

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? JER. 31:10-17 (AFBC 12/3/17)

Do You Hear What I Hear? is a song that most of us know, and many of us, including myself, look forward to hearing this time of year. I thought of it as I was considering our Scripture passage for this morning. When I googled the title, this is what I found.

It was written in October of 1962—the words by Noël Regney and the music by Gloria Baker. But here’s the thing: the song was composed in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was written as a plea for peace.

Some of you can still recall what a fearful time that was. Lots of threatening acts and tough words were being exchanged between the two nuclear superpowers—the Soviet Union and us. In response, Regney and Baker came up with this:

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see
Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see
A star, a star, dancing in the night
With a tail as big as a kite
With a tail as big as a kite

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy
Do you hear what I hear
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear
A song, a song, high above the trees
With a voice as big as the sea
With a voice as big as the sea

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
Do you know what I know
In your palace wall, mighty king,
Do you know what I know
A Child, a Child shivers in the cold
Let us bring Him silver and gold
Let us bring Him silver and gold

Said the king to the people everywhere,
Listen to what I say
Pray for peace, people everywhere!
Listen to what I say
The Child, the Child, sleeping in the night
He will bring us goodness and light
He will bring us goodness and light

It's a beautiful song with an important message. I've chosen to use a few phrases from this familiar carol as we once again prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's birth.

Music is such an important part of this season. In two weeks, our wonderful choir, accompanied by a variety of instruments, will present our Christmas music. We look forward to this every year. It's a Christmas tradition. I hope you'll invite others to come and share in this gift of music with us.

Of course, it's not only at church that we hear music. On the XM radio that came with my car, there are three special Christmas music stations. One plays traditional Christmas music, everything from *Away in a Manger* to *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*.

Another channel plays classical favorites like Handel's *Messiah*. And the third plays crazy songs like "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer"—all day long, they play these familiar Christmas tunes.

But not all the sounds associated with Christmas are good—not even in the Bible. See if you are familiar with this passage of Scripture found in **Jeremiah 31:10-17**:

¹⁰ "Hear the word of the LORD, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:

'He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

¹¹ For the LORD will deliver Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹² They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—

the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

¹³ Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴ I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,"
declares the LORD.

¹⁵ This is what the LORD says:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,

Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

In the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, we have these disturbing words that we just read, which are then immediately transformed into words of hope. Listen as the passage continues:

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy.

¹⁷ So there is hope for your descendants," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land.

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, God is speaking a word of hope to his people in exile. He assures them that they will soon return to their homeland—so they should not lose hope.

We also find these words about "Rachel weeping for her children" in the New Testament—in the Christmas story, of all places—remember? In the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we learn that wise men from the East came to visit the baby Jesus.

When they told Herod what their mission was, he told them to let him know when they found the baby so he could worship him too. But the wise men were warned in a dream not to do this, so they returned home without checking in with Herod—and you remember what resulted from this.

Herod was furious! He ordered that all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem be put to death. This was cruel almost beyond comprehension, but Herod's soldiers carried out the king's orders.

Matthew lifts these words from the Old Testament prophet in an effort to describe the anguish this caused. We find them in Matthew 2:18: **"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more."**

How would you describe a person who would order such a thing? Would you call him evil? Insecure? Insane? I don't know what to make of this kind of violence. But I do know that not all the sounds in any Christmas season are happy ones—then... or now.

Do You Hear What I Hear?--the shouts of the soldiers, the cries of those babies, and the screams of their mothers... unfortunately, these are all part of the sounds of Christmas. I believe God is

reminding us here that His sounds of hope during this holy season must be heard over the other sounds of anguish and despair.

I. In other words, friends, if you and I are to have hope in our hearts, the sounds of suffering cannot be the only ones we hear.

Maybe by now you're saying, "I don't want to think about this—it's too morbid. Let's all have happy thoughts, and only hear happy sounds." But the Bible is honest.

When it tells the story of Christmas, it's not only about angels and shepherds and wise men who bring nice gifts. It also tells about Herod, and hatred, and soldiers murdering little innocent children.

It's impossible for us to imagine what it was like to be one of those parents in Bethlehem that night. To have your little boy, just a few months old—plenty of time to capture your heart--to have soldiers invade your home, search through every room until they find your child and kill him.

How cruel and senseless and embarrassing even that we live in a world where things like this happen! Yet all of this is right there in the Christmas story.

Such anguish is still part of the Christmas experience for some—for those who are suffering, who are lonely and grieving. There may be little joy for them in their Christmas celebrations this year.

Yet, God still wants them—He wants all of us--to hear a clear message of hope in the Christmas story. He wants all of us to know that even though He doesn't promise to take away our suffering, He will at least be here to help us cope with it.

Eli Weisel was a well-known Jewish author. He wrote a book called Night in which he tells of his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp.

One evening after a day of slave labor, he and the other prisoners returned to the camp to discover that three gallows had been built. Three prisoners were to be executed. The guards had orders to force all the other prisoners to stand and watch those executions.

