

**January 1, Christmas 1A** (*Matthew 2:13-23*)

## **Before Mary can cut the tags off the brand-new frankincense, the weeping starts.**

by [Liddy Barlow](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Before we’ve read 20 words of Matthew’s Gospel, we think we know exactly what we’re going to get. We already know that the main character is the Messiah, the promised Savior, here to fulfill the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures and to establish God’s realm on earth.

To make things even clearer, before the end of the first chapter Matthew quotes Isaiah: “‘Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (1:23). God with us! It would be reasonable to expect that from this point the story will be one triumph after another, with everlasting peace and love only pages away.

But it is not to be. Immediately after the Magi’s visit, before Mary can cut the tags off the brand-new frankincense, the weeping starts. Rachel begins to cry, and the sound of her sobbing drowns out everything else.

It’s surprising to find Rachel here, a whole testament away from where we first met her. Jacob’s younger wife never cries in Genesis, though she has plenty of reason to: rivalry with her sister, years of infertility, a hard childbirth ending with her early death. She is buried far from home, along the road near Bethlehem. Her sons Joseph and Benjamin grow up without her.

Only later, in Jeremiah, does Rachel begin to weep. On their bitter road to Babylon, the exiles pass by her grave—and from the ground, the matriarch wails for all they’ve lost. The prophet has God speak immediately to console her: “Refrain your voice from weeping. . . . There is hope in your future, says the Lord” (Jer. 31:15–17). In Jeremiah, Rachel’s tears are dried moments after they begin.

But Matthew does not preserve this consolation, only the wailing. In our Gospel reading, Rachel's refusal to be comforted is an unshakable resolve, representing the grief of the mothers of Bethlehem. The pain they face is simply too much to bear. Jesus has been spared, but at what cost? Rachel is not satisfied to trade his life for those of the other toddlers Herod kills. She does not want to hear that everything happens for a reason, nor that God needed more angels. She grieves every precious life, even and especially these unnamed ones barely begun.

Matthew and Jeremiah have already uprooted Rachel's tears from any literal history, and so her cries continue to be unbound by the constraints of time. That means Rachel still refuses comfort today. She weeps for lost innocents. She weeps for victims of political violence. She weeps for the bereaved. She weeps for refugees and exiles. She weeps at Newtown, at Parkland, at Uvalde. Wherever there is pain, Rachel is weeping. Every suffering parent's tears become hers. Platitudes cannot console her. She gives grief its due.

A world of sorrow and pain, echoing with Rachel's sobs, is not what we pictured when we read Matthew's opening words. This is not the good news of a triumphant Messiah, ushering in an immediate happy ending. Instead, Matthew's story goes in an unexpected direction. Jesus' life begins with a cozy family and exotic, generous guests, but it continues at the edges of society, in the crosshairs of tyrants, in danger and in want. His story will include exceeding great joy, to be sure, but also terror, mourning, and state-sponsored murder.

From Epiphany to Transfiguration, the lectionary offers texts that depict the gradual revealing of Christ's divine nature. The Magi, John the Baptist, and finally the disciples on the mountaintop begin to understand that in the human Jesus, God is fully present. The word *epiphany* itself means a revelation of the divine.

But Rachel's grief points us toward a different kind of epiphany: a revelation of the human. Matthew has told us that Jesus is the Messiah. But as the Magi depart, the evangelist begins to unfold the unexpected way that he will fulfill his calling. This Messiah is the man of sorrows, leading a community of lament. This Messiah is Emmanuel, God with us, and so he will be fully with us, experiencing all of what humanity entails. His way will be marked by tears and turmoil. He is acquainted with grief. He will suffer, in body and in spirit. He provides abiding presence, not easy answers.

Our Christmas celebrations rarely make room for sorrow. Rachel has no place in most Christmas pageants and nativity sets. But the story of Christmas is incomplete without her. Her grief shows us just how much we need this Messiah who is God with us. Her tears reveal the broken world that Christ came to enter, to share, and at last—praise God—to save.