy, lest we be seen as silly, weak and out of place. One of the greatest gifts that you can give someone is to sit with them and simply allow them to cry, never mind how messy things get along the way. But that is rare. We far prefer to fix than to feel, or to witness the feelings of others. I know that is my inclination, one that I often have to fight to remind myself to allow people around me to feel. That level of vulnerability is not natural for us.

And we do the same for God. We transfer our notions about pain and the ways to deal with it—to hide it and make it better—on to God. We assume that God is a lot like us because it is rather convenient to have the maker of heaven and earth think, look and act a lot like us. We so desperately want God to share our values even more than we want to share in God's. We stand at a loss to understand why God does and does not do that which we would wish. We have the problem of the trying to deal with the stuff that happens and our notions of God. Out of this we come with our basic, easy equation: since God cannot be part of the bad, stuff of the world, there God cannot be. If there are tears being shed, we reason, we might not know why it is the way it is, but God was otherwise occupied and we try to move on. Yet one of the hardest things that is a part of the life of faith is trying to reconcile the goodness of God with the pain of the world. And I think this is a story that serves us to consider in thinking about how that might work out I the end.

Because say what we will about God and around God, we have to say the most obvious thing of all; so obvious that it often is left unsaid. That God is not us. God is separate from us and while we can know God and experience God, no experience or revelation will encompass God, give complete insight in the rationales of God's responses or how God feels about anything. The Good news of this story, I think, is that God comes into the crying shames of the world. Literally the savior of the world is still endangered by the whims of a power-crazed king, and God still comes anyway. Indeed it is this petty jealousy that marks the power of the new born king; after all monarchy has always been that way—when in doubt, kill the heir to the thrown. But God still comes. And in that, this is a utterly essential Christmas story. God's presence does not require a calm, silent night, but can also endure the lamentable idiocies of the world and the ways of it, and God still comes. Not merely within an extraordinary child long ago—God with us at one point in human history—but rather within the new paradigm of human history inaugurated in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ which started in these humble, messy circumstances of long ago and continues still, even now, even here in our messy, lamentable, painful realities of the world. The word made flesh, as John puts it, places these circumstances of God coming to us into the context of a messy world as a new state of being, come what may. I will never get tired of declaring this awesome, confounding Truth, even as I will be the first to confess that the world is a mess; that our lives are messier still.

It was a mess then and a mess now. Ours is not the only time where things seem challenging and bleak. It does not bode well to have the messiah on the run from the earliest months of his existence. From the get go, this incarnation of God with us by definition changes how we think, what we expect from God in our presence. We often want a God who makes it better, who comes in and fixes the world as it is. We want that because we want the crying to cease. We want to stop the crying now. We want the injustice to stop. We want the God of the universe to get off his butt and fix all that we see wrong around us. Not a very reverential thought, I'll grant. But it is honest. It is what we all feel, and no doubt from time to time have to yell heavenward. Make it stop. Dry the tears, not in the by and by, but now. Bring down the tyrants now. Beat the weapons of destruction into pruning hooks already. Cure the illness now--once and for all. Yet seldom does it change. We don't know why that is. I do not pretend to stand here and tell you that this is fair, or that it does not make us angry, or that I can justify why bad things happen in such copious quantity to good people. I do not have that answer and I refuse to pretend otherwise in the name of appearing as though I have achieved insight into this.

Yet, God is still with us. God is still here. God does dry the tears of injustice and loss in this world, not by grabbing a cosmic tissue and asking us to blow, but rather accompanying us into the mess, and, I think, crying right alongside us. Sometimes, there is transformation as things are made new—not the same, not restoration as if the history didn't happen or didn't matter—but new in the ways that gives life where it is least expected. God loves us enough not to simply be some wish granting genie in the sky, but to be the loving one who comes and cries with us, holding us in our grief, knowing that many times we have to cry for our world to make sense. The meaning of the incarnation is that God breaks down the barrier between here and there, between I and thou, and simply comes and is with us, living and dying with us, crying for justice with us, lamenting the pain of loss and grief with us, seeing all that is wrong with us and being brought to tears, and hoping and dreaming along with us of a world forever changed. And that makes a difference. That makes a huge difference.

What's more there is no power in the world that was going to stop that. And that too is what this text teaches us. There is a classic scene in the *Grinch who Stole Christmas* where the Grinch, having deprived all the Who's down in Whoville all the joy of Christmas stops to hear the wail of despair for the injustice he has inflicted upon them. Of course, we know that what makes his heart grow three sizes that day is that despite the way things are, despite the crying

injustice of it all, Christmas still comes. He could not stop Christmas from coming, despite the worst he could do. Neither could Herrod stop Christ from coming despite putting him on the run and committing the unthinkable in the process. Neither can the world stop God from being present, despite the worst it can dish out. God is not Santa Claus whose favor depends on naughty or nice, but rather comes to be the joy of the world.

Our tears do not and cannot stop God from coming into the world; it was not so then, and it will not, cannot, shall not prevent God from coming to be with his beloved creation here and now either. It may not be in the ways we desire, or the ways that would make our lives easier, but it does not mean that the promise of Christmas is invalidated because the world is as it is, or that Christmas loses its meaning because there are tears in our world. Rather, when we remember the coming of Immanuel, of God with us, in all things, all times, and all scenarios, even in the midst of our tears, we can dare hope despite our grief, persist despite the setback, be sustained for the changing of the world despite the pain that is so often its character, knowing that the kingdom is coming, and God is with us and among us now and forever more, even the midst of our tears. And that is a Christmas miracle we can sustain throughout the year.

May it be ever so. Amen.