

Signs and Power

December 28, 2025 (8B)

Jeremiah 31:10-17

¹⁰ Listen to the Lord's word, you nations, and announce it to the distant islands: the one who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock. ¹¹ The Lord will rescue the people of Jacob and deliver them from the power of those stronger than they are. ¹² They will come shouting for joy on the hills of Zion, jubilant over the Lord's gifts: grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds. Their lives will be like a lush garden; they will grieve no more. ¹³ Then the young women will dance for joy; the young and old men will join in. I will turn their mourning into laughter and their sadness into joy; I will comfort them. ¹⁴ I will lavish the priests with abundance and shower my people with my gifts, declares the Lord. ¹⁵ The Lord proclaims: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and wailing. It's Rachel crying for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because her children are no more. ¹⁶ The Lord proclaims: Keep your voice from crying and your eyes from weeping, because your endurance will be rewarded, declares the Lord. They will return from the land of their enemy! ¹⁷ There's hope for your future, declares the Lord. Your children will return home!

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³ When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him."

¹⁴ Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. ¹⁵ He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

¹⁶ When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. ¹⁷ This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: ¹⁸ A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving. Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more.

¹⁹ After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. ²⁰ “Get up,” the angel said, “and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” ²¹ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

²² But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. ²³ He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.



Today we hear a story that, unfortunately, is an all-too-familiar tale of powerful rulers using violence and force to maintain their control and position of authority. While what happened in and around Bethlehem just a couple of years after Jesus' birth is a horrible atrocity, our focus this morning is on the ways that God was and remains at work in and amongst us, even in the worst of what we can do to one another. The signs of God at work, bringing life and hope in the face of violent, death-dealing powers, reveals God as rescuer and shepherd, as God is described in our text from Jeremiah 31. As we prepare to wrestle with these difficult but still present realities, let us begin with a word of prayer...

God of love, you have come among us in the flesh, sharing the dangers and fragility of the flesh. Among those who fear and hate, you have come as a child, defenseless and tender. Speak to us now, and give us courage, that in a world of hardness we may be children of peace. It is with the hope to be courageous children of peace that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

When a horrible tragedy strikes in our world today, we often struggle to understand how such a thing could happen. Whether it is a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, a senseless mass shooting, a genocide, a war or other act of violence – we can have a hard time processing what has happened. When the world shatters in a way that takes away our breath, how do we stand, how do we manage to put one foot in front of the other? These are the questions that Jeremiah and eventually the people of his day were wrestling with in their hearts and minds. Please turn with me to Jeremiah 31 as we begin to explore these difficult realities.

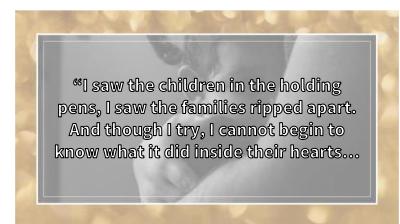
Jeremiah spoke God's word to the people of God for about 40 years. Early in his ministry, the main focus was upon calling for repentance. The people of God were living deep in sin. Their leaders were foolish and weak. Because the people refused to repent, Jeremiah prophesied starvation, death, and captivity. In the third part of the book of Jeremiah, the prophet promises that God will return a remnant from exile. Although punishment is due and is sure to come, God will restore this remnant after 70 years in captivity. Chapter 31 comes from this third section. Our passage begins with words of hope: "*The one who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock. The Lord will rescue the people of Jacob and deliver them from the power of those stronger than they are.*"

"The one who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock. The Lord will rescue the people of Jacob and deliver them from the power of those stronger than they are."
- Jeremiah 31:10-11

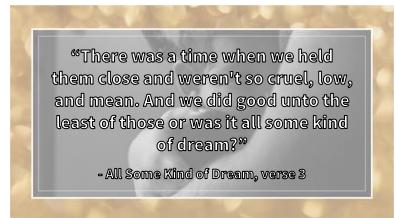
Knowing that the consequences of their sins will not last forever, there is hope kindled in the hearts of the people of God. When we have stumbled and fallen into sin, it is good for us to remember these words of God too. Often our sin causes consequences. We suffer or those we love suffer. We hurt others or damage relationships. In our sin, we separate ourselves from God. We feel scattered and unsafe in that place of darkness and vulnerability. It is good to remember that God does not want to leave us there. Even though the pull or temptation of sin is more powerful than we are at that moment, we have one on our side that is more powerful than any evil that comes against us.

