SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
December 28, 2025
"Walking in Faith"

Scripture:
Isaiah 63:7-9 (God's mercy remembered)
Psalm 148: 1-2, 7a, 9-14 (A call to praise God)
Matthew 2:13-23 (The escape to Egypt)

Today's Gospel passages from Matthew; first the escape to Egypt, followed by the killing of the innocents, is quite a turnaround in the Christmas story after the beauty of Christmas Eve.

The discomfort for some people in this passage from Matthew turns to a question about God in all of this. They ask, "If God knew it was going to happen, what Herod was going to do, why only warn Joseph, but not others?" Why weren't all the innocents in Bethlehem warned? Some respond by saying the others had to die to convince Herod that the child called the King of the Jews by the wise men had also been killed, but I don't believe God would do that. I don't believe God would have had those children born just for that function. What I do believe, and what we

all clearly see in every generation, is that God does not keep us from doing violence to one another. To ask why God allowed those innocents to be killed is the same as asking what is normally a Lenten question; that is, why does God allow suffering at all in our world, if God is all loving and almighty? It's one of the deepest theological questions there is, and countless books have been written about it.

But still, we are faced with this horrific description, with a scene that shocks us out of the heavenly birth story on that silent, holy night, into cries of anguish and evil. The event in Bethlehem is so horrible, that Matthew connects it to an earlier event in Jewish history, also a time of great suffering, when the Babylonians conquered Judah, which included the land of Bethlehem and even Jerusalem. The Babylonians captured and slaughtered and scattered and enslaved the people. That period was so awful as to evoke in the OT prophet Jeremiah an image of Rachel, the mother of Israel's children, crying in Ramah. Ramah, a town just north of Jerusalem, was a place of deportation to Babylonia, where the descendants of Israel were taken into exile.

So, the event in Bethlehem, at the hands of Herod, is experienced in a way reminiscent of the horror of the Babylonian exile, with a feeling of complete helplessness at the hands of evil, and with lives and whole communities lost in the horror. Rachel, wife of Jacob who is also called Israel, is pictured as wailing so loud that she cannot be consoled, because her descendants are no more.

But, just before the evil of Herod descends on poor Bethlehem, we have the scene of a small family fleeing through the night, because an angel comes to Joseph in a dream. A remnant of hope is nurtured in the midst of hopelessness.

So often in the Bible, when evil raises its ugly head, and when all apparent hope is gone, God saves a remnant, and the hope of new life and new days is preserved. Isaiah often speaks of a remnant returning to the land where evil held full sway in its destructive power. In the prophet Micah, a remnant who will be redeemed is promised. Jeremiah speaks for God when he promises redemption to a remnant of God's flock. The postexilic Hebrews, after the Babylonian exile, saw themselves as God's

remnant after the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and allowed the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem.

For us, in today's passage, we see the promise of redemption in a remnant so small as to be unnoticeable; a small family with a baby, fleeing through the night.

Our Psalm today, psalm 148, says that, "[God's] glory is above earth and heaven." There is no power on earth that can cry victory over God and God's people. That mistake has been made many times, but God's merciful power always provides a remnant of redemption. Even around the time of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II and his son, there was inscribed on an upright pillar of stone the following declaration of a destructive fulfillment: "Israel is desolated and has no seed." However, by God's will, a child named Moses was placed in a basket on the Nile, a remnant of hope, who came back years later to lead his people to the promised land." So often in our world, evil cries victory, and the innocents cry out in pain, but the truth is, we are never forsaken or forgotten or without hope. In God, there is always a remnant of hope and

a promise of redemption.

In fact, let's go back to that passage in Matthew where the prophet Jeremiah is quoted, from Jeremiah 31:15. It says, "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." On its own, we hear only despair and hopelessness. But, in looking back at Jeremiah 31, that passage is, in fact, surrounded by hope, and even promises of joy. The whole of chapter 31 in Jeremiah speaks of the joyful return of the exiles after the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah speaks of God promising that the young women will rejoice in dancing, and the young men and old shall be merry. God promises this by saying, "I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow." So, the passage about Rachel weeping reminds the people of the awfulness of what happened at the hands of evil, but also speaks of new days being fulfilled.

Right off the bat in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we see the great contrast between God's promise for us, and the world instead

preferring the darkness of evil over the light of heaven. It is a foretaste of what is to come in the life, and the death, of Jesus. But even in Jesus' death, when evil cried victory, a heavenly remnant of hope remains in the resurrected Jesus. Now, even death itself cannot hold the last word. O death, where is your victory, O grave, where is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jeremiah 31, Rachel, seen as the matriarch of all of Israel, cannot be consoled, because they are no more. But then, Jeremiah offers contrast to the phrase, that "they are no more." In the verse following that, it says, "Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country."

In this Christmas season, in this season of hope and promise, remember the God of the Bible, who, even in the midst of evil, always offers a remnant of redemption, and hope, and promise. Take heart that our beautiful and tender image of the manger scene carries more power

than any evil in the world. In that image of the holy family, of shepherds, of angels, and of wise men, find comfort in remembering that we belong to God, and that we are not owned by the world.

Emily Dickinson, the 19th century New England poet, once said of hope: “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.” The feathers convey a lightness and a freedom that remains unaffected by the world, and the tunes sung are a joy beyond words. Sometimes realists see such hope as unrealistic, but David Ben-Gurion, one of the founders of the modern state of Israel, and its first Prime Minister, once said, “Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist.” At this time of year, we remember a small holy family, and then we joyfully see, in churches all around the world, a message, a light, of hope and newness that will never be extinguished.

Even when this world feels so overwhelming that some feel like Rachel, unconsoled and hopeless, know that there is, in God, in Christ, a remnant of hope. It may be as hard to see as a holy family journeying

under the night sky, but believe. Believe in God, and believe in the Christmas message of hope, for hope is closer to truth than anything the world might claim or declare.

May God bless you and comfort you with the heavenly truths of this Christmas season: hope, peace, joy, and love. Amen.