Matthew 2:16-18, Jeremiah 31:15-17

“Massacre of the Innocents”

 It is a bit unusual during Advent to read the New Testament lesson first and then the Old Testament, especially when the New Testament is a Scripture that defines an event that happens in the very earliest stages in the life of our Savior. But today is not an ordinary Sunday. I was ordained in 1994 and in those nearly 20 years I have only radically changed what I was going to be preaching on twice: The first time was with the assassination of Yitzak Rabin in 1995 and I remember weeping while watching the coverage. The second time was with the attack on our country on 9-11 and I remember weeping with other people around me as we watched from a hospital lobby. Today is the third time. As Rachel wept for her children, so we wept on Friday and yesterday, but in the words of any good Baptist preacher, it’s Friday, but Sunday is coming, and today is Sunday. The Lord’s day, and today we try to put some words to it to try to make sense of it all.

 Even as we stray from our Advent Scripture we still remain with our Advent theme of No Fear. Does anyone need to hear that message today, but hear it in a way that it actually makes sense in light of the massacre of 20 kids whose average age was 6 years and 7 months old. You see my primary responsibility as your pastor is to take life as we see it, as we live it, and distill it through the screen of Scripture and every week through prayer and study and even more prayer to present a neat and tidy package called the Good News, or the Gospel, that can be shared with you as a message of hope in our Savior Jesus Christ. But some Sundays are more difficult than others to be able to do this. Today is one of those difficult Sundays.

 I saw a headline yesterday morning that read: Massacre of the Innocents. To some this is a direct reference to the very famous depictions by Reubens, or Poussin, or Guido Reni, but to us as Christians it is the title of what we read earlier in Matthew 2, or the slaughter of the babies by Herod. It is historically called and known as, the Massacre of the Innocents. Today we are going to look at our Scripture and first identify the massacre in Matthew and see what God was able to work out of that, to the prediction of this massacre in Matthew, not Friday’s through Jeremiah, but it is depicted in a very different way. It is depicted in a way that is to give us hope and drive away all fear so that we can see the God who loves us and truly cares for us shine through even the most horrific event we could imagine. Let’s read.

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The most striking scene I remember from Friday is hearing about the parent who was walking away from the school, down a wooded role crying out Why, Why. I thought right away of what happened right after the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. You know, we don’t often include this story about Christmas. The angels, shepherds, wise men, and the starry night and the wonderful, peaceful, bucolic scene that we so enjoy and that is so indicative of our romanticizing of Christmas and the sterilizing of Christmas soon gives way to the sound of the feet of soldiers going house to house through Bethlehem and the surrounding towns searching for infants in order to slaughter them. This Scripture has not made any of the Christmas carols, it was not a silent night that night. It was far from a holy night.

 Look at the Matthew Scripture. We don’t know the motivation for why Adam Lanza did what he did. But we do know why Herod did what he did, Scripture gives us this insight. It tells us in vs. 16 that he was infuriated when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men. He was mad because he had a plan to capture and kill the one King of the Jews who had the potential to take his throne, so he would kill all the Jews just to be sure that he had his bases covered. He was angry, but don’t you think he was also afraid? Even more than anger, fear drove him to this action and made him do what he did. He was afraid of losing his power, which he loved to wield. He was afraid of being replaced, he was even afraid of losing his life, because that was what happened when one lost their throne.

 Fear drove Herod to make this decision. Think of what decisions you may have made because you were driven by fear, whatever fear you may have had at the time. Fear of not having control over a relationship, fear of losing control over your child, fear of not knowing what God might be doing in a certain situation. God tells us to not be afraid, over and over and over again. But you know, let me tell you of someone who heard God’s message of do not be afraid and responded in a very ungodly way about it.

 Do you remember Gideon? Turn to Judges 6:12 and here you have an angel of the Lord appearing again to someone in the Bible and giving them comfort and hope in their words. The angel tells Gideon on the cusp of an impending massacre at the hands of the Midianites: The Lord is with you. Again, in all the other situations God comes through the words of an angel and the one receiving the words pays attention and obeys. But not Gideon. What does Gideon say? Look at vs. 13, but sir, Mr. Angel sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? To the mothers of the innocents slaughtered don’t come to them gaily and say: The Lord is with you. To someone who has just suffered a tragedy or is facing cancer with all of its uncertainties or is in the midst of a brutal divorce, or facing a surgery that they are not able to comprehend, or you fill in your current state, don’t come to me and say the Lord is with me. Because if the Lord is with me, why then has all this happened to us?

 Those aren’t my words, those are the words of Gideon that are reflected time and again over history. They were spoken by Rachel as she saw her children being massacred, the metaphorical Rachel in Jesus’ day as the nation of Israel saw her children slaughtered. Have you ever used Gideon’s words? Now would be the time to use them. He goes on, you thought that was blasphemous enough, he goes on and says, And where are all his wonderful works that our ancestors recounted to us? Honest questions from someone facing impending disaster. If God is for us, then let him show himself. Very different from Paul’s: If God is for us, who can be against us. There are times in our history when we can ask these questions of faith and not be condemned for asking. This time has come upon us.

 Yesterday I went and heard the Lancaster Mennonite choir concert. One of my daughters sings in it. 100 kids, high school, but kids singing together. It was the first year in history that Lancaster Mennonite and Lancaster Catholic are combining in sports and music for those sports that either may not have they can each participate in the other’s, like football, or music like the orchestra. That last piece that they sang was Come All Ye Faithful. And as these kids belted out Oh come let us adore him, I thought Jesus was going to come back, I prayed that he would, because it was so beautiful. A day removed from a tragedy that took the lives of so many beautiful children, I was being blessed by kids even in the face of that tragedy able to sing, O Come Let Us Adore Him. How do we do it, how do we adore him in the face of this stark and bitter death?

