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1/1/17--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 2:13-23; Revelation 21:1-6a

NEW YEAR PREDICTIONS

The lectionary cycle gives us very little time to feel sentimental about the birth of Jesus. One week ago, scriptures told us about the birth of Jesus and we all celebrated with beautiful songs of praise, candlelight, gift giving, family gatherings. But only 7 days later, wham! We're hit with this horrific story about the slaughter of infants and the flight of the holy family in fear and terror. The gospel writer Matthew gives us a real jolt of ugly reality with this story today about King Herod's murderous fit of jealousy, vented against mere babies. All the wise men's talk about seeking the "king of the Jews" got Herod anxious about a potential rival to his throne. And when the wise men did not return to tell him where to find the child as they said they would, Herod fell into a fit of rage and ordered the murder of all the children around Bethlehem who were under the age of two. Jesus managed to escape the slaughter after Joseph and Mary fled in fear for their lives to Egypt.

Out of this horrific story, there is a voice that caught my attention. It is the voice of Rachel. Rachel, one of the great matriarch's of the Jewish people had been dead for a thousand years by the time Matthew wrote this gospel account of Jesus' birth. But Matthew reaches all the way back into Jewish history to bring forth Rachel's voice, to recall her weeping for her lost children. Matthew writes, "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'" It was the prophet Jeremiah who first used this quote about Rachel weeping for her lost children. He used to in reference to Rachel's grief for the children caught up in the Babylonian captivity. But now the gospel writer

Matthew uses Rachel to represent the Bethlehem mothers weeping in the aftermath of Herod's bloody massacre of their children.

There has been no end to the weeping of mothers down through human history. Whether because of genocides, famines, disease, warfare, lynchings, shootings, neglect--the human story could be written through the mothers who wept for their lost children. This past year, 2016, saw much maternal and paternal weeping as well: weeping by Syrian parents who sat among the bombed rubble of their homes and held their children's lifeless bodies in their arms, weeping by parents of African American men killed in encounters with police, weeping by parents of police officers killed in retaliatory violence, weeping by parents of young people killed at a Paris concert by terrorists, weeping by parents of American young people killed by a terrorist at a night club in Florida, weeping by parents of young people killed in drive by shootings on American streets, weeping by parents of children drowned in a desperate attempt to cross the Mediterranean. The story of this last year could be written via the tears of the mothers and fathers who wept for their lost children. Rachel's lamentation echoes down through the eons to us this very day.

Matthew tells us not only that Rachel wept for her lost children but that she refused to be consoled. She would not be pacified by those who would have her tidy up her grief, move on, or accept the tragic loss. She would not be pacified by the voices of those who would seek to justify the tragedy, rationalize the injustice, excuse the decision, explain away the situation. She refused to be pacified by those who would have her accept what was not right. And neither should we. Neither should we.

Jesus' birth came in response to all this weeping. God did not sit idly by while mothers and fathers grieved and wept, one year, one decade, one century after another. And so the God

of peace, the God of love, the God of justice came to show us humans a better way to live with one another.

But this horrible story of the massacre of the innocents shows us something important. It shows us that while God comes to heal us from our crazy, murderous ways, God's very coming can trigger a backlash. The God of justice, the God of peace, the God of love will evoke a hostile response from those who feel threatened by this message and its implications. And we had better understand that if we seek to be followers of this way. The way of Jesus stands as a powerful opponent to the structures of power, the people of power, the status quo of our world. And so the response to the love, and justice, and compassion of Jesus Christ is sometimes violent and destructive.

The anxiety level in our nation seems to be at a level higher than it has been in a great while. People are anxious about violence and terrorism. People are anxious about our elected leaders and the policies they may enact. People are anxious about their family's well-being, their security, their ability to educate their children, find work, keep their health care. People are anxious about the status of our nation's democracy and its tenets. The future is uncertain. And Herod-like forces are out there making a lot of us afraid. What do we do with this fear? How do we deal with it?

In the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection, a lot of his followers had good reasons to be afraid. They were severely persecuted by the powerful Roman government. These Christians faced open hostility, discrimination, arrest, and death. The Book of Revelation is a book written to these terrified Christians to bolster their faith and give them hope. The part we read from today speaks about the future and it tries to give these fearful Christians a strategy for dealing with an uncertain future. The writer of Revelation tells them about a God who is intimately

involved in human history, coming to dwell with humans, righting wrongs and bringing about justice. They are reminded that God is the Alpha and the Omega--the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet--meaning that God is the beginning and ending of all things. They are told about a time to come when God's realm will replace the broken realm of humanity. God tells them, "See, I am making all things new." Evil and brokenness and injustice may exist around us, but God is engaged in the midst of it all, making all things new, reforming and reshaping our world to reflect God's realm. Evil may exist for the moment but ultimately, God's realm of peace, justice, and love will triumph.

These words of faith are offered to all of us who face an anxious future not that we might kick back and tell ourselves--"well, God will fix it all." These words are offered so that we might have confidence that evil will not triumph, that God's power to redeem us is stronger than our brokenness, and that we can move forward with hope.

This week I heard an interview with a counter-terrorism expert from the Hague. He noted that we can anticipate terrorist attacks to take place in this new year--because terrorism is a fact of life. But he also stated that in terms of what will kill you in life, terrorism still ranks pretty low. He encouraged us to keep that fact in perspective because elevating it to a place of disproportionate threat could prompt dangerous policies that might serve to add fuel to the fire. And he added that if we choose to see our world through a dystopian alarming framework, we will have to live in a dystopian alarming world.

I think this is what the writer of Revelation was trying to teach us Christians. There is an alternative to a dystopian, fear-based, anxiety-ridden perspective on our world. We are called to remember the God who makes all things new is at work in our lives. What awaits us in our future

is not an event but a person--the God of Jesus Christ. And this God of justice, love, and peace invites us to live out *that* reality. To live out *that* reality.

As we enter this new year, we can probably make certain predictions. We can predict that there are likely to be terrorist attacks this new year. We can predict that there are likely to be tragic stories of children dying and mothers grieving. We can predict that you and I are likely to know people who will get cancer and that people dear to us will die. We can predict that you and I will likely experience disappointments, hardships, and struggles of some kind.

But, we can also predict that the God who makes all things new, who is the beginning and the ending of all things, will be at work in our lives and in our world--redeeming, healing, and transforming us. We can predict that the God of love awaits us in the future. And here is another prediction: God will give you and me abundant opportunities in this new year to participate in God's redeeming work--opportunities to heal the wounded, to speak out against wrong, to help the weak, to comfort the grieving, to welcome the stranger, to love the enemy. God will give us in this new year the opportunities to be part of God's realm of hope. Whether you and I say yes to this invitation, well that's up to us.