

## **Via Dolorosa: Weeping With Rachel**

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*Genesis 30:22-24, 35:16-20*

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA  
February 17, 2008*

Imagine that you're exploring a beautiful cathedral somewhere in Europe. You're alone in a side chapel and before you is a carved triptych – a hinged panel composed of three paintings. The left hand painting is of weeping women and midwives who, back in the time of Pharaoh, were told to kill every newborn Hebrew male. In the corner of the painting is a basket woven out of reeds, ready for the baby Moses who would escape that grim fate by floating down the Nile toward Pharaoh's daughter. The center painting shows a destroyed city of Jerusalem with women in the foreground weeping over the temple's destruction, while behind them people are marching into exile to the distant land of Babylon. The right hand painting also shows weeping women. This time it is the New Testament mothers forced to witness their infant sons being killed by Herod's army. Off to the side, Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus can be seen escaping by a side road, heading for safety in Egypt.

When the outer panels are closed, the front of the triptych shows a fourth painting – this time of Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, who is lying on a birthing bed that will also be her death bed. As the child is born, she will name him "Benoni", son of my sorrow. No triptych exists like this, but if it did, imagine why Rachel serves as the unifying figure for all these stories about loss and weeping.

You need to know Rachel's story: Second daughter of Laban with whom Jacob falls in love and eventually wins her hand in marriage. But for years no child came from this union. Her sister, Leah, their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, all delivered to Jacob male heirs, but not Rachel. From the other women, Jacob's sons, the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel were born: Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun – ten sons in all. Only near the end did Rachel's womb open. At last she added an eleventh son to the family tree – Joseph, whose name means, in effect, "Whoah! Give me another son soon!"

But things changed. Jacob and his family had to flee. Jacob had some hard times, including a wrestling match with an angel and a standoff with his estranged brother Esau. As they neared the town of Ephrath, which will later be known as Bethlehem, it came time for Rachel to bear a second child. The labor was hard. A midwife tried to encourage her by saying, "Remember your wish for another child? Well, it's about to come true!" But Rachel would die giving birth. And as she wept from pain and sadness, she named the infant taken from her arms "Benoni", son of my sorrow. Jacob, through his tears, would rename the boy "Benjamin", son of my right hand, and hold tight to that child for the rest of his days.

Rachel is the first woman recorded in the bible to die of childbirth. Her death reminds us of the fact that many women today still meet a similar fate. According to the World Health Organization, complications from pregnancy and childbirth lead to more than 530,000 deaths worldwide every year. 99% of these deaths occur in the developing world, with over half of them coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Over the course of her lifetime, a woman in the United States has a 1 in 5,000 chance of dying during childbirth. That's actually not very good, since for a woman in England the odds are 1 in 8,000 and for a woman in Germany, 1 in 19,000. However for a woman in Somalia, the odds are 1 in 12; for Sierra Leone or Afghanistan, it is 1 in 8.<sup>1</sup>

Rachel weeps as she dies bringing forth life. There's a universal quality to her tragedy; the tears of the one who died in childbirth continue to be shed for all who suffer from life's tragedies. The ancient rabbis tell a Midrash, or a story, in which Jeremiah is so distraught over the destruction of Jerusalem that he calls up the spirit of Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But God does not answer any of these men until Jeremiah summons forth Rachel, the ancestral mother of the tribes being taken into exile. Only in response to her cries for mercy God finally answers with the promise found in Jeremiah 31: "There is hope for your future; your children shall come back to their own country."<sup>2</sup>

Just as in the triptych we imagined earlier, Rachel weeps for the mothers in Egypt whose children Pharaoh killed. Rachel weeps for the descendants of her boys Joseph and Benjamin who were killed or sent into Babylonian exile. Rachel weeps for their descendants in Bethlehem who were slaughtered by Herod's army. Rachel also weeps for every mother parted from her child tragically – through her death or theirs, by accident, disease, or disaster, by warfare or hunger or street violence. Rachel weeps for her children sold into slavery a century ago and those still sold into slavery today. Rachel weeps for her children irreparably harmed through child abuse and date rape, through so-called honor killings or genital mutilation or being maimed with acid in misogynist cultures. Rachel weeps today and cries out to God for an answer, for a new promise that says, "There is hope for your future; your children will come back to you."

