

And How Are the Children?

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Jeremiah 31:15-22

Children's Sabbath

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And How Are The Children? This traditional greeting of the Masai in Kenya acknowledges the high value the tribe places on the well being of children. Even tribe members who do not have children of their own will always give the traditional response: "All the children are well."

In this year, 2009, as we are coming to the close of the Decade of the Child, I would like to ask again, *how are the children, really?*

Today has been designated as Children's Sabbath—a day in honor of all children around the world, and a day in which we, as adults step back and take a serious and often sobering look at the state of our children today.

Sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund, the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths weekend is an annual, multi-faith holiday that celebrates children as sacred gifts of the Divine and provides the opportunity for communities of faith to renew and live out their moral responsibility to care, protect and advocate for all children (*National Observance of Children's Sabbaths, Children's Defense Fund*). Children's Sabbath is endorsed by more than 200 different denominations one of which is our own denomination, the PC (USA).

The theme of the 2009 Children's Sabbaths weekend is "Create Change for Children Today: Bring Hope and a Better Tomorrow." With millions of children living in poverty, lacking basic health coverage and being funneled into a pipeline to prison, we know that children in our nation desperately need change—and they need **us** to create that change today.

Our Old Testament lesson today from Jeremiah *is* a lesson in hope. And a lesson that can encourage us to make that needed change. We begin the reading by hearing Rachel weeping for her children. The Rachel in this passage was Jacob's preferred wife and the mother of Joseph, Benjamin, grandmother of Ephraim.

Verse 15 says that Rachel "refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." This passage is part of what is sometimes called the "Book of Consolation," which was probably written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Its focus is the future restoration of Judah and Israel. There is some symbolism here in this passage in which Rachel represents the new society as it was then—after the fall and exile of Judah, and the children represent Judah itself.

Rachel is beside herself in her grief, and then the Lord speaks to her. God says, “they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, your children shall come back to their own country.” There is hope, God is saying. He is offering, in a sense, a resurrection of what was and the possibility of what will be.

Next, the passage has God telling, either to Rachel, or to us, what he heard from Ephraim—Joseph’s son and Rachel’s grandson. “You disciplined me,” said Ephraim “and I took the discipline; I was like a calf untrained. Bring me back; let me come back for you are the Lord my God. For after I had turned away, I repented; and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was dismayed because I bore the disgrace of my youth.”

Ephraim, too, cries out. He cried out in repentance, and God heard. God not only hears the mother, but he hears her son as well. God responds to Ephraim’s plea saying, “Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him.”

God is profoundly moved by the mother’s tears and by the repentance of the son. In the Hebrew language—which is the original language Jeremiah was written in, the root word for mercy and womb are one in the same. It would appear that God’s mercy for this son is one of a mother loving her child. God, too, is the mother of the children in this poem, and God hears.

Walter Brueggeman is a well-known theologian, and a professor of Old Testament at the Presbyterian Columbia Seminary. He said, “Rachel not only weeps for her children, but for all her children. The warehoused ones in New York City are present with the baby in Bethlehem, and with the exiles in Babylon, and with the lost boys in Genesis. On the horizon of Mother Rachel are all the same, all her abused, destroyed children who must be grieved in perpetuity” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*).

Rachel becomes a symbol of grief for all children then and now—throughout the ages that are lost or suffering, or living anywhere outside of God’s plans for them.

God hears the cries of the grief stricken parent, but God also calls us—**urges** us to move from our weeping and to work. In verse 16 he tells Rachel to “keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work. They shall come back.”

Have you ever heard, in psychological talk, that men like to fix problems, whereas many times women just want to be heard? Things don’t always have to be “fixed” for a woman to feel better. Well, in this case, I

think the men have it. God *is* calling us to fix the problem.

God's response to hearing our cries is to *call us to work*—to fix what is broken. We are to work to bring about change—a change in the way our children today are being in this world.

Rachel was given the promise that the children of Israel would come back, that there is hope in her future. We are given that same promise today if we answer God's call to work. The hopeful future that is promised is one in which justice is restored and compassion is practiced.

We cannot arrive at this hopeful future alone or only by our efforts, though. We need God. **First, however, we, like Rachel must cry out.** We have to be aware of the issues facing our children today. My fear is that many of us *are* aware of the issues facing our children and feel like we are unable to do anything about them. But we **cannot** be at a loss for words or unaffected by what our children are suffering today. One of the lessons from our passage today is that Rachel *cried out* and God heard her. I think we must cry out.

We must cry out about how a Black boy born in 2001—just 8 short years ago-- faces a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison because of poverty, abuse and neglect, failing schools or living in a bad neighborhood.

We must cry out about the 13.3 million children living in poverty in our nation.

We must cry out about the 9 million children who lack health care coverage.

God hears these cries of not only mothers who grieve their children, but of communities and uses us, “despite our sense of inadequacy—to challenge systems, structures, and leaders who seem unshakable. God sends us to challenge even those structures that at one time met our individual needs at the expense of others.”

We are called to this hard but hopeful work because we have been assured that God hears us, God calls us to this work, and God has promised to be with us as we work for a better tomorrow. God is with our children as they grow, God is with our nation as we struggle to move from oppression to a land of promise and plenty for all.” (*Christian Resources for Children's Sabbath, 2009*).

So I will close today with the same question I began with. “How are the children today? Are all the children well?”