

Holy Innocents, 2008

Text: Matthew 2:13-18

Title: What do you say?

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What do you say to a parent who has lost a child? What do you say to a mother whose child is stillborn? What do you say after someone miscarries? What do you say to parents who have had an infant die of SIDS, or whose baby is born with a birth defect and isn't given long to live? What do you say to the parents of a child who has been the innocent victim of a drive-by shooting?

What do you say to parents who have prayed and waited and longed for a child, who have experienced the joy of their child's birth, only to have their whole world fall apart when that child is taken from them?

Thankfully, I have not yet had to deal with any of these circumstances, but other pastors have told me that burying a child has been one of the most difficult things they have had to do.

When a child dies, it is a pain sharper than most. There is something gut-wrenching when a child dies. Death is always painful. We mourn for those who die at 100 as well as those who die at 50. But when a child, when a baby dies, the pain, the grief, the sorrow is particularly deep.

What is most horrible is when the child is an innocent victim of violence. When someone kills a child on purpose.

The thought of the thousands of lives lost through abortion should bring you to tears. When you hear of the children who caught in the crossfire of war, it makes you sick. When you see pictures of children dying of starvation, malnutrition or preventable diseases, it's hard to find the words to express your sadness.

We live in a cruel, violent world. And when that violence is directed towards the most innocent and vulnerable, it's hard to imagine that hate, evil, and depravity run so deep.

Today's gospel lesson is hard to hear. Christmas was just three days ago. The words to Silent night, Away in a Manger, and Joy to the World are still in our ears. We still have the decorations and trees and lights up. We'd like to hold on to the warm, happy feelings for at least a few days longer.

But today's gospel brings us crashing back to earth. The joyful Christmas story with the angels and the shepherds and the magi is interrupted by the cries and wails of mothers weeping for their children, and refusing to be comforted.

These mothers are given the name "Rachel."

Rachel was the wife of Jacob. She was the mother of his two youngest (and favorite) sons: Joseph and Benjamin. The descendents of Joseph were the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. They lived in the north of Israel. They were attached by the Assyrian army and taken away in 722 BC. The descendents of Benjamin lived in the south of Israel. They were attached by the Babylonian army and taken away in 586 BC.

Rachel's children were gone, taken away from her into exile. This is why she weeps. Her children are gone, and no human can comfort her. The only words that can bring her comfort are the words of the Lord.

This is what the LORD says:

"Restrain your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded,"
declares the LORD.
"They will return from the land of the enemy.

So there is hope for your future,"
declares the LORD.
"Your children will return to their own land.

Although things seem hopeless now, the Lord promises Rachel that her children will return and she will see them again.

In the midst of grief, no human words are of any value. Any words that you could come up with, only ring hollow in the ears of one who is in mourning. The only words that can bring true comfort are the words of the Lord. Only his words are sure and solid.

The Lord promises Rachel that her children will return. He promises to bring them back. Only the Lord can make such a promise. Only the Lord can bring Rachel's children back from exile, back from the dead, and return them to her loving arms.

A few verses later the Lord says:

Is not Ephraim my dear son,
the child in whom I delight?
Though I often speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I have great compassion for him,"
declares the LORD.

Ephraim was the son of Joseph, the grandson of Rachel. The Lord begins by asking, "Is not Ephraim my dear son?" The Lord took the people of Israel as His own children. They belonged

to him, and he promised to take care of them. He promised Rachel that He still remembered her children and had compassion on them.

These words are for mothers who mourn as well. Their children are the Lord's children, children of the heavenly Father. They belong to Him, and nothing can change that fact- not sickness, not cancer, not SIDS, not even death.

They became the Lord's children through Holy Baptism, when He claimed them as His own, as He wrote His name on their forehead. They are among the 144,000 whom John sees standing in heaven.

And even the children who do not make it to the font have the prayers of their parents and the whole church commending them into the Lord's care. They are his; they belong to Him.

When death steals away a young life, the only words that bring true comfort is that the child belongs to the Lord, and they will see each other again. This is the Lord's sure promise.

You may ask, then, why does the Lord allow such tragedies to happen in the first place? Why does the Lord allow the Herods and Hitlers and Husseins of this world to come to power? Why did the Lord allow the babies of Bethlehem to die? Why does the Lord still allow abortion to continue?

Part of the answer is that the Lord has given us free will, and we can choose to do evil. Evil is the easy choice, the choice of least resistance. It was easier for Herod to just kill everyone than to acknowledge the son of Galilean peasants as the rightful king. It's easier to take revenge than to forgive. It's easier to hurt than to help. It's easier to do nothing than to get involved.

We may not be guilty of infanticide, but we find other ways to hurt and harm our neighbors. We can be thankful that the Lord is slow to anger and that He forgives even the worst of our offenses.

But that sort of answer does little to satisfy those who mourn. If God has the power to stop such things and thwart evil plans, then why doesn't He?

There's no answer to this question, because the Lord doesn't give us one. Sin and violence and death continue. We can't say why God does what He does. To do so would make ourselves into God. He doesn't have to answer to us for what He does or does not do. We can only say what God has already spoken to us in His word.

What we can say is that one day sin, violence and death will be put to an end. There will be no more mourning, no more weeping in heaven. There will be no more need for comfort, because we will be gathered together in God's glorious presence.

We don't know when that day will come. We've been praying throughout Advent for the Lord to come quickly. We know He hears our prayers, but we also know that He will return in His own time.

And the Lord is with us until He appears in glory. That is the message of Christmas. God comes to be with us- not just in the good times, but also in the bad. God comes to be one of us and to share in our sorrows. Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows.

God Himself knows your pain and your grief. God himself experienced it. You see, God had a Son, too. Jesus was His name, the little baby you've been singing about all week. He was completely innocent. He never hurt anyone, but was a sweet, kind boy. He helped those in need, and had compassion on them all.

But He was brutally murdered. He was arrested in the middle of the night, beaten up, falsely convicted, made fun of, beaten again, humiliated, tortured and killed. God watched His own Son suffer and die.

He knows what it's like. He's been there.

Christmas can be a difficult time for many of us. We are reminded of friends and family who aren't with us this year.

Christmas is not about warm, fuzzy feelings, toys that break, food that is eaten, decorations that are packed up and put away.

Christmas is about a person. The very Son of God. He was born for you to die for you, to bring you peace and comfort, and to bring you through this vale of tears, this valley of the shadow of death.

What do you say to someone who has lost a child, a spouse, a parent, a friend?

In the midst of your grief, the Lord comes to bring you comfort. You will see your loved ones again. If they belong to the Lord, He will remember them and take care of them. And the Lord will be with you, too. He knows your pain.

What do you say to parents who have lost a child? Our closing hymn is a good place to start.

Neither life nor death shall ever
From the Lord His children sever
Unto them His grace He showeth
And their sorrows all He knoweth.

Though He giveth or He taketh,
God He children ne'er forsaketh;
His the loving purpose solely
To preserve them pure and holy.