It brings us hope to remember that God wants to rescue us and deliver us from our sin and time in exile. God wants to exert divine power to free us from those things that entangle and ensnare us. And in the moment when we are restored, the grieving ends and we dance with joy because we are back in right relationship with the Lord our God. We rejoice as Judah shouts with joy and is showered with good gifts as God ends their long time in exile.

There are also times in people's lives when it is not their own sin that causes suffering or leads to them being scattered. For example, in "All Some Kind of Dream," the song that we sang before readings today's scripture passages, we gave voice to these words in the first half of verse 3: "*I saw the children in the holding pens, I saw the families ripped apart. And though I try, I cannot begin to know what it did inside their hearts.*" This is the reality for children and their families today. It is the reality here and in other places around the world. Whether the 'holding pens' are refugee camps, inner city slums, detention centers, or places of extreme poverty on our nearby reservations, the tearing apart or scattering of families does damage to hearts and lives today.



As we continue in verse 3, songwriter reminds us of another time, much as Jeremiah points the people of God to a future with hope as he reminds them of the good shepherd that God desires to be. In the second half of verse 3, we gave voice to these words: *"There was a time when we held them close and weren't so cruel, low, and mean. And we did good unto the least of those or was it all some kind of dream?"* Yes, there was a time when we treated the least of these with love and kindness and dignity. Yes, there was a time when our faith led us to be compassionate and caring for the least of these. Yes, there was a time when we protected and defended the most vulnerable amongst us. Voicing the time when we 'held them close' reminds us of how we the Lord our God calls us to treat the least of these.



Turning to verses 15-17 of our Jeremiah 31 next, we see what happens to the least of these when they are not well-cared for. We see what happens when the powers that be flex their muscles in order to maintain power and status. This flexing of power often involves violence and suffering. In the aftermath of Babylon exerting power over a weakened Judah, there is "weeping and wailing" in the land. In the last part of verse 15 we read, *"It's Rachel crying for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because her children are no more."* Rachel represents all of the mothers of the children of Judah. As families were scattered and torn apart, cries filled the air and tears covered faces. Consolation was not to be found.

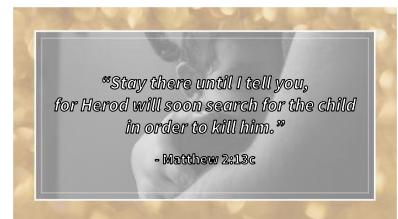


Today, in our world and in our nation, how many Rachels could we find? How many mothers have lost their children and cannot be consoled? How many families have been torn apart and fear that they will never be reunited?

In the aftermath of great suffering and deep grieving, God again offers hope to those suffering and experiencing separation. To the mothers whose children are no more, God offers these words in Jeremiah 31: “*They will return from the land of their enemy! There's hope for your future.*” Again, the darkness will pass, and God will restore the people of God. A sign of God’s power will be the return from exile and an end to the separation of families.



As we continue, please turn with me to Matthew 2. Here we see a powerful ruler trying to use violence and force to maintain their control and position of authority. Just for context, the wise men have come and visited the newborn king, who is now about two years old. Warned in a dream, the wise men do not report back to Herod. That night, in another dream, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and to flee to Egypt. The angel adds, “*Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.*” An obedient Joseph flees that very night.



This becomes the reality in verse 16. An angry and fearful and paranoid Herod sends soldiers into Bethlehem and the surrounding area, killing all of the children who were two years old and younger. So great was his fear of this newborn king, so deep was his desperation to hold onto his position of authority, a powerful king uses unthinkable violence against the innocent and vulnerable. Two thousand years later, our world is not much better off. Today, yes today, leaders use violence and force against innocents – all in attempts to maintain their place of authority and power. The unthinkable is done to the powerless and those without voice here in our land and around the world. Matthew connects this abuse of power in his day to Jeremiah 31. There is weeping and much grieving in and around Bethlehem. These motherless children cannot be comforted or consoled.

