

“Dreams of the Patriarch(y)” Matthew 2:13-23
Rev. Michele Ward
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD
Epiphany Sunday January 5, 2020

The text this morning picks up right where the magi left off--they are on their way back to their homeland, by way of another road, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus and the reality that Love could not wait to come and dwell with us on earth. And now, even the magi delivered their final gifts and are on their way home. The angels stop their singing and the shepherds go back to their fields. Everyone who traveled to Bethlehem for the census has found their way home, too. While most of the people we encounter in the Christmas story are excited about the birth of Jesus and what it will mean for the world, King Herod is frightened. This baby is a threat to his power. He tried to trick the magi into being his informants and reporting back on what they learn during their visit to Bethlehem. When that doesn't work, he becomes furious. To make absolutely sure that the Messiah will not overthrow him, King Herod orders his soldiers to kill children under the age of two in Bethlehem. His soldiers arrive in Bethlehem and kill these children because of fear.

A few weeks ago, we rushed around wrapping presents, arranging parties and cooking meals in order to celebrate with loved ones. And now, the festivities are over for the year. The relatives have gone home and the Christmas decorations are put away. The air mattress and extra chairs are back in the basement, the guest room is back in order, and the world around us seems to slow down a bit--at least for a moment.

But all is not calm and bright in our new year. Australia burns and millions of animals die. Iran reels from our drone strike, mourning their top general. Hong Kong started their New Year's Day with peaceful protests and tear gas. So, tell me, what kind of dream do we find ourselves in this morning? We find ourselves in a nightmare--one much like the nightmare of the mothers of Bethlehem.

Where is Mary's song of revolution and change now, I'd like to know. Well--for one thing, it is in another gospel. Luke is the only gospel with a revolutionary song for Mary to sing. Here, in the gospel of Matthew, Mary doesn't say anything. Joseph does the talking and acting for her, and Matthew, a man, tells the birth narrative that way. This is an uncomfortable part of the text--Joseph, although making brave decisions and taking radical steps, is still a man shaped by a first century patriarchal system. Matthew tells the story this way to appeal to the Jewish converts to the Jesus Way because he makes an argument the entire gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the one that the

Jewish people have been waiting to arrive. A birth narrative that tells the story through the lense of the patriarchy suits Matthew's ends well.

When we look closely at this section of Matthew, the delivery of important information through dreams would have been familiar to some of Matthew's Jewish listeners. Many of the patriarchs--the spiritual father figures--received divine insight through dreams. Men like Abraham, Daniel, and Jacob, to name a few. An angel of the Lord communicating through dreams with Joseph confirms his rightful place in the patriarchy, and validates his role as the stepfather of Jesus. Joseph's position is even more pivotal than it was previously in Luke.

Now on to Herod, a patriarch who also does the talking and acting for others in this narrative. Herod is an overly fearful, calculating, and downright evil ruler. He punctuates his reign by murdering the family members who are successors to the throne that get in his way. So none of us should be surprised when he decides to use the same tactic on a baby. When he hears the prophecy about the Messiah has come true, Matthew tells us that Herod and all Jerusalem were scared by that news. He did not rejoice at the announcement. Rather, he gathered together the people he trusted and asked them to validate the prophecy. When the magi show up from another country, he becomes even more afraid. He convinces the magi that he wants to visit the child, which they believe, of course.

Herod does not have any visitors in his dreams. Instead, he needs others to tell him what their dreams meant. He needs others to tell him what ancient predictions and the dreams of the prophets meant. Unlike the magi and Joseph, Herod does not have a heavenly visitor in his sleep tell him what to do. Herod's misuse of his patriarchal power is easier to see--he has the ultimate say in the region as the Roman Empire appointed him. He can send other men off to do his dirty work for him so he does not need to soil his sword with the blood of innocent children. He can sit in his palace and wait for the news from the soliders, hoping they will return to announce that they murdered the Christ child.

And what of the mothers in this text? Even the grieving mothers of Bethlehem do not speak for themselves. Matthew quotes Jeremiah instead, saying that their grief fulfilled yet another prophecy. What names did they give their children? What dreams did they have for them? We do not know these details. But we do know that the matriarchs weep because they cannot do anything but lament in the face of astronomical loss. There is no way to quantify the death of a child, no matter how old or how young. The mothers of Bethlehem need to lament. Lament is an action, not a weakness. To grieve is not to admit their weakness. To grieve is to be present to their deep pain.

Like the mothers of Bethlehem, we must lament. The tragedies I mentioned earlier in this sermon--of environmental catastrophe in Australia, of continued political unrest in Hong Kong, of the mounting tensions between our government and the government of Iran--all of these deserve lament. Lament is necessary for true healing of ourselves, our city, our world. The work of hope is incomplete without lament.

Lament does not mean getting deep into our feelings and doing nothing. Lament isn't just about the climate crisis or international politics. It can be as private as the death of a loved one. Lament is an active, self-aware, present grief, and one that eventually compels us into action. Do not ask ourselves "What can we do?" as a way to avoid the pain of lament. The actions to take will emerge from our grief, but only in time.

I do not know how the mothers of Bethlehem moved forward. I do not know how Mary and Joseph moved forward, continuing to travel and resettle multiple times. But I do know that they found a way when it looked like there was no way. The substance of Love--Immanuel, God-with-us-- rooted them. It is Love that teaches us to lament and teaches us to hope.

In the patriarchal overlay of Matthew's gospel, in this painful story of abuse of power, we can find hope. We can find hope in the other road of the magi, in the lament of the mothers, and in the angels that come in our dreams. Dream differently than the patriarchs--dream of hope.

"Refugee" by Malcom Guite

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.