This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

Her name, Rachel, means “little lamb” – what a sweet name for Laban to give to his second daughter. She did not have the large and lovely eyes of her older sister, Leah, but when she was a teenager she had gained the heart of her cousin Jacob who was willing to work 7 years to pay the bride price for her to be his wife. Jacob, whose name means “trickster” was out-tricked by his Uncle Laban into marrying Leah (they wore lots of veils) and the 7 years of laboring for Laban became 14. Rachel, his little lamb, 1st in his heart, was the last to have children. In fact, she was there to help her sister and 2 “sister wives” through 11 pregnancies – 10 boys and one girl – always wanting a child of her own. At last she and Jacob had a son – Joseph (who saved the children of Israel from death by starvation by welcoming them to Egypt) – how happy Rachel must have been to present her first-born son to her husband, the one who loved her best of all. Then, as they journey back to the land of Abraham and Isaac she goes into labor at Bethlehem. The labor is difficult, a son is born alive and well but Rachel is dying, bleeding out, and says to name the boy Benoni: “Son of my sorrow” as her life fades. His father says, “No. He will be called Benjamin, the son of my strong right arm.” He would not have their son, his last; bear the name of sorrow but a name of strength.

Generations later Matthew recalls the wailing sorrow of this dying mother, Remembering Rachel as he relates the Slaughter of the Innocents: “A voice goes up in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children.” Some Christmas story – I mean, after we have all felt good about our generosity and best wishes for Peace on Earth around our Christmas trees, these texts wrench us back to reality like today’s bone chilling sub-zero winter wind, taking our breath away. We do not live in a peaceful snow globe even here in Minnesota; we live in a world where children die and mothers grieve, spouses die and widows and widowers go on to care for their families — not just occasionally, but every day, not just in hospitals but on city streets. Victims of wars throughout the world have come and are coming right here to Minnesota as refugees and outcasts to our neighborhoods to escape oppressors who are getting away, literally, with murder.

There’s no getting around it: Matthew’s “slaughter of the innocents,” as the church has dubbed it, is a wretched text to ponder with angelic choruses still ringing in our ears. I remember being taught about “the Flight into Egypt” as a child in a matter-of-fact way. The death of the babies bothered me, and I remember my mother talking about my twin dying, telling me how hard it was when my cousin Danny died in a tragic accident or my cousin Johnny being left in a cornfield as a toddler – thrown from the car where everyone else was knocked unconscious. Mom even talked about family friends who desperately wanted children but were unable as the same kind of loss. Dorothy Benke was kind and factual parent – and I asked lots of questions. She didn’t skip difficult or painful points – like my
Sunday School teachers or Lutheran classroom teachers did in this passage going straight to the adventurous journey: Joseph the hero taking Mary and baby Jesus to Egypt under direct orders from God - never mentioning that they were refugees there, outcasts & strangers in a strange land. I wonder if he had any trouble getting work as a carpenter not speaking the language, not having done his apprentice work under an Egyptian.

Certainly the point of the story at home or church & school was that Jesus came into a very dangerous world. As a boy in the 50’s with a pretty good fallout shelter in our basement walking without fear with fellow Kindergarten student and neighbor, Linda Schindhelm, a mile to school along a very busy 4 lane street I thought that our own world was safer for children, I suppose.

If Matthew’s account of the Slaughter of the Innocents was not part of the infancy narrative of the life of Jesus this portion would seem more appropriate for Lent or Holy Week, but Christmas songs of Peace and Joy throughout the centuries have rung through the darkness of oppression, poverty, violence and genocide to give us hope in this always brutal world. Today’s victims are from the Congo, Egypt, Syria, Pakistan - the sounds of Rachel weeping for her children are not uncommon in any land at any time.

I believe that is why Matthew tells us what happened – oh, it does fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would “come up out of Egypt,” but it is also our story – it is not just ‘what happened to them’ it is ‘what is happening to us.’ Writing to a Jewish audience those hearing of baby boys slaughtered by the empire would remind Matthew’s readers of the way Moses (another savior for Israel) narrowly escaped that fate as well. And any Jew hearing this story in 1st century Palestine would remember the not too distant history of their people under the King of Syria, Antiochus Euphemos. He decreed the death of any man teaching or reading the Torah and the public slaughter of any male child who was circumcised by his mother who then had the dead baby hung around her neck.

Like I said, a wretched text though Matthew wishes to stir up hope quoting Jeremiah 31:15, where as the citizens of Jerusalem are being hauled off to Babylon Jeremiah uses Rachel’s weeping as a turning point shifting from declaring God’s judgment on them in his prophesies to promises of hope. "Keep your voice from weeping . . . there is hope for your future . . . your children shall come back."

Why Rachel? Well, the ancient rabbis tell a Midrash (story based on a Bible passage) of God’s response to this pivotal tragedy in Judah’s history. Jeremiah, they say, called up Moses from his grave, who in turn called the patriarchs to bear witness as the exiles left their homes. Each of them responds with indignation.

Isaac protests: “Lord of the world, I did not protest but willingly let myself be bound on the altar and even stretched out my neck beneath the knife. Will you not remember this on my behalf and have mercy on my children?” (Rachel, by Samuel Dresner).

The Midrash says God is not moved - not by Abraham or Isaac or Jacob or Moses himself, until finally Rachel stands before God, and her words alone turn the tide. Although
Rachel is a biological ancestor for only two of the original twelve tribes, she is recognized in Jeremiah as mother of all, and even God has to respond to her insistent plea for mercy. Fairness has nothing to do with it; it is the promise of one parent to another, a Father whose Son would die and a mother who died giving birth to her boy, Benjamin: “your children will come back.” Your children will have life!

Matthew, in turn, invokes Rachel in the midst of this story of God-with-us, the birth of a child whose name is a verb: to save. God’s salvation may seem far off and inadequate to the parents who mourn, but the promise is deeper than this or any moment in time. The threat of this Herod passes for a short while, only to be replaced by another Herod who is cruel and without scruples. But when this particular child of Rachel, Joshua ben Joseph, returns to Jerusalem as an adult, God enters into the fate of every doomed child and every bereft parent and spouse with the Savior of all nations to bring all who call on the name of Jesus life eternal, hope for now and hope forevermore.

For Christians, the birth of Christ can and must remind us that there can be no cheap comfort for those who mourn their children or any loved ones. There is really nothing naturally within us that stops or brings ultimate “closure” to the devastation of those who have lost a child—whatever the circumstance. Toys for Tots and even our best legislation for child health don’t make that big of a dent either. Only something deeper, God’s entering into this world of sorrows, will accomplish the depth of healing, the salvation all the broken people of this world— all of us need— standing us in our sorrow, granting us hope, healing and the strength to face life.

This is not a cheap kind of sympathy, a soothing cliché that “it will all work out in the end.” Having another child after the loss of one doesn’t ever replace that child. Parents who have lost a child to death or the dreams of a child they never got to have still wail and mourn. But as God is with us, then with a hope and peace the world cannot give we can bear to listen to the cries of sorrow and pleas for justice of our time too, knowing that all our weeping is gathered up by the one died— who had no reason to experience death or have his Father experience loss but did it so that our mourning can and will be turned into dancing. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God shown to use in Christ Jesus our Lord - nothing, not even a bottomless pit of grief or the intractable legacy of injustice repeated throughout the ages. The Lamb of God – the Savior all the world needed has come – Joseph kept Jesus safe so that he could save us – and He did! AMEN.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ, who knows our needs and our limited power to meet them, defend us and all the needy from harm and adversity and stir up in us the warmth of His love.