

Isaiah 49:8-16

⁸ Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favor I have answered you;
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,^[a]
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,

⁹ saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

They shall feed along the ways;
on all the bare heights^[b] shall be their pasture;

¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them
and by springs of water will guide them.

¹¹ And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.

¹² Look, some shall come from far away,
some from the north and from the west,
and some from the land of Syene.^[c]

¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

¹⁴ But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me;
my Lord has forgotten me."

¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these might forget,
yet I will not forget you.

¹⁶ See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;

Matthew 2:16-18

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,^[b] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.^[c] ¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ "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."

God Remembers

The inspiration for today's message came from our November 3rd speaker, Ashley Wilcox. She relayed how she had expressed disappointment to her husband a few years ago because the standard Lectionary calls attention to so few scriptures pointing to the many women in the Bible. His reply? - Make your own Lectionary! Ashley rose to the challenge and her book "The Women's Lectionary" was published in 2021. It has a full liturgical calendar year's worth of scriptures and commentary highlighting a sampling of the women who were disciples, leaders, prophetesses (and troublemakers) in the Bible.

The early Quakers in the 1600s clearly knew and valued the voices and leadership of women as full equals to men. Their understanding was based on, and supported by, scripture. Many early Quaker women were shining examples of strength and reform accomplished all while suffering from living in an oppressive nation where women were dismissed. Yet, they held fast to their voices. Unfortunately, in our time outside forces have again been subtly pulling society back to the values of patriarchy. Ashley has given us a gift to help re-focus on what we have been missing out on.

The scriptures for today's message are from her lectionary for this Second Sunday after Christmas. I also use several of the points her commentary makes, hoping to avoid the appearance of Mansplaining.

Our first reading today was situated at a turning point in the book of Isaiah. The Israelites around 537 BC were returning from 70-years of Babylonian captivity after King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon. God had touched the heart of King Cyrus, and he not only helped the Israelites return to their land, but went so far as to see they had the resources to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem; Cyrus was **not** taking chances of being on the wrong side of the Israelites' God. So, unlike the Israelites' last return from captivity in Egypt, the trek was direct and their journey was made easier. No wandering in a desert for 40 years this time.

In Isaiah chapter 49, **Who?** is described by the prophet Isaiah as called upon to sing praises for this return? The answer in verse 13 reads: "Sing for joy, O **heavens**, and exult, O **earth**; break forth, O **mountains**, into singing!" – **Why?** -- "For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones." – These "singers" are all parts of **Creation**. The Heavens, Earth and Mountains, are the ones cheering on God's returned attention to people. Creation sees the advancing of God's original goals for the earth, and for mankind.

Good -- But what is **missing?** -- The Prophet is **not** calling on the returning exiles to sing for joy.

Why might this be? Even while seeing the work being done for their benefit the people are probably not in a celebratory mood. They would be remembering how they had **not** been helped during those 70 years in captivity. How they had **not** been on their own land, **nor** living within a thriving faith community. They had been **unable** to appropriately worship God while in a strange land because their designated **place** of worship, the Temple, where they were required to worship, was in ruins.

However, all their losses of homes, vineyards, and even the Temple itself, pale in comparison to the **women, men, and children** they had lost while in captivity. Where can there be exuberant joy while sitting beside all this loss?

In verses 14 and 15 they were complaining to God where it says: ¹⁴ But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me. ¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”

This passage shows God’s amazing empathy towards the people, Zion, who are frequently personified as feminine in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the striking image of **God as a mother**. A mother who has carried a child in her womb. A mother who has nursed and nurtured a child. The verse continues: “Even these [the mothers] might forget, yet I [God] will not forget you.”

The prophet’s message, by using women and mothers as the focal image, makes sure everyone is feeling recognized, seen, and valued. The prophet is also reminding us to make space for Lament when we find ourselves in need of healing. Even, or maybe especially, during times when simultaneous events bring reason for joy. The prophet is suggesting we pause in tough situations. Grieve and heal for a bit. God will take it from there for a while. Trust that God is remembering us and what we have lost.

The other scripture from The Women’s Lectionary we read this morning follows events soon after the Birth of Jesus. It’s another account of sorrow and grief amidst a setting of joy. These three short verses -- the tragic story of the Massacre of the Innocents -- are often elided over by a greater focus on the amazing protection that was given to Jesus. It can also be overshadowed by Matthew’s monumental comparison of Jesus’ birth with the birth of Moses. Matthew has a penchant for comparing prophetic examples with their fulfillment by Jesus. The audience Matthew was trying to reach may have needed to make such a connection between Jesus and Moses to allow people to even listen to Matthew’s account. -- The religious leaders at that time were certainly trying to spread mis-information about Jesus. Counterbalance may have been needed.

So today we are focusing on just these three verses reminding us of the atrocities perpetrated by the political world Jesus was born into. The baby in the manger needed protection. But then so did the innocents.

As a side point, when Ashley Wilcox studied these verses, she found that scholars have found no confirmation from secular sources that this massacre happened. Therefore, if it makes us feel any better, this may give us license not to insist on this as a historical event, but to look at this as a legend. As a story involving historical people that may have been embellished over time. But this is still here for the purpose of teaching us something.

Interesting as well is that Herod would not have known of this perceived threat of a new “King of the Jews” had it not been told to him by foreigners arriving from regions to the east. One wonders what motives and powers were behind their involvement.

Anyway, the Spirit lead Matthew, and others over the centuries, to include these three verses in our current Bible. We should not be quick to dismiss their implications as we avoid the image of violence. So, what **can** we learn from them?

In verse 18 Matthew points back to Jeremiah 31:15 for a comparison to the matriarch Rachel weeping for her children after the people of Judah had been taken into captivity by Babylon. That verse reads:

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.”

But in the next two verses the focus quickly switches. To **Hope**. The reading continues:

¹⁶ 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;
¹⁷ there is hope for your future,
says the Lord:
your children shall come back to their own country.

But the Innocents in Matthew have no such explicit hope as there is in Jeremiah. The children from around Bethlehem will not be returning as had many of the children of Judah had from Babylon. We can only trust they are in God's memory.

What is at stake in both accounts is different too. In Isaiah, Zion was returning to their promised real estate. It is just one step in returning humanity, and creation, back to God's original goal. The birth of Jesus is another, even **greater**, step in God's plan to carry out the original goal for people and creation.

We heard this goal a couple of weeks ago when we considered the songs of praise sung before Jesus' birth, as recorded in the book of Luke. The expectant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, drew expansive meaning from the future role of Jesus: **Mercy** for generation to generation; scattering the **proud**; bringing down the **powerful** while lifting up the **lowly**; filling the **hungry**; and remembering and trusting the **promise** God made to Abraham.

But there is another reason these three verses from Matthew can also give us comfort.

No matter the exact **history** of this account, or the **reasons** behind it, there is a compelling **portrayal of God**. God is hearing the lamentations of women. God is Listening with a motherly ear. God is showing **empathy** like a mother while sitting with women in their sorrow. All while amidst other evidence that fulfillment of a great promise is surrounding them. Even if people do not notice at the time.

God's life-changing promise **was** coming through **one** child - whose life was miraculously spared and protected.

God is, once again, using women as one of God's images. An image of people that society is disregarding. God is paying attention. And, whether we notice or not, God continues sitting with us, remembering us, until we remember God and respond.