

Hope Inside Horror Matthew 2:13–23

As a new year dawns upon us in a few days, we all share in the same basic posture just before we hang our new calendars for 2022—we're nostalgic and thankful for the year almost gone and cautious but hopeful for the year approaching. I use *cautious* because the difficulty of the last two years has caught us all off guard. I use *thankful* because despite the difficulties, the goodness of God has not budged one bit. Followers of Jesus believe this in the face of all things bright or dim.

We wouldn't believe this without the revelation of Jesus Christ. His move from heaven's throne to an obscure, wooden manger speaks of several realities that can't be adequately exhausted. However, if the incarnation of Jesus shouts anything, it shouts God's faithfulness and that He can be trusted in all of life's episodes. The arresting thought of being completely in command of myriads of angelic hosts to being completely vulnerable as a newborn baby—we're still trying to find words for the beauty of this humility. And even without discovering the proper words, by this coming and the rich purpose of it, He's gained our faith. One right response at such amazement is to borrow expression from an ancient hymn found in one of Paul's letters...1 Timothy 3:16, "*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh...*" We may not grasp the whole of it, but what we do grasp we confess, we believe it happened, we sing about, and we glory in.

Yet, our songs around the holidays are not always in the major key. The disappointments, sorrows, and tragedies of the year we're leaving behind—some of those wounds may still be fresh. The thought that there might be more of the same this coming year is also hard to lay aside. Immunity from heartbreak and grieving circumstances has never been a part of the church's defense system.

Like us, our text today looks back and projects forward. And as it does, we're confronted with some familiar chords of life played in that minor key—fear, horror, and death. Not everything around the Advent season has "the thrill and hope" tag on it. Sometimes, though joy never completely leaves a disciple of Jesus, it gives way to more pressing and necessary sorrows and longings that serve to counterbalance our lives. God expertly and uniquely manages the pH of sanctification for His church when He shows again and again that He is always faithful, but especially in times of deep distress. *What we'll learn from our text is that with Christ, there's hope inside of the worst of circumstances.*

I. The Detour to Egypt

[13] Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Before a righteous word is formed on his lips, Jesus is found to be the object of a manhunt, and the biggest dog on the Judean block is howling for His blood. Thirty years out from our text this morning, other vicious religious leaders would bark victoriously under the shadow of a Roman cross, only to be exposed as loud fools by a quiet, empty tomb.

The worshippers from the east are now taking a different road back home because, we presume, that God graciously saved them from Herod's bloodthirst by changing their coordinates. We might wonder if the wise men told this dream to Joseph and Mary. Perhaps Joseph is already on edge before the angelic guest appears. There's nothing calm and bright about this situation or the message at hand—

get up, get out, get on. What a merciful visitation this was! It's hard to find a more loving announcement to give someone than when by it their lives are being saved. "***An angel of the Lord appeared.***" Herod is hunting, but the arrows, bullets, swords, and soldiers are ineffective if the Lord of profound kindness wills it so. He sees. He acts.

Do you know God in this way? He sees dangers—all of them. And who can count the number of occasions He has acted to protect each of us day after day? This past Monday a car ran a red light as I was going through my green one. If I were going just a fraction faster through the light, the other driver would have issued a direct hit on my side of the car. No injuries save the metal and plastic. Two things soared in the hours to follow—my adrenalin and my gratitude for the Lord's preservation.

This angelic message was for that very purpose of preservation, "***Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.***" It wasn't Jesus' time to be taken by this impulsive, jealous leader named Herod. Our text is speaking of Herod the Great, not to be confused with Herod the tetrarch, who played his part in John's beheading and Jesus' death. Nor was this Herod Agrippa II, who heard the gospel from Paul in Acts 26. This Herod, as is reflected in our text, was, to say it mildly, a notorious ruler. He ordered the killing of his "favorite" wife out of suspicion. I can't imagine what the other less favored wives thought of this. He viewed many of his sons as political rivals, having at least 2 of them put to death. At the end of his life, Herod, being gravely ill, commanded his soldiers that on the very day he died, they were to arrest hundreds of notables through his territory and execute them that very day. This insured Herod that there would be mourning in the land on the day of his death, knowing that few tears would fall for him. To the relief of the notables, the command was not carried out at his death.¹ The point: Herod drew no boundaries lines when it came to his evil. Joseph knew the reputation, so ***[14]...he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt...***

Some detours are hard calls to make. When my phone GPS suggests two thousand times a minute that I should take a different highway, I don't often trust it. More importantly, when my life expectations are in one direction and I'm forced to go another, or counseled to go another, at times my prideful independence kicks in, or I think I'm robust enough to make it through. Detours almost always carry a level of frustration with them. Under the stronger current of Joseph taking care of his wife and baby, the nagging whirlpools of sadness and anxiety were surely spinning about. They're leaving home, family, all that's familiar. The leading of God will often carry with it the sting of sacrifice. However, the sting here can't be compared to the imminent danger. Joseph squares the dream with the reality of a tyrannical, life-taking Herod and fled in the mercy of his life-preserving God.

