

THE INNOCENTS--THE ROAD OF GOD'S DIFFICULT WILL

December 28, 2014

By Pastor Stan
Matthew 2:12-18

PASTOR STAN WEESE

SERMON SERIES: "CHRISTMAS ROADS

SERMON TITLE: "THE INNOCENTS: THE ROAD OF GOD'S DIFFICULT WILL"

SCRIPTURE TEXTS: MATTHEW 2:12-18) (P. 808)

TOPIC: CHRISTMAS / ADVENT

DATE: DECEMBER 28, 2014

copyright 2014 by Stan Weese

INTRO.

-- In some liturgical churches today (December 28) is observed as the Feast of the Holy Innocents. It is these "Innocents" who are the last of the characters that we meet as we travel the road to Bethlehem in our Christmas series. We meet them in Matthew 2.

Matthew 2

-- The Christmas story as we generally tell and depict it would receive a motion picture rating of "G" or possibly "PG" since there is the birth of a baby. Almost everyone, however, would think of the Christmas story as a perfect children's story, with a newborn baby sleeping in a manger, while being watched over by his parents and surrounded by shepherds and stable animals.

However, the story of the Innocents turns the Christmas story into an "R" rating. Actually, their story is connected to the account of the Magi (the Wise Men), but is rarely included because it is so disturbing and upsets the feel-good nature of the rest of the Christmas story. The story of the Innocents brings us face-to-face with God's difficult will and the question of why a good God would allow horrific things to happen to innocent people. Indeed, this part of the Christmas story is often called "the slaughter of the Innocents." That part of the Christmas story is in Matthew 2:12-18.

Matthew 2:12-18 (p. 808)

I. The Story (vv. 12-18) 1

A. The Background

-- The "they" who are departing from Bethlehem in verses 12 and 13 are the Magi (a.k.a. the Wise Men). As you remember, the Magi were Gentiles, probably from the area of modern-day Iran, who had traveled to Jerusalem to pay homage to the newborn king. To their surprise, however, no one knew anything about the birth of a new heir to the throne. Their inquiry, nevertheless, caught the attention of the current occupant of the throne - King Herod the Great, who was insanely paranoid about possible threats to his power.

Herod immediately summoned the Magi to the palace. Pretending to want to assist the Magi in their pursuit, Herod assembled the top religious scholars to determine where the Messiah was supposed to be born. The scholars agreed that the Messiah's birthplace would be King David's hometown, Bethlehem. So Herod sent the Magi off to nearby Bethlehem to search for this future heir to the throne, instructing them to return once they had found the baby so that Herod himself could also go to "worship" him.

When the Magi left Herod's palace, the star that had started their search reappeared to them, and this time began to move and guide them along the 5-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, leading them in some strange manner to the precise house where Joseph and Mary were living with their child named Jesus, who by now was probably somewhere between one and two years old. Amazingly, upon seeing this ordinary toddler living in an ordinary house with ordinary parents, the Magi did the most extraordinary thing - they bowed down and worshipped Him and presented to Him gifts reserved for royalty - gold, frankincense and myrrh.

-- Before the Magi could return to the palace to tell Herod about this child, God sent an angel to them in a dream to warn them not to go back to Herod; so the Magi quietly left Jerusalem and returned to their home by another route.

Now, that's where we usually stop. But that's not the end of the story. Verses 12-18 continue to tell the rest of the story, and it's these verses that turn a heartwarming story into a disturbing tale of horror.

B. The Rest of the Story (vv. 12-18)

-- A question we ought to ask here is why Matthew even includes this gruesome account.

Luke doesn't have it in his gospel, and this "slaughter of the innocents" certainly doesn't seem to fit nicely with the rest of Matthew's Christmas story and with the angel's announcement of "good news of great joy...for all the people."

-- So why is this event included here? Let me suggest two possibilities:

1. The Bible's Un-Retouched Honesty

-- The Bible deals with characters and events in a very open and honest manner. It doesn't pretend that it's always a wonderful life. The Bible records the faults and failings of its characters, including its greatest heroes, and it records events that are difficult for us to understand why God let them happen.

2. Matthew's Jewish Emphasis

-- A second reason for Matthew's including this troubling account may have to do with his Jewish emphasis. Matthew is writing his gospel primarily for a Jewish audience, and one of his major themes is how Jesus fulfills the OT prophecies and expectations regarding the promised Messiah.

