

Where is God When I Weep?

Pastor Jim Bangsund

Rachel ... weeping for her children. How soon the green and red lights of Christmas have dimmed to the deep blues of grief and mourning. The wise men have just left. From them, King Herod has heard of one “who has been born king of the Jews” and this disturbs the paranoid Herod enough that he commands the slaughter of all male children two years old and under – a slaughter which Matthew sees as the final fulfillment of the prophet Jeremiah’s words many years before: “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” (Jeremiah 31:15).

Yes, Rachel has wept before. We first meet Rachel in Genesis as the wife of Jacob; and her great great great grandchildren became the northern ten tribes of Israel – the tribes later brutalized by the Assyrian assault and exile. A century after that event, Jeremiah speaks of that time of terror and great mourning as if the nation’s ancient matriarch herself were weeping. Now, after Jesus’ birth another seven centuries later, Rachel weeps again as her descendants once more suffer slaughter, this time by Herod. We hear this text every three years on this first Sunday after Christmas, but the question of “Why?” comes up much more frequently. For each of us. Why? Often, “Why, O Lord?” Or “Where were you, God?”

Where is God when I weep? It seems a strange time of year to be asking that question – though every year at this time there are those who ask it. Christmas is an especially difficult time for those who have recently lost spouses or children ... or jobs ... or hope. And when we ask these questions, we are not alone. The Bible itself is not shy about asking such questions ... at times challenging God with them. God even affirms our doing so – more on that in a moment.

Rachel weeps for her children. So did Job, a man described as good and righteous in the opening words of the book bearing his name. In the first

chapter of that book, in spite of Job's goodness, his seven sons and three daughters are killed. Job at first responds, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." But in the rest of the book, Job raises that question of "why do bad things happen to good people;" and, yes, he even eventually challenges God on this matter.

Steve Jobs asked such questions. Did you know he attended confirmation classes in one of our local Lutheran congregations many years ago? But it was the question of the suffering of children which so troubled him that he wandered away from his earlier faith.

I wish Steve had pushed the question. As I said, God encourages that. You can cry out even in anger against God; he's big enough to take it. Back to the book of Job again. Oh, there was a point when Job got uppity with God, but when all was said and done we find God affirming him for pushing the hard questions even when the answers ended up being beyond him. God so wants to build his relationship with you that he encourages your bold challenges even – perhaps especially – in those situations that defy our ability to understand.

The Psalms are filled with questions and challenges. In Psalm 44, the psalmist cries "Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever." We may flinch and ask, "Is it proper to challenge God in this way? Why was such a psalm included in the Bible?" The rabbis who collected the psalms said, "We include these psalms ... because we, as God's people, do ask such questions."

Rachel weeps for her children. So does the book of Lamentations – written by one who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem, its people and its temple. The book ends on a dark question.

"Why do you forget us forever, why do you so long forsake us? Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old! Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you exceedingly angry with us?"

With those final words, the book ends. And, yes, the rabbis kept that one, too.

We struggle to make sense of it all. We ask, What did I do wrong? What did my suffering friend do wrong? Jesus says the answer isn't to be found in such questions. When people mentioned Herod slaughtering a group of Galileans, Jesus replied:

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

In order to understand, we need to go back to the beginning. “In the beginning ...;” that's where it all starts, of course. That episode of Adam and Eve and the snake and the tree – which we call “The Fall” – teaches us a number of things – but two in particular stand out. First, we are where we are because of human rebellion against God. God said don't and they did – and we still do, today. But, second, the results of the Fall are seen not just in us but in creation itself.

Yes, what we do has an impact upon the world in which we live – this is becoming more and more apparent each year. But it goes even deeper than that – bone deep – in ways both mysterious and profound. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, he speaks of the Fall involving what sounds almost like a twist in creation – such that, at present, not everything that happens in the world is God's will. A twist that will one day be untwisted in what the Bible calls “the day of the LORD” or “the world to come.” Thus, Paul looks in hope for that day when, as he writes:

the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.

A twist in creation Think about that: a twist in the created order such that not everything that happens in the world today is God's will. Indeed, bad things do happen to good people – and good things to bad people. Elsewhere, the New Testament speaks in terms of what is sometimes called a “theology of the cross.” We followers of Jesus

should expect not a rose garden but, rather, often to be treated no better than our Lord himself. And so, in this age, too, Rachel weeps.

Rachel weeps, and yet there is hope in the weeping, as the knot of questions and doubt begins to untangle. Job weeps, but at the very center of that book of questioning there lies a sudden affirmation, “I know that my redeemer lives!” Especially in the Old Testament, major points are often placed at the center of things. The book of Lamentations ends on that dark question “or have you utterly rejected us?” and yet in the center of that book lies one of scripture's boldest statements of faith:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

Such declarations of trust and hope, in the literal midst of the worst life can offer, come only from God's Holy Spirit. And what about us? Where is God when *we* weep? My friends, we have an even clearer hope than did the writers of Job and Lamentations and the Psalms. We know so much more, living on this side of Christmas, on this side of the Cross. God speaks to our weeping both by giving of himself as well as giving us one another as we await that grand finale of which Paul spoke in Romans 8 – the “untwisting” of creation, as it were.

Some of you may have seen a drama from some years back, occasionally performed by youth groups and titled “And Let God.”