The angel warns of Herod's evil design concerning Jesus and orders Joseph to flee to Egypt with his family. Funded by the expensive gifts of the *magoi*, God the Father provides for the multi-day journey.² And where they are going Herod will not follow, as Joseph, Mary, and the Christ-child have little trouble concealing themselves in Egypt. Early Jewish philosopher and historian Philo noted that there were as many as a million Jews in Alexandria at the time of Jesus' birth.³ Getting lost in the shuffle was the unavoidable consequence of living among a large Jewish populace. This detour has its challenges, yet this was a remarkable display of God providing for and sustaining one baby in danger. This was not God's first time providing for and protecting one who would be a deliverer.

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, 57.

² Andreas Köstenberger, *The First Days of Jesus*, 79.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 42. As quoted by Morris from Philo, *Flaccus*, 43.

Egypt is a familiar place for people who read their bibles, and it calls to mind stories and images that are some of the most dramatic in human history. A baby murdering, man-stealer. A desperate mother. A baby floating down a croc-infested river. A family betrayed. A family's welcome. A burning bush. Plagues that mocked false gods and exalted the true One. A snake staff. A wall of water. A pillar of fire. This is the place where God's people began and the place from which they were saved by lamb's blood and rescued by God's hand. It's no coincidence that the Messiah is returning to the place where His person and work were first shadowed and copied.

But the move to Egypt and the subsequent return referenced by Matthew from Hosea 11 is not a prophecy in normal sense of the word. Verse 15 we read, **[15]...This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."** In its original context we read, *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols."*⁴ Hosea is looking back in the life of Israel as a nation and recalling their unfaithfulness. Matthew employs the interpretive method of typology where events or people are foreshadowing future things. In this case, some connections come into view:

- Where Israel was faithless, the anticipation is that this new Moses will be faithful, being the promised Messiah
- Born under a death threat to Hebrew baby boys, being spared in the providence of God in order to deliver His people—Moses is the shadow, Christ is the real deal
- Like Moses, Jesus will perform signs and wonders among those people to attest to divine power
- Similar to Moses, Jesus will be a mediator for those people. Unlike Moses, He will be a perfect mediator. Sinless. Spotless.
- Similar to Moses, who led Israel from temporary bondage into freedom, Jesus will lead His people from eternal bondage into the glorious freedom of the sons of God and all of creation.

If we fail to understand that Matthew's intent for his readers is see the gospel from the very beginning of Christ's life, then we've gotten off to a poor start. This detour brings us to a proper place of seeing the long view of God in redemptive history, with Jesus being the great Deliverer from our fiercest enemies of sin and death. God spared His Son from destruction so that in time and by His death He might spare us all from the same for eternity. Do you believe this? God whispers His mercy in Moses and shouts it in Jesus the Savior of the world. Have you heard this divine call to come to Christ and be redeemed? If not, hear this: Be reconciled to God without any delay!

Maybe there are a few things holding you back. Keeping with the detour language, one roadblock to coming into Christ by childlike faith is that life seems to have hills too steep to climb, obstacles to severe to navigate, and wounds too deep to heal. But I want to tell you that the Christmas season is not just for the joyful. It's for those sitting in silent struggles, too.

II. The Destruction in Bethlehem (and beyond)

[16] Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

⁴ Hosea 11:1-2

In keeping with the earlier observations about Herod, his paranoia and anger bring him to the point of unthinkable wickedness. He's been shamed and outwitted, in his mind, by these eastern strangers, unaware that God was behind their new directive to disobey Herod. So, what do power hungry, rulers of this world do when they are duped or shown up? Like pouting children, they overreact. Yet, unlike pouting children they sometimes exert deadly force. To mash the similes, the massacre of these children is a classic example of overkill.⁵

To make sure he didn't miss, Herod calculates and decrees a death sentence for all males two years old and under. The most powerful, grimly snuffing out the most vulnerable. Again, a historical rerun from the Jewish archives of horror, "*Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.'*"⁶ No wonder we leave this scene from Matthew's birth narrative out of children's Christmas pageants. The evil is almost more than the mind can grab or the heart can stomach.

