The grief of the widows (*Matthew 2:13-23*)

Grief is like a lead-weighted blanket that can never be fully lifted.

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I have often said that the church belongs to the grandmothers—the rest of us just play in it. I even titled a sermon that way (it went nowhere).

It's more than just a flip saying. If you look at who makes up the core of attendees and supporters in many, many mainline churches, it's the grandmothers. They are the keepers of the flame and the history. Because of that, as any pastor who's spent any time in a family-sized congregation knows, all big decisions must be ratified by the matriarchs if they are to go into effect.

The wonder of it is that churches don't operate this way, at least in one particular way: the grief of the widows so often goes unheard.

I don't mean in the sense that there are no grief-support groups in local congregations. They multiply like toadstools. Nor do I mean that sensible pastors and lay ministers don't visit and listen to the tears shed after the funeral. They do, if they value their ministry.

But if sorrow is a process, as C.S. Lewis has it, grief is like a lead-weighted blanket that can never be fully lifted, or a memory that can never be quite pushed out of sight.

Some of the most poignant memories of my own time in parish ministry come from those who have not forgotten. A grandmother wept to remember her husband, who had died five years before; a father who lost his adult son 20 years ago withdrew into a shell every year at Christmastime. "I'm all right, Pastor," he would say. "I'm just sad." And sure enough, a week or two into January he would come out of his funk and rejoin the community. But just as surely, the cycle repeated itself the next year.

I've seen a thousand shaky hands light candles and murmur soft names during the All Saints Totenfest and been told by a 90-something that life was no longer worth living because "all my friends are dead."

Life after loss is more than grimness, of course. It's just that this stuff persists. There is always another layer to be revealed. In the meantime, everyone else has moved on.

That's nowhere more true than in the North American context, so future-oriented and forgetful. We are quick to want grief packed away somewhere safe, to wonder about the mental health of those who cannot navigate through it on schedule. I cannot tell you how often I have heard the bereaved say, "After a while, everybody just stopped talking about it. I wasn't ready to stop talking!"

The gospel remembers. The Gospel, as in the second chapter of Matthew, keeps talking about grief and loss. It knows that every "first," even the birth of an infant, is tinted by the shadow of the missing.

There is no other record of Herod slaughtering infants in Bethlehem, not even from a hostile biographer like Josephus. The story is better understood metonymically, as a way of naming the collective grief of the community. The memory of this loss summons those collected around Jesus to attend to pain in a way that goes beyond the programmatic: to know the pain bone-deep and to understand from within both its sadness and its tenderness.

Because if there's anything the grandmothers know better than grief, it's how precious a new life can be. My own grandmother, in our last interaction, held up a borrowed baby the morning after my wedding and declared, "See, Daniel, this is what marriage is for."

I don't know that I completely agree with Grandma, but I take her point. Jesus was given to be our savior not because of his outrageous tolerance of abuse, but

because he was an infant—a consolation to Israel in a time of loss and death. A hundred generations later, the grandmothers remember that too. Blessed is the church that lives by their memory!