

Matthew frames the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of what was foretold by the prophets. This was to fulfill what had been *spoken by* the Lord through *the prophet*, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Then was fulfilled what had been *spoken through the prophet* Jeremiah:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachael weeping for her children,
she refused to be consoled,
because they are no more.

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been *spoken through the prophets* might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Only Matthew tells us Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt. We have no corroborating sources for this story. The Coptic Church of Egypt sees itself as the guardian of the divine child’s infancy. Its inheritance is to provide care and protection to refugees. The Coptic Church believes the angel warned all the parents of young children to flee, but only Joseph acted on the warning.

Only Matthew tells of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents. We have no corroborating historical evidence for this story. Matthew’s story of Herod’s murder of the children of Bethlehem is a recapitulation of the story of Pharaoh’s slaughter of the children of Israel. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses, escaping the grasp of a murderous ruler.

At Jesus’ trial, Caiaphas advised it was better for Israel that one man should die for the people so that the whole nation not perish. At Jesus’ birth, it seems, it was expedient for many to die to save the one. It may be considered expedient by a despot desperately clinging to power, but it can never be justified in any moral universe to slaughter the innocents.

Every attempt to make sense of innocent suffering, whether in Bethlehem, Sandy Hook, Uvalde, Kabul, Mariupol, Kherson, Bangkok, West Darfur, wherever—call it fate, karma, free will, or God’s inscrutable will—only rubs salt in the wounded hearts of those who weep. Somehow we find it easier to choke on ludicrous explanations than to weep with those who weep.

The temptation, one quite fashionable at the moment, is to conclude that nothing means anything. Disorder, chaos, is the name of the game; cynicism is the best defense. Every conviction, we are convinced, is but a concerted effort to impose a pattern where none exists.

If we can live with bewilderment long enough, if we can respect the suffering of those who grieve by keeping silence long enough, we will know, at some level, that all attempts to

make sense of the insensible are like cheap facial tissues which dissolve in the tears they are intended to wipe away.

The refusal to “make sense,” to explain and domesticate innocent suffering, is a potent witness to the faith of Mary who weeps at the foot of the cross bearing her son. Refusing comfort, refusing reconciliation with the senseless violence reigned upon the innocent children of Ukraine and the abduction and deportation of 11,000 of them for “reeducation” in Russia, is a potent witness to the faith of Job.

The knowledge that we can only stand helplessly before the outrages and miseries of our world, utterly at a loss for a word of meaning, realizing reason alone cannot bridge the chasm between innocent suffering and meaning, places us in the company of Rachael, of Job, of Mary, of all grieving mothers and fathers.

Reason, reasons, do not, never have, and never will wipe away Rachael’s tears, for her children are no more. Reason, explanations, do not, never have, and never will heal the broken heart.

God never answers Jesus’ cry from the cross. The silence of eternity is the only thing Jesus hears. Why? For the same reason God sends Job’s friends back to school for remedial metaphysics. Reason is powerless to answer innocent suffering. No explanation can redeem what is lost.

Our need to make sense, to find meaning, is so overwhelming that we accept explanations we know are bunk. Perhaps, we should not be too hard on ourselves. Where God remains silent in response to Jesus query, “Why?” Matthew, Mark, and Luke respond, each in his peculiar way, with explanations which evolved into theories of atonement. The only Gospel to respect the silence of God is John, which has no theory of the atonement.

How, within any providential system whatsoever, can the suffering of the innocent, of children, make sense? God’s response to the innocent suffering of Job is not an explanation but a theophany. God’s response to the innocent suffering of Jesus is not a theory of the atonement but resurrection.

Only if divine love is stronger than death is there hope, not of making sense of innocent suffering, but of redemption.