December 29, Christmas 1A (Matthew 2:13–23)

Matthew connects Jesus to the overarching narrative of the Jewish people—as well as to the smaller story of Matthew's immediate community.

by Daniel Schultz in the December 18, 2019 issue

One can read the twinned stories of the flight to Egypt and the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem as an example of how Matthew likes to depict Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. Jesus is like Joseph—the one with the amazing Technicolor dreamcoat, not his foster father—because he goes down to Egypt in desperate circumstances. Joseph saves his family from starvation by resettling them in Egypt; Jesus saves Israel by escaping Herod's political violence. Jesus is also like Moses in that he sets his people free from their slavery. More generally, Matthew wants us to trust Jesus and his teaching because he has experienced the story of the Israelites in his own life story. In other words, he is Joseph, Moses, and Israel.

This story is also about the memory of Matthew's community, which likely can relate firsthand to this story of people fleeing political violence. Matthew's audience probably did not live through a slaughter of innocents in Bethlehem. They may or may not have had to run for their lives down to Egypt or anywhere else. But they did live in a nation occupied and occasionally terrorized by foreign troops. They know about Rachel weeping and mourning for her lost children. Matthew tells his audience, in other words, that Jesus knows what it's like to stand in their shoes.

Matthew connects Jesus to two different levels of story: the overarching narrative of the Jewish people, and the smaller story of Matthew's immediate community. Those stories fit together, and in their connection, they produce hope for the community.

Hope might not be the first word that comes to mind when we talk about a story like this. It is filled with fear, persecution, violence, and death. Yet real hope arises first among people who are able to talk about the awful things that have happened to

them. By identifying Jesus with their suffering, Matthew gives his audience permission to weep and to mourn and to comfort one another. And they can begin to imagine the world in a new and different way. Rehearsing their collective grief, the community can begin to see that things don't have to be this way.

Remarkably, God joins the community in this process. God listens when the people cry out. God hears. God experiences the suffering firsthand through Jesus. And it is God who sets in motion the surprising, sometimes alarming, chains of events that result in a different world.

For Matthew's original audience, to imagine the world in a different way meant to imagine it in a truly free way: free from violence, free from the domination of the strong over the weak. It meant an entire constellation of political and economic change. While middle-class North American readers can understand this perspective to a certain extent, it is fairly remote from most of our own lives. It is not wrong, exactly, to embrace a narrative this complex as an example of the God of justice standing on the side of the oppressed. But doing so uncritically risks reducing the people in it to cardboard cutouts symbolizing our own agendas. Worse, it narrows the scope of God's initiative considerably.

This scripture has something to say even to those who have not suffered oppression. As it happens, I know a mother named Rachel who lost a child. Surely she would be interested in hearing how God hears the people. When they weep and mourn and name and claim their grief, God pays attention. Does that mean that God tends to every proverbial hangnail? Well, Jesus says he cares about what happens to the sparrow. But let's not be silly here. The collective suffering of an oppressed people may weigh more on God's mind than our inability to get along with the kids or feel fulfilled in a career.

Yet we all suffer and grieve, and God hears those cries. Furthermore, God authorizes us to talk about what we have been through and what we have lost, and so to begin the process of imagining a different world.

When we bring real grief and suffering into community, we create the possibility of real hope and real change—a process blessed by God and sponsored by Jesus' identification with all who suffer. Christians can weep and mourn with Rachel for their own lost children, writ large.

Not that church should be one big therapeutic gripe session. What creates real hope is one person coming to another and saying simply, *I am in pain. What can we do differently so that is no longer the case?* Hope in this sense is simply openness to a future that is different from the past. This is the promise embedded in Matthew's narrative: that even though horrors are still a part of the world, the coming of Christ creates the possibility they will be routine no more.

Hope takes root as the ability to express compassion for others develops. It blossoms when people grow in their capacity to take concrete steps to make things different. And where real hope lives, there is also a constant invitation to broader and deeper meaning. As we learn to talk about our own suffering and grief, we become sensitive to the often greater suffering of others. Because hope emerges from processing grief and suffering in community, it draws its practitioners to consider matters from a much wider field of vision. As we grow in our ability to imagine a different world, hope emerges among us.

It all begins by talking about it.