The absence of secular documents conveying this massacre may be related to the smaller population of Bethlehem and the rural nature of her surroundings.⁷ Some scholars suggest that as few as twenty children were involved, but that falls inside of conjecture. What we do know is that it was significant enough, regardless of numbers, for Matthew to document and make prophetic application to the event. ***[17] Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: [18] "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."***

This fourth fulfillment of Scripture throughout the birth narrative of Matthew is similar to the previous one. Matthew is drawing from Jeremiah and Jeremiah is drawing from Genesis 42. In Genesis, Jacob, Rachel's husband, is lamenting the fact that Joseph and Simeon have been taken from him (into Egypt no less), and Benjamin is under the threat of being taken also due to the deal made with their undercover brother at Pharaoh's right hand. Amid the transactions and travels, Rachel is watching her sons slowly slip out of her hands into a pagan land so that the rest of them can have something to eat during a famine. Yet, her other famine, one of joy and hope, may be harder to swallow. Matthew applies this story from Jeremiah's own application, and he does so to the mothers of the babies slain under Herod's command.

Can any of us imagine the agony of this slaughter, especially to these mothers? The knock at the door. The cooing turned into a crying. The abduction. The sounds. The sights. The aftermath. The ***weeping and loud lamentation***. The raw horror of it all. We're not left to wonder why Benjamin wasn't allowed to go with his brothers back to Egypt. All Rachel knew is that she had one son remaining, and the thought of Benjamin going out the door only intensified the ongoing grief at the loss of Joseph, who was already dead in her mind.

Maybe you're no stranger to grief. Maybe this time of year you're tempted to respond to "Merry Christmas" with a "No, not really" or a humbug of your own. Maybe you're about to face a new year without an old friend. Perhaps some struggles for you are more than you think you can bear. A rogue child. A disappointing relationship. Less than ideal circumstances in your job. An empty place at your table that fills you with a sadness that won't let up. Maybe you're misunderstood, unsatisfied,

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *New American Commentary*, 68.

⁶ Exodus 1:15-16

⁷ Blomberg, 68.

discontented, all tinted with a level of sorrow. Perhaps you've allowed something difficult that's happened to you be the whole of who you are. This is the world that Jesus has come into. Fraught with burden after burden, carrying burdens Himself, and ultimately carrying the chief burden of mankind at the cross.

But the sticking point for us here may be that the death of these children was a fulfillment of God's Word. The world does not talk like this, and many people who claim to be Christian wince at the very thought, wanting to somehow protect God of wrongdoing. But believer, what should we make of this? How do we clearly, reverently, and accurately think about the providence of God when an issue as sensitive as the death of children comes into the equation? As with any theological issue, our impulses and feelings are not Lord and King. What we feel should not drive what we confess to be true. The Scriptures must be a lamp unto our feet. And so, I want to state 5 basic truths about God's providence as it relates to the sinful acts of mankind:

1. *"In [God's] hand is the life of every creature, and the breath of all mankind"* (Job 12:10). From the beginning, God has clearly exerted this right to give and to take life. When Adam fell, death was the punishment. The flood of Gen. 6, Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 19, the firstborn taken in the Passover of Exodus 4, Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5, Herod Agrippa I struck down by worms because he did not give God the proper honor. Or, less known, the unknown saint who falls asleep in Christ in a noiseless nursing home. All are appointed once unto death. Because He is God and Judge, God has every right to give life and to take it.
2. *"For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live"* (Ezekiel 18:32). God gives and takes life, but He is not bloodthirsty. His is not a masochist whose enjoys grieving humans. The first time I realized reading John's Gospel two decades ago that Jesus wept at the passing of his friend Lazarus and then minutes later raised him back to life, I admired Him more than before. The Word made flesh does not have a heart of stone. The loss of these babies in our text—it fulfilled God's purpose but not His pleasure.
3. *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:20), or the New Testament version, *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good"* (Romans 8:28). Whatever disaster, calamity, loss, impairment, disappointment, or sorrow we face, though we most likely will not see clearly into it or through it clearly, God wills to craft good out of the rubble. We can hold tight to the truth that God will often ordain what He hates to accomplish what He loves.⁸
4. *"Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!"* (Romans 9:14). None on earth are privy to the exact information on *how* God can govern sin and not be a sinner. Or, *how* He governs sinful human choices without relegating man to robot status. Herod answered for what he decreed in our passage, and God maintained His justice, His wisdom, and His goodness. Those are enough for us to quiet our souls to worship and reverence.
5. Finally, *"And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'"* (Revelation 5:5). Death, sorrow, mourning—each day we inch closer to these being abolished and swallowed up in the glorious life of the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ. He has conquered man's worst enemies. They all find their resolve in Him. He is the hope inside horror. He is the hope inside pain. He is the hope inside disappointment. He is the hope inside death because He drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath that could have justly been poured down into my very soul, a sinner who is no better than the next person in this room. He's conquered and He will wipe clean the battlefield of this world in His timing and power. Take heart, every one of you!

