



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

*Sermon for The Commemoration of the Holy Innocents*

*December 28, 2024*

## The Children of Rachel

### Jeremiah 31:15-17

*<sup>15</sup>Thus says the Lord: “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.”*

*<sup>16</sup>Thus says the Lord: “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. <sup>17</sup>There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.”*

The Hebrews dwelling in the Land of Goshen, descendants of Israel, Joseph’s father, had been blessed by the Lord and increased greatly in number. The Pharaoh in Joseph’s day, who had invited Joseph’s family into his land, who dealt favorably with them out of respect for Joseph, had long since died, as had Joseph, and Scripture tells us that a new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. After four hundred years, even the most important events of history can be forgotten.

The new Pharaoh was a megalomaniac, obsessed with his own power. He saw the prosperous Hebrews as a threat to his kingdom. So he enslaved them, placed cruel taskmasters over them, and ordered the Hebrew midwives to slay the male babies, thus enabling him to maintain control. But the midwives wouldn’t do it. So he ordered his own people to take the male children and cast them into the Nile, thus killing them. And there was weeping in Goshen, Rachel<sup>1</sup> weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they were no more.

At the time of Jeremiah the prophet, Nebuchadnezzar<sup>2</sup> ruled the Babylonia empire. He was a ruthless despot of a man. It was his forces who invaded the Kingdom of Judah and besieged Jerusalem, pillaging the Temple, stealing the holy things, carrying them and

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel of antiquity was the favored wife of Jacob, who died in Ramah, giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob’s youngest son (Genesis 35).

<sup>2</sup> It was Nebuchadnezzar who ordered the building of a giant golden statue, to which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow, prompting the King to have them cast into a burning fiery furnace, from which they emerged unscathed and unsinged, by God’s great grace and favor.



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a large contingent of the people, into captivity in Babylon. The siege caused appalling deprivation and suffering. Tens of thousands were massacred in the process, including the sons of King Zedekiah (2 Ki. 25:7). Many Hebrew mothers were separated from and deprived of their children. Some children were killed, some exiled, but many, many were torn from their mothers, never to be reunited. Can you imagine?

Oh, there was bitter weeping, inconsolable sorrow – Rachel, weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they were no more.

But, as Matthew records in today's Gospel, the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy actually occurred at the time of our Savior's birth. Herod the Great ruled in Judea. He was a monster, a murderous paranoid freak, who killed members of his own family – including his wife – for fear that they were a threat to his throne. He claimed to be a Jew, though for various reasons his religious commitment was questionable, not the least by a riotously decadent lifestyle. He was actually granted the title of "King" by the Roman Senate, which could tell you where his sympathies lay.

When the Magi arrived from the East<sup>3</sup> seeking to worship the newborn king, Herod was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Apparently, the people knew what he was capable of when he was troubled. But how could they have known the depths of depravity lurking within the man?

As he had murdered others whom he saw as a threat, so he wanted to kill this newborn king. But, since the wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, he decided on a shotgun approach and had all the male children slaughtered, reiterating Jeremiah's prophecy and re-awakening Rachel's bitter grief. Oh, there was weeping in Bethlehem – Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they were no more.

Such a woeful prophecy. Such a dastardly deed! And so soon after the proclamation of the angel, that there would be peace among men on account of the Savior's birth. What are we to make of it?

Oh, beloved, listen carefully to the rest of Jeremiah's prophecy: "Thus says the LORD: 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.'"

It may have taken 80 years after the slaughter of the Hebrew boys in Egypt for the Deliverer to come and set the Children of Israel free; it may have taken 70 years for the exiles to return home from Babylon; it may have taken 33 years after the slaughter of the

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<sup>3</sup> Most likely, they were aware of Messianic prophecy due to the 70-year sojourn of Hebrew captives in their homeland.



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Holy Innocents for salvation to be completed through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus; but God always makes good on His promises. This is news we need to hear, my friends!

I don't know what tragedy has presented itself in your life, whether it be the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, failed investments, a tarnished reputation, a rift in your family, or a political setback. You may feel as though all is lost and that no one in your life can be trusted or relied upon. Maybe you feel like Rachel, whose children are no more. Or like the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, exiled and alone, abandoned by all. Maybe you think even God has let you down.

Be assured, dear Christian, that this is not true. The Lord says through the prophet: "There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country."

There is a country awaiting you, a Promised Land, where all that ails you now will have passed away. Your aching, failing body will be restored, resurrected. Your spirit, troubled by sin, guilt, and the sordid events taking place all around you, will be at peace. The perfection your redeemed soul longs for will be a reality that lasts forever.

In the meantime, your Savior is here to comfort you, you who feel inconsolable grief, you who weep bitter tears, you who feel a stranger in a strange land. You do not sojourn alone. By grace through faith, Jesus has taken up residence in your heart and the Holy Spirit testifies to your spirit that you are a child of the Father, who has promised never to leave you nor forsake you.

One day, all that you have lost for the sake of Christ and His kingdom will be restored to you. Even in this life, Jesus says [Luke 18:29-30], you will receive back much more than you ever lost, and in the age to come, eternal life.

There's no discounting the grief we endure in this world. There's not a soul among us who has never suffered a heart shattered by loss. But this world is not the end. The children of Rachel await her, singing a new song before the throne of God and the Lamb. That is the destiny of all who bear the name of Christ, the Christ whose birth we celebrate, the Christ who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Christ who gathers the lambs of His flock into His arms of mercy and brings them home. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen