

A Christmas Eve Meditation

Joy Comes in the Morning

Our Christmas this year is not only marked by those who will gather with us tomorrow but by those whose absence will be equally as felt. In reality, the birth of Jesus, which Christmas celebrates, has always been marked by lament and joy.

1 - Several weeks ago, I spoke about the first time Bethlehem is mentioned in the Bible. As Jacob and Rachel make their way from Haran, Abraham's hometown and the birthplace of her only other son, Joseph, Rachel dies as she delivers Benjamin and names him, Ben-oni, son of my sorrow.

Genesis 35:19-20 - ¹⁹ So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰ and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. ²¹ Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

And so it is that the first time we are introduced to Bethlehem is with sorrow. But it won't be the last.

2 - One thousand years later the children of Israel gathered near Bethlehem in a city called Ramah, to be transported to Babylon and Jeremiah wrote -

Jeremiah 31:15 - A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

3 - And 600 years later, two years after the birth of Jesus, it is not a foreign power but Israel's own king, Herod who sent his henchmen to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus and kill him. He isn't found, but every child under the age of two in Bethlehem die in Herod's attempt to hold his throne. And once again, Rachel's sorrow is recalled, this time by Matthew, to describe the loss.

Matthew 2:18 - 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.

How many fathers in Bethlehem remembered the words of their earlier king, David, also born in Bethlehem, as he lamented the loss of his son and said, "*I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me*" (2 Samuel :23)

These are the three occasions when Bethlehem is recalled with sorrow. But what about Christmas joy?

First: Rachel

- 1 – Rachel does die and names her son, Ben-oni = son of my sorrow.
- 2 – But Jacob renames him, son of my right hand.
- 3 – And he is born, near Bethlehem, in the land promised to his grandfather.

4 – He is one of the recipient of that promise, *“I will make of you a great nation...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen 12:2-3).

Second: Israel

Only one verse after Israel’s weeps over their deportation and the loss of their children, God says,

Jeremiah 31:16-17 - Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears.... declares the LORD.... ¹⁷ There is hope for your future... and your children shall come back to their own country.

Third: Jesus

Since the Fall, there is no joy unassociated with sorrow, or happiness without loss.

Before Rachel had Joseph, her own sister, Leah had given Jacob several sons and eventually Rachel cried to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Genesis 30:1). And she did...anyway...and so shall we all.

One Christmas will be the first Christmas without us. Unlike Rachel, our hope does not lie in our children or our children’s hope in us.

Our hope is in a single child who compensates for Rachel’s loss and Israel’s loss, under both Babylon and Herod.

When the angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and look for a *“baby wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:12), they knew exactly where to look.

Under the tower of Eder, where Rachel had been buried, is where shepherds kept the sheep destined for Temple sacrifice and where, when a lamb was born, it was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger – a concrete feeding trough – for safekeeping and to insure it met the “unblemished” standards God required of a sacrifice.

Here, where once a mother died giving birth to a child, another mother gives birth to the ultimate child and it is, according to the angels, *“good news of great joy”* (Luke 2:10).

Psalm 30:4-5 & 11-12 - Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. ⁵ For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.... You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, ¹² that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

Like Rachel, OT Israel and those parents in Bethlehem we long for that promised day and it is ours in Bethlehem’s babe!

Addendum:

Even the birth of Jesus is not without sorrows -

Simeon to Mary at Jesus's circumcision – "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)...*" (Luke 2:34-35).

And Christ himself endured his sorrows....

Hebrews 12:2 – "*...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross...*"