⁸ Nancy Guthrie, *Be Still My Soul*, 35.

To echo Matt from last Sunday, is Christ your hope in life and death? Hear this clearly: God sent Him into the world to make that a reality for you. He is a God who works His wise purposes, of which some may bring us to genuine sorrow, but know that the God of providence doesn't operate in another province, separate from your struggles—He was brought near through His Son, and for all who trust in Christ, He is brought nearer than that by the Holy Spirit of comfort.

More comfort is found when we consider Matthew's use of Jeremiah's prophecy. In context, this is what follows Matthew's quotation: Jeremiah 31:16–17, "*Thus says the LORD 'Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.'*" I can't fathom that Matthew didn't have this context in mind as he penned verse 15 on Rachel's sorrow. In the gospel, we hear our Savior's great promises through verses like this. No more tears. Hope. And can you imagine the scene of lost children returning into the arms of mothers?! That's the picture. Real, heavy, gripping, persistent sorrow is met with a sympathetic and powerful Savior in the gospel.

I'm reminded of reading about Tim Keller relaying a nightmare he had some years ago that helps us to think about what awaits us because of the gospel,

In my nightmare, every member in my family was killed in terrible fashion. I woke up at 3 a.m., panting from the nightmare. It was if I had lost my family and awakened to discover I had them back. I wanted to wake them all up and hug them. I loved them before the nightmare, but not like I did after the nightmare. Here's the point. The joy of finding them wasn't a joy in spite of the nightmare but a joy enhanced by the nightmare. Because of the nightmare, my joy was intensified...If the new heaven and new earth is our hope—and it is—it will make everything horrible we've experienced nothing but a nightmare. And as a nightmare, it will infinitely, correspondingly increase our future joy and glory in a way it wouldn't have been increased if we'd never suffered.⁹

Listen, joys and sorrows aren't at odds. They're heaven's proteins, together working to build spiritual muscle for the race set before us. But only one will go with us into Emmanuel's land. Because of the greatness of Christ's mercy, every member of Christ's body will hear, "*Enter into the joy of your Master.*"¹⁰

Back to our text, the wages of sin have come to roost in Herod's death, verse 19, and his death became the occasion for a return home for Joseph and family as another celestial visit takes place, *...Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, [20] saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." [21] And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.*

Note lastly,

III. The Destination of Nazareth

⁹ Sermon from Tim Keller, *Christian Hope and Suffering*, 2008.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:21, 23

[22] But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Herod's oldest son, Archelaus, is now at the helm. And, like father like son, he is also known for his own cruelties.¹¹ Joseph fears for their safety. Fearing God doesn't mean that the courage of the faithful is bulletproof. So, the Lord sees, and in yet another move of mercy, He grants Joseph another dream so that he might again avoid the worst.

Verse 23 is the fifth prophetic word in the birth narrative of Matthew. ***[23] And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.*** The reference here by Matthew is curious in the fact that he doesn't note a specific Old Testament text like before. Instead, he speaks of multiple prophets testifying to the place where Jesus settled and grew up. The most compelling interpretation is that together the prophetic expectation is that the Messiah would come from humble beginnings.¹² Remember the question by Nathanael from John 1, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

Does this buoy your faith! To have such a Savior, not arriving with glamour and noise and all the superficial attachments of riches and fame that garner the attention of the masses. No, he started low, glided in lowliness, lived in an obscure town, was rejected by His own people, and died a shameful death, so that He might understand us when we're downtrodden, understand us when we hurt, sympathize with us in our weaknesses. With Him, there's hope inside of every horror. Do you have this hope?

Conclusion

The cunning Herod, bent on destroying the Son of God, trying to dupe to *magoi*, can't contend with Him who sees all, knows all, hears all, has all at His disposal, wields all that is necessary. The Father is making sure that the Son will run His allotted horizon, fall into the sea of death, and rise to pierce the darkness with His glory. Go with Christ. Go with Him into the new year, into the unknown. And if you do, and you happen to find yourself in the minor key, remember that He's perfected those notes long before your own birth. Thanks be to God, and to the Spirit, and to the Son incarnate, Lord at His birth and Savior by His death. He is the only hope inside of every nightmare.

¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.9.3.

¹² R.T. France, *TNTC: Matthew*, 94.