Two of the victims were men, but to their horror they saw that the third was only a small boy. They watched as nooses were put

around their necks, and all three were made to stand on chairs. The chairs were then kicked out from under them.

The two men died almost instantly as the weight of their bodies broke their necks. But he said the little boy was so light that his neck didn't break.

So there he hung, gasping for breath, dangling at the end of the rope. And those prisoners were forced to stand there and watch the boy struggle for over 30 minutes, until finally... he died.

In the terribleness of that moment, one of the men behind Weisel cried out, "You say that there is a God? Then where is He? Where is He now?" Weisel said, "I turned back and looked at him and said, "There He is. He is hanging at the end of a rope."

What do you think Weisel was trying to say? Maybe that God is not just beyond the stars, far off somewhere in the heavens. That He is also here with us.

This is surely part of the Christmas message—that God came to be with us, suffering with us, hurting with us, bleeding and dying with us. Maybe this is not the Christmas message we most want to hear—but so often, it's the message we most need.

II. Do You Hear What I Hear? I hear that in the midst of this baffling world, God keeps providing us with sounds of hope and reassurance.

Think of all the uncertainty in the lives of Mary and Joseph as they were forced to pack up their meager belongings and leave Bethlehem in order to escape to the safety of Egypt.

Many of us have traveled to foreign countries, but we've probably gone with someone who knew where to go, what to see, where to spend the night and what to eat and drink. But Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt, not knowing where they would stay.

They didn't know what the future held, only that God had instructed them to leave—and again, they trusted Him. He was the only hope they had.

An angel had told them that their boy, Jesus, was the Savior--that He would save His people from their sins. But what was their

responsibility in this? How were they to raise the Son of God and what would their future hold? There was confusion and uncertainty.

Our lives are often like that too. Every time we approach a major change, a big decision, an unanticipated crisis, the questions come flooding in. Young people worry about how their lives will be affected by decisions they must make right now about school or employment or relationships.

Those who are older may have concerns over whether they'll have a job next year, or if they will ever get their house paid for, if their children will be okay as they head off to college or wherever.

We wonder if that pain we're experiencing is just something minor or could it be serious? We wonder if we'll ever be able to retire? Will there be any money left in Social Security when we do? And will we be able to afford health care—at whatever stage of life?

Life is uncertain—it doesn't matter how well you plan for it—it's still confusing. It was for Mary and Joseph, too, but God chose to use this young couple in a remarkable way because they had this deep faith that God was leading the way, and this abiding hope that God would take care of them wherever He led them to go.

They had to escape with the baby Jesus to Egypt—this was a life and death matter. But one day, Jesus would return to His people and teach them about God. He would tell them how God cares for the birds and the lilies.

"If God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field," He would say, "then you mustn't be concerned about what you're going to eat, or what you're going to wear, because God cares for you even more."

As we follow Jesus today, we don't know what tomorrow holds either, but we do believe that God holds our tomorrows in His hands—because Jesus said so. We've heard Him and we trust Him.

There's uncertainty—sure--but God is with us to lead us through that uncertainty. We hear this clear word of hope in the message of Christmas. Now let's close with this:

III. Do You Hear What I Hear? Not even the noise of death itself can drown out the clear message of hope.

There was lots of suffering and death on that long ago Bethlehem night when the babies died and their mothers could not be comforted.

Yet, we hear the message of hope that one child was saved. Carted off to Egypt, He didn't die--not then.

But, of course, one day, He would. He would die as part of His own Father's plan to save a lost world that's full of dying people. It's not an easy message to hear—but it's important that we hear it.

I like the story of the family putting up a nativity scene in their front yard. Everything was in place--Mary & Joseph, the manger and the baby, angels and shepherds and all the animals.

Then little Billy came out carrying one of his favorite toys--a big, fierce Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of the dinosaurs. It was one of those plastic inflatables. Compared to all the other figures, it was enormous. It looked out of place in the nativity scene.

Dad said, "Billy, take that back in the house. It doesn't belong there. Dinosaurs existed thousands of years before the baby Jesus. It just doesn't fit in."

But little Billy insisted, so... they left it there--a fierce-looking dinosaur hovering over all the other figures in the manger scene.

But then Dad made this observation: "As we stood back and looked at it, we realized that maybe that dinosaur says more than we realized. For over each of us there is this menacing character that threatens to rob us of all our joy and peace and cheer.

So what would that be in our lives? The Advent season comes round to remind us that the baby Jesus is stronger than all the dinosaurs—real or imagined—that exist in my life and yours.

I hope you hear what I hear—that God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, has come to help us in our times of suffering, to lead us in our times of uncertainty, and to give us victory even over that last and greatest of all enemies, death.

Jesus Christ offers Himself to you as a gift, and He waits for you to respond to His invitation to come to Him in faith, to love Him with all your heart, and to follow Him as your Savior and Lord.