In places here in our nation and probably even in many of our communities, and in places all around the world, there is weeping and much grieving. Acts of violence continue to plague the innocents, the vulnerable, the powerless. In these places and difficult situations, it can feel as if there were no room for God's hope, love, peace, comfort, grace, mercy. Don't you imagine that that is how Mary and Joseph felt as they were forced to flee for their lives? And imagine how the mothers and fathers who did not flee Herod's terror felt. They certainly felt as if God was not present in the midst of their suffering, sorrow, grieving, and loss. In a world filled with violence that makes no sense, people then and people now long for God's presence, intervention, rescue, and restoration.

Returning to the story, after the threat passes, an angel instructs Joseph to return to land of Israel. Warned against returning to Bethlehem in Judea, Joseph and family settle in Galilee in a town called Nazareth. A bit further removed from the places of power, Jesus will safely grow up and mature in faith. While this is good news for Jesus and family, in the wake of Herod's violence and in the wake of violence in many places today, there is pain and sorrow, weeping and the shedding of tears. The reality is that we live in a broken and messy world. We live in a world in need of saving. We live in a world in need of hope, comfort, and healing.

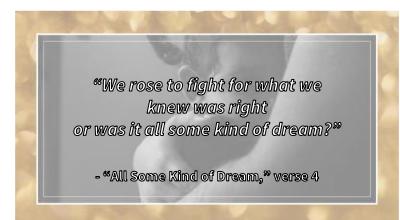
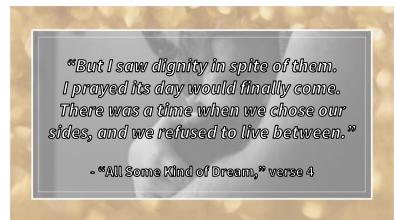
We can get caught up in trying to come up with answers to the questions that we and others ask God. Why didn't God just keep all of the children safe? Why does God allow a ruthless and cruel person to ascend to a place of power? We can tie ourselves up in knots trying to explain God's actions and inactions. Today's gospel lesson is a great example of our desire to do this. But we cannot find answers in today's passage from Matthew any more than we can find answers to the tragedies and horrors of our day. So, what then, can we find that helps us in stories and events like we are thinking about today?

In verse four of “All Some Kind of Dream,” we gave voice to these words: “*I saw justice with a tattered hem. I saw compassion on the run.*” In our world today, it often feels like justice and compassion are in short supply. To stand for justice can feel risky. Practicing compassion can feel dangerous. It is so because justice and compassion are not on the side of those who use violence and force, all in an attempt to maintain their place of authority and power.

The song continues, “*But I saw dignity in spite of them. I prayed its day would finally come. There was a time when we chose our sides, and we refused to live between.*” Dignity calls us to be people of

justice and compassion. In order for people on the margins and for those without power to experience dignity, we as the people of God are called to stand with such as these. I pray for that day to come. When we make the choice to stand with the vulnerable and powerless, we are choosing our side. We are choosing to take on the heart of God and of Christ. In a world that is increasingly violent and divided, we cannot live between good and evil. We must choose to stand for good and must decide to work for good in the world.

Speaking words of hope, yet questioning our resolve, verse 4 continues with these words: “*We rose to fight for what we knew was right or was it all some kind of dream?*” This question speaks again to the choice we have to make. Will we, as God calls us to, choose to fight for what is right and good and holy? Or will it just all remain a dream? The choice is ours. I pray that our choice will be to live and fight for all that is right and good and holy. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow.* Many people today, like Jesus' family, feel unsafe, vulnerable, powerless. How would seeing them and standing alongside them bring safety, security, and power? In what ways could you practically do that this week?
- 2) *Pray.* Where do you see people in power abusing that power or continuing injustices in order to maintain or increase their power? Pray for the Prince of Peace to intervene.
- 3) *Study.* Read Jeremiah 31:18-22. When have you recently acted like Ephraim? What brought you out of 'rebellion' (or what could do so now)? How were you changed?