I thought a lot about what causes Rachel's tears today. I thought about how, through history, women have been so often defined by the men in their lives, even though their gifts and abilities often far surpassed their male counterparts. Thomas Jefferson, for example, worked out an extensive educational plan for his daughter Patsy, which was quite unusual for his time. But, as he put it in a letter in 1783, "I need to consider her as possibly the head of a family of her own. Because the chance that in marriage she will draw a blockhead I calculate at about fourteen to one, so the education of her family will probably rest on her own ideas and direction without assistance."<sup>3</sup>

I thought about how deeply the death of a child or a spouse affects us both emotionally and cognitively. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, The Tipping Point, he talks about how we store information with others in our immediate family. Most of us remember only a fraction of the day-to-day details and histories of our family life, but we know who to go to for the answers to our questions – whether it is to our spouse to remember where we put the checkbook or to our 13-year-old to fix something on the computer or to our mother to tell us a detail about our childhood.<sup>4</sup> We rely on this network of memories to help us function each day. That is why when we get divorced or a child moves away or a partner or child dies, we complain that it's hard to think straight. The loss of this shared memory bank feels like losing a part of one's own mind. And for that, we weep.

In the end, I don't need to name the causes of Rachel's tears or of our tears. We understand why Rachel weeps as she hands over the boy she named "Benoni," son of my sorrows. There is no parent, who in saying goodbye to a child, considers the conversation to be truly finished. Whether the goodbye is said as they board a school bus or drive off to college or move into an apartment or pull away in a wedding limo; or whether it is spoken in anger some rainy night or whispered in a side chapel of a funeral home, no one considers that conversation finished. They didn't in Egypt or Bethlehem back then; they don't now. The question is, How do we make sense of Rachel's tears even as we weep with her?

Laughter forgets laughter; tears do not forget tears. The church, and the church's faith, should never offer cheap comfort to those who mourn their children. Instead we are to offer three things: our presence, our voice, and our promise. Our presence is the reminder that those who weep are not alone. We weep as a community. We share our stories and comfort one another. Love others as you would be loved yourself. Forgive others as you have been forgiven. Comfort those who mourn and weep, as you allow yourself to be comforted also.

But it's not only our presence we offer; we offer our voice. A voice that says to God and the world: "Things are not as they should be, nor as they were promised, and not as they will and must be."<sup>5</sup> The beginning of change comes when we take to heart the message, "Do not suffer without complaining." It is important for us to name the ways people are wronged and mistreated and in pain. Raising our voice with them, or if need be, for them, is the first step toward the changes that prevent future tears from falling – that leads to changes in research funding and crime prevention and foreign policy and on and on. God hears, but God is a just God who always listens. We speak so that others can learn what our just God demands.

We offer our presence and our voice, but mostly we offer a promise. If that triptych honoring Rachel's tears truly existed in a cathedral side chapel, then it likely was positioned below another work of religious art – a crucifix depicting the Son of God dying on a cross. Rachel's final cry of Benoni, "son of my sorrow", receives an answer in another son of the Hebrew covenant, the one called by Isaiah a "man of sorrows, well acquainted with infirmity." And Jacob's tearful re-naming of the baby as Benjamin, "son of my right hand", is mirrored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God. It is a deep truth difficult to put in words, but you know it by heart: God entered this world and endured every experience of loss – such as when a parent loses a child – so that amidst the deepest grief imaginable a life-changing promise can be offered. Jeremiah 31: "There is hope for your future." Matthew 28: "Do not be afraid: he is not here, but has been raised from the dead." John 16: "In this world you will face tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world!"

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Maternal Mortality in 2005: WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and The World Bank Maternal Mortality in 2005 study. ([www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Dresner, Rachel (Fortress Press); cited by Dan Clendenin, "The Journey With Jesus: Notes to Myself," December 24, 2007 ([www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net))

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience, pp. 186-7.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point, p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Doris Donnelly, Spiritual Fitness, p. 96, quoting Walter Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination.