

To Pray for Mothers

TEXT: Matthew 2:13-23

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 14, 2023

There are a number of stories about women in the Bible, some of whom are named, many not. But since all the stories are told by men and are typically incidental to stories that are primarily *about* men, it's usually left to female readers to pull out the impact of events on the women who are mentioned. And I think it can be argued that, from biblical times through today, there is no greater impact on women in any time or place, than motherhood.

I picked the passage BonnieJean read for us this morning because it crams so many of those impacts into one small section. The first is just the impact of being a woman. Mary is not even named here. For that matter, neither is Jesus. That's because they don't have agency. Women and children were then, and in many places today are still, property. The angel comes to Joseph, because Joseph's property—in this case his son—is in danger and he needs to take action to protect him.

Mary has already been through a lot. The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream in chapter one to tell him not to end his engagement to Mary due to her pregnancy. The law would have called for her to be stoned if Joseph had said the child was not his. He was going to “put her away quietly,” but that would have been close to a death sentence anyway. Mary had no rights, except as the property of a man—either a father, husband, or some other male relative. With a pregnancy, but no husband, she would have been damaged goods and, if there was still a male relative willing to care for her and her baby, she would have been an economic burden to them and likely treated as such.

By chapter two, Mary has been through all of that anxiety and fear; not to mention the physical stress and pain of the pregnancy and birth. Now, with a baby, she has to flee the country and become a refugee in Egypt. Refugee mothers are suffering, and have been suffering at our southern borders as I speak. Like Mary, they have traveled far and at great risk. Also like Mary, they didn't end up there because they wanted to, but because they had to, because what's happening back at home was more dangerous still.

In Mary's case, the paranoid King Herod is slaughtering all the male children under two years old to make sure no new “king” can threaten his hold on power. In the case of many at our southern border, it's gangs and drug cartels, slaughtering or kidnapping their children. In the case of refugee mothers in other places it's drought, famine or war. Sometimes the whole family goes, as Joseph went with Mary and Jesus. But sometimes fathers and even sons have to stay to work or fight. And sometimes it's the abuse of a father or brother that the mother and child need to flee.

The mothers remaining in Bethlehem didn't get tipped off to Herod's intentions by the angel and were forced to bear what mothers in occupied nations and territories the world over have to bear—the random violence of the occupier; the acts of terror that keep subjects in compliance. Those mothers watched the state slaughter their babies; it's likely mothers who resisted met the same fate. Motherhood brings unrivaled joy and wonder; but as the angel told Mary in Luke's Gospel, “a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

In describing the horror of Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem's children, Matthew reaches back to the prophet Jeremiah's memory of the children dying during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. “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.” Ramah is about five miles north of Jerusalem and about 11 miles from Bethlehem; but its significance here is that it was the hometown of Rachel, the preferred wife of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. You have to go to Genesis for her story, but her significance for mothers is that Rachel was the mother of just two of those twelve children—Joseph and Benjamin.

After begging God for a child for many years, and having her sister Leah, who was also married to Jacob, gloat over her in Leah's seemingly endless fertility, Rachel finally conceived Joseph. Since Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and this seemed like a miracle baby, Joseph became Jacob's favorite child. That favoritism led to resentment in Joseph's older brothers, who sold him to slave traders and then told Jacob and Rachel that Joseph had been killed by wild beasts.

Readers of Genesis know better, and we can follow Joseph's story as he is sold to a prominent Egyptian and ends up saving both Egypt and his father's family when famine hits Joseph's former home. But Rachel never learns any of that because she dies giving birth to her second child, Benjamin. As far as Rachel knew, the child that had finally been conceived after so many years and tears, was dead.

Rachel's tragic motherhood speaks to millions of women who have struggled with infertility, who have lost children, and who have died bringing new life into the world. In Rabbinic tradition, Rachel became the face of the suffering of mothers more generally. Stories emerged that told of Rachel being able to intercede with God to save Israel even when the pleas of Abraham and Moses were ignored.

So, when mothers watched their children die in the siege of Jerusalem, or were forcibly marched into exile by their Babylonian captors, it was the voice of Israel's suffering mother, Rachel, who could be heard crying to God for all her children—for all of Israel—more than a thousand years later. It's notable that the only woman actually named in this section of Matthew is Rachel. By invoking Rachel's name, all the diverse suffering of motherhood is brought to the fore, even though the direct story is about Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

I think in a similar way, on this Mother's Day, we can access the suffering of mothers and their children everywhere through the suffering of mothers in Ukraine. To be sure, there are mothers suffering in Sudan, in south Texas, in Russia, and in every city and town across the globe for myriad reasons. There are mothers suffering in this room and within the sound of my voice. And on a day when the country calls on us to honor mothers, we owe mothers far more than "thoughts and prayers."

When you are aware of any tangible help you can give to any mother anywhere, give it. As a church, specific relationships in our congregation give us an opportunity to give concrete help to mothers suffering in Ukraine. BonnieJean is going to talk to us about that opportunity and what you can do to help.

It's in remembering the suffering of mothers and working to alleviate any and all causes of that suffering that we help to ensure that we can truly celebrate those who gave us life and who continue to take on incredible emotional, economic, and physical risk of bringing a child into the world. Rachel is weeping for all her children; we have a chance to help a few of them.