-- Jewish readers would have immediately seen the parallels here between Jesus and Moses. The lives of both are threatened by a ruler's horrific decree to slaughter innocent boys, and God works providentially to protect and to deliver both Moses and Jesus. Matthew's implication is that Jesus is akin to Moses, but Matthew will make it clear in his Gospel that Jesus is greater than Moses, that Jesus is the Messiah who saves us from the condemnation of our sins.

II. The Insights

-- As troubling as this story is, it provides us with some valuable insights into God's difficult will with regard to evil that causes human suffering.

A. The First Insight: There is a mystery in God's will regarding evil.

-- Why does God allow something as evil as "the slaughter of the innocents" to take place?

A simplistic answer would be that such events are the result of God's granting us humans a free will, the ability to choose to obey or to disobey God. While there is an element of truth in that, it doesn't really solve the problem of God's will regarding evil because there are times when God intervenes to prevent free will from being exercised for evil purposes. For example, in the OT Pharaoh wanted to capture and re-enslave the Jews but God prevented that from happening by opening a path through the Red Sea. Or in the book of Daniel the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to execute the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, but God prevented that from happening by keeping them alive and delivering them from the fire. Of course, we see God's over-riding Herod's free will here in the story in Matthew 2. Herod wanted to kill Jesus, but God prevented that by sending an angel to warn Joseph.

-- The question of why God permits certain evil acts and prevents others really takes us to the larger question of why God has chosen to allow any kind of evil at all. While we may give some responses that partly answer that question, ultimately the answer remains a mystery to which only God knows the full answer.

B. The Second Insight: The triumph of evil is never final.

1. The second insight from this troubling story is that the triumph of evil is never final. When we read these verses in Matthew, it appears that Herod's evil decree and act has prevailed. But a deeper investigation into the story reveals that this distressing account of innocents being slain actually contains a message of hope.

2. Matthew says that this incident fulfills a prophecy made by Jeremiah. Verse 18 is a quote from Jeremiah 31:15.

a. Ramah (RAY-mah) was a small village about 5 miles from Bethlehem. It was the traditional site where Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried. About 1,000 years after Rachel's death Ramah was also the site where the Jews were assembled to be deported to exile in Babylon. That's the scene that Jeremiah is describing - the deportation of God's people from the Promised Land to a far-off pagan country. Jeremiah pictures this tragic event as being so sorrowful that the great matriarch Rachel is weeping in her near-by grave. That same grief and sorrow is now being repeated when Herod orders that all the infant boys in the area are to be slain.

b. Matthew's Jewish readers would have been familiar with this passage in Jeremiah and would have also know the context of the verse that Matthew quotes from Jeremiah, and they would have known that the sorrow is not the final word - the context is one of hope. Look at the verses that immediately follow the verse that Matthew quotes.

Jeremiah 31:15-17 Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." **16** 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. **17** There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.

-- Even as Rachel is pictured as weeping, God assures her and her children that He is with them and will bring them back. With God there is always hope, even in the midst of our darkest and most painful experiences. The message in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is God's full and final triumph over all evil.

C. The Third Insight: Part of God's answer to evil is to subject Himself to it.

1. Christmas is the story of God's entering into this world of evil and the suffering it causes. At Christmas time God came to us, took on our human form, and entered into our suffering. Jesus came to live a life that would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

-- Whatever His reasons for allowing suffering, God didn't exempt Himself from it. It looks as if God exempts Himself here in today's story. It appears that God is showing a calloused favoritism towards His Son. After all, God sends an angel to warn Joseph to leave, but He doesn't warn the other families in Bethlehem. It's true that God spares His Son here, but if you keep on reading the Gospel of Matthew, you'll find Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for the Father to remove the cup of suffering. But this time the Father doesn't spare the Son, and Jesus proceeds to the Cross and its horrific suffering.

But the Cross isn't the end of the story. The Son who died on the Cross was raised again. And even that isn't the end of the story. The same Jesus who died and was raised is coming again and will put an end to all sin and suffering.

CONCLUSION

John Piper has expressed all these insights in a powerful poem called "The Innkeeper," in which Piper imagines a scene in which Jesus visits the innkeeper in Bethlehem just a couple weeks before His crucifixion.