There are eight roles, seven of them very clear: **a girl about to enter college** who, because of pressure, has cheated on tests and plagiarized papers to get in. **A mother**, very active in civic and social groups but who spends more time away from home than at home. **A boy** who often succumbs to peer group pressure. **A lonely girl**, jilted by her friends and who has turned to drugs. **A man who has recently lost his only son** and, embittered and angry, has turned to alcohol ... and so on. The eighth figure is rather mysterious. He sits behind a table and has the image of a judge ... yet is not one. He doesn't accuse or condemn and yet brings people to reveal themselves. He is not divine, and yet seems to read people like a book. His role title is “The Mirror.”

As the drama proceeds, each figure is called forth and gently examined. Gently, but even so the process is uncomfortable because it is so revealing. The tension builds throughout until finally one of the characters cries out ... and is then joined by the others:

Judy: ... it's not fair. You don't understand. It's not *our* fault these things just happen. *We* can't help it.

Jim: *We* didn't make things the way they are. (The Mirror begins to leave at this point.)

Judy: You're not listening! You! Come back here! For the sake of God, listen to us.

Jim: *That's* whose fault it is. *He's* the One who doesn't understand. Let *God* come here and listen to us.

Judy: It's not our fault. Let *God* know what it's like to have a church full of hypocrites.

Jim: Yeah, let *him* know what it's like to have everyone expecting you to succeed. Let *God* feel the pressure of society.

Judy: Why doesn't someone dare God? Let *him* know what it's like to have your friends call you a straight.

Jim: And have *God* live in a house where nobody understands.

Judy: Let *him* know what it's like to be lonely and unwanted.

Jim: Yes, and let *God* lose his only son.

Suddenly, all are silent; the lights dim; the curtain goes down

Where is God when I weep? The answer this drama gives is not an intellectual answer, not a philosophical rumination, but rather a simple, sober reflection that both is true but also deepens the mystery: Where is God when I weep? God, whom we call Father, is the same place he was when his own son cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – quoting one of those questioning psalms.

The cross may not at first give us the answer we want, but it does give us the answer we need. Jesus entering our world gave a foretaste of God's ultimate intent to "untwist" creation – of his final answer to our suffering and anguish and weeping as he healed the sick, fed the hungry, and forgave sin. Jesus' death on the cross showed the depth of God's commitment to untwisting a creation in which his will is not always

done today; his resurrection gave the proof of an assured future outcome. Why did God let my spouse or child die? Why doesn't he fix things right now, right today? Like those other questioners we have heard in the Bible, we find there are questions for which we don't come away with simple answers. But we do come away with assurances that finally, ultimately, the hurtful powers of sin, death, and Satan will be overcome. We come away with the promise, first given by the prophet Isaiah and then again in John's revelation at the end of the Bible, of a new heavens and a new earth. Of the coming day when God "will wipe every tear from [your] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away."

And there is more. Where is God when I weep? First – as we have heard – God gives of himself. Second, God gives us one another. And here is where we ourselves too often get in the way. You see we – as Americans but even more so as Silicon Valley folks – are rather "odd man out" historically and culturally. From the beginning, God has said, "It is not good that man should be alone." And, throughout history and throughout most of our world today, people have lived in much closer community than you and I choose to do today. When I weep, God indeed gives of himself, as we have heard. We ultimately have a good future, as we have heard. But in the meantime – in this interim period – while we wait – he has also given us one another.

In the place where we lived overseas for two decades, most people lived in villages or groupings of small huts, just feet apart. They didn't have much but they cared for one another, shared meager resources, and embraced in both joy and sorrow. In that sense, perhaps they had much more than we do as we live in splendid isolation separated by our redwood fences, seeking to numb ourselves with toys, travel and tunes – and then crying out to God, "Why am I so alone?"

Today we have the luxury of reading the Bible alone in our personal devotional life – and that's a good and wonderful thing. Yet scripture expects that we will in general be in *communities* of faith – for that's

where God best comforts us when we weep. As Jesus hung on the cross, he said very little – the Bible mentions just seven last words or statements. But that makes it all the more significant that the third of those words is to his mother and to John, making sure that she was not left alone. “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.” Not a theological treatise but, once again, it is not good that man – or woman – should be alone. When we weep, God is there, comforting us by giving us to each other.

In Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, he begins with a most marvelous statement that recognizes both the theology of the cross – that is, that followers of Jesus will also suffer – as well as the ministry of comfort to which we are called. He writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (2 Cor 1:3-5)

In communities of his people – that's where God best comforts us when we weep. My friend, if you are hurting, this is the place to come. If you are not hurting, this is the place to be a part of what God wants to do for others who are. God is heavily invested in his creation, twisted though it may be, and in the lives of hurting people. Where is God when you weep? He is with you wherever that place might be – but especially here, in this place, where the cross stands over you and God’s people can gather around and embrace you.

Rachel wept for her children ... because they were no more. We weep ... in many situations and for many things. We live in a creation twisted by the power of sin, in an age in which the will of God is not always done. But we – who live on this side of Christmas, on this side of the Cross – also live with this: the knowledge of what Christ accomplished on the cross, the promise of a new age in which God will wipe away

every tear, and the presence today of a community of faith in which God brings us comfort and uses us to comfort others who weep.

Let us pray

Gracious God, even in the light of Christmas there are moments when darkness floods our lives and we wonder where on earth you can be. Thank you for the assurance that our prayers – even our complaints – are heard and honored by you at such times. Thank you for the victory accomplished by Christ on the cross, for the future hope in which we live, and for your comfort and encouragement in the present through your presence and through your people. Now help each of us to be a part of your comfort and encouragement in the lives of those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.