 Jeremiah helps us here today and gives us the distilled hope from Scripture that helps us sing to the Lord even in the face of the worst possible moment or season of our life. Turn to Jeremiah. What you will find in chapter 31 verses 15-17 are the quoted words from Matthew. But the context is completely different. In Matthew you find yourself immersed in the tragedy of the slaughter. In Jeremiah the people of Israel are heading back home after generations of Babylonian captivity. The weeping of Rachel is seen as something that happened in the direct past. Not too long ago, so the wound is still very, very fresh. But somehow as the people of Israel are making their way to freedom Jeremiah the prophet tells them, remember the weeping, remember when you refused to be comforted because you had lost your children, and they are no more. Do not every forget that.

 But also know, that your children, in some way, will come back from the land of the enemy. Your children shall come back to their own country. Jeremiah the prophet was telling the nation of Israel, the terrible tragedy that we have just undergone is over, the children that we lost are gone forever, but we are promised that there is hope for our future, and that hope lies in the children that remain. They will come back to their own country. Look at vs. 17, there is hope for your future, and that hope is found in our children.

 We failed in our responsibility to protect our children. That failure is revealing itself it seems more and more in our recent memory. I couldn’t help but think of when Terry Roberts came and spoke last year and how she said that every time that there is a shooting in the country it just brings it all back flooding to her. We have been inundated lately with these memories that have brought back home this tragedy that struck our community. As our President said from a Mall in Oregon, to a temple in Wisconsin, to a movie theater in Aurora, to the streets of Philadelphia and Lancaster, these are our children that are being killed, and we have a responsibility that is not being met.

 Over the last 30 years millions of youth have disappeared from our churches. Did you know that according to the Gallup poll 8 out of 10 kids leave the church before they get out of high school? And only 1 out of 10 kids have any sort of Christian education. Think of the churches that have had an impact on your lives. Count how many have actually made a difference. I had 7 different churches and 4 different denominations.

 What kind of nurturing did you receive growing up from the church? Well, in the Bronkema family we had to go to church whether we liked it or not. The older three Bronkema boys did it with a smile on their face and I went kicking and screaming. I remember being kicked out of Sunday School a few times, and not being the best influence in the youth group. For some kids, you just expect the worst from them, and when you do, well they usually surpass your worst expectations.

 Do you realize that each of these children as they are growing up in the church will have they say about 25,000 opportunities to connect with an adult who will show them the real authentic Gospel of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ which is found in unconditional acceptance, something we call grace. And we can choose to scold them and yell at them for leaving the church early or for dropping their crumbs around, or we can choose to greet them with a smile and a hug.

 But so often we feel as if in some way the kids have to earn it before we give it to them. If that happens then we set them up for rejection and it becomes fairly obvious that they aren’t wanted. Think of the last time you knew you weren’t wanted. When you walked into the room and the body language says it all. Kids feel that and when they do they want to get out of that room, out of that church as fast as they can. In this church a child must be able to walk in and see that it is filled with people who have a nurturing approach and want to gather the children under their wings as Jesus did on that day he headed into Jerusalem.

 You know the earliest church had to learn the hard way from Jesus. Remember what happened in Matthew 19:13-15. Jesus, the master is teaching on a hillside, mostly to adults and these young parents start making their way to the master to hear better and maybe to have their kids actually see him.

 Well, the disciples see this happening and they cut off the young parents and their children. What do you think you’re doing. Can’t you tell that he is busy, with adults? He doesn’t have time for you now. Jesus his voice cracking like a whip over the people says: What are you doing? Let the children come unto me it is not my will that even one should perish. We need to foster that attitude that not a single one of these kids will be lost.

 I remember in a church growing up and we would have coffee hour. We would race over to the fellowship hall after the service so that we could be the first there, grab a fistful of cookies and then like squirrels go and hide somewhere with our stash so that nobody could bother us. One day an adult indignantly went up to the pastor and said, they are stealing our cookies, can’t you do something. There was a collective snarl that gathered on the people’s faces when they saw us coming. The church can’t live without the youth and children running around, taking cookies, dancing in the fellowship hall, disrupting the normalcy of life so that they know that they are accepted.

 Did you know that 95% of people who come to know Christ come to know him before they turn 20, and we are losing 20% of these. These kids’ first experience of who Jesus is, is going to be interpreted through what you do and your love and acceptance of them.

Our goal as a church is that every single adult Christian who is active in this church will come to know that they have been called to give that unconditional love that they have known and felt to others, especially children. At the head of our each on reach one campaign is that understanding that if you have felt the love of God in this place, you can’t help but share it, you can’t help but have it affect your life and the way that you approach and think about the children of this church.

I felt the love of God through a youth pastor who never gave up on me. Still hasn’t. He still prays for me, writes to me. He was imaging God in Christ for me. God made my youth pastor his friend. And that youth pastor, Big Al, made that boy named Bobby his friend for God’s sake, and it was all about nurture.

 Every single adult here can release the transforming power of God’s friendship that they have experienced in Jesus Christ. Our kids are looking now in every dry well for that contagious community. Let’s be that community to them, and to each other.

 It’s not an answer to the why, but at least it gives us something to do in order to interpret in some way or shape our responsibilities for children and youth. So that all of us, even in the midst of this tragedy, may be able to gather together and sing, O Come Let us Adore Him.