

*Into Darkness*  
Matthew 2:13-23  
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By way of warning, the last time I preached this text I was not invited back. It's a true story. Happened when I was a pastor in New Jersey, had not been there all that long. We were planting a congregation there, and I had gotten to know some other Presbyterian ministers in our community with whom we enjoyed some fellowship and common ministry. They thought it would be good, very ecumenical, to invite other Presbyterian ministers from other branches of the Presbyterian church to come and be a part of a Christmas service. This was my passage. They thought I was safe. But the truth is, it's this passage that is not safe. You might know it as a passage that speaks of God's preservation of Jesus and his family, but oh, there is so much more going on here. And I want you to see it, because it is for us the reason why the gospel, the good news, is really good news. So walk with me, if you will. Matthew chapter two, verses thirteen to twenty-three.

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." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

"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."

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 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." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 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. 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.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we come to this portion of the drama of the incarnation of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and we would ask that by your Holy Spirit you would open our eyes that we would see and hear what you are teaching us, so that we might praise you and give thanks for Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all your promises, who is the pinnacle of all that you have done. Jesus Christ come to earth, his life, that we might have life. His resurrection, that we might know resurrection unto eternal life. Now help us we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

This passage works on two levels. There are a number of ways of looking at the passage. One could certainly discern there are three different parts of it, but for the sake of time and my own interest and

hopefully yours, I wanted to look at it differently. And that is through two ways. These two ways you'll see in your outline; one is the truth about us, and secondly the truth about God that this passage shows us. But both of these perspectives are intertwined; they're not exclusive from each other. But in their intertwining, we can see that perhaps one of the things that Matthew is trying to do is he's not only giving us the narrative of the birth of Christ and all that surrounded it, but that he means it for our salvation—that he means for us to take from it the reason for Jesus's coming and the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. So I believe that was his purpose. And so we'll see the two ways in which this passage works. So you'll see it—the truth about us, and the truth about God.

First, the truth about us. The truth about us that this passage clearly demonstrates is perhaps in this most devastating of passages. First, it is the heart of darkness. The heart of darkness is revealed here. We see it first and foremost, of course, in Herod. Herod is by all measures a megalomaniac. You can read about his exploits, his atrocities, not in the Bible, though it is certainly here for us, but you can read about his many atrocities through the Jewish historian Josephus, who recorded in his annals of Jewish history all of Herod's atrocities that were related particularly to his reign and to his own household. And as you read about Herod, he was a man so caught up in himself, so anxious, so tense, so in control, that he lived his life in fear that others would think of him as less worthy. And he would do whatever it took to make sure that people would see just how great he is. Because you need to know that within Greek religion and the Roman religion, he was considered a divine figure. And so it's just been announced to him previous to the passage that I have read, that this Christ has been born. That goes straight to the heart of his megalomania. What? Someone else will be worshipped? These wise men come, and he says, "This is precisely what I'm afraid about."

Just to give you a look inside the heart of Herod. One of the things that Herod did and recorded in his will, if you will, was this: that on the day of his death, he actually had recorded orders that on the day of his death, a number of key leaders throughout his reigning area would be killed. Now why? It's because he was afraid that there would not be sufficient mourning of his death, so to guarantee that many would mourn his death, in his will is the death of these other leaders. You see, this was the way of the world. Your reign was only as good as the last day that you reign. The very next day could see your own son trying to overcome your rule. It happened over and over again. This was one way to ensure his famous standing. But what was interesting is, on the day of his death in 4 A.D., those death edicts were not taken out. Rather, they rejoiced at his death, because you can read of his many atrocities—the death of other leaders, death to his own family members. He was a man so caught up in anger and in fear, in success, he would do whatever he needed to do to hold on with white-knuckled grip his power and reign.

But after his death, his son, as the passage tells us, came to reign. Like his father, Archelaus was himself a megalomania. He was too given to atrocities. He was certainly a man not afraid to wield the sword. As you see hear, the angel came to Joseph saying, "No, you can't go back there. You need to go to Galilee." But fortunately for them, he was not as good of a ruler as his father. Megalomaniac, yes, but a poor administrator. His reign was despised because he couldn't even do even the good stuff his father could do. And so he, too, would lose his life. And what would come to the forefront would finally be a ruler that would enable Jesus to grow up without the fear of death, who held a little bit looser reigns on power.

But what is interesting about this passage is that it shows us precisely what is going on in the heart of one man so bent on his own sustaining of power that he is willing to commit infanticide and order it. Now, this is known as the slaughter of innocence in church history. If you know anything about it and go back and look at Wikipedia, there is plenty of debate. Some believe there were lots of children, thousands of children. Praise be to God that it wasn't thousands, but sadly it was somewhere less than a hundred. Because it took place in a town that was roughly five hundred to fifteen hundred people at most. But it shows you just what can happen in a heart gripped with anger and fear.

Here's the problem. The problem is what we want to do is we want to read through that passage and get to the rescue, while we're missing what perhaps we need to camp out for just a minute and look at. Is Herod's heart any different than our own? Because the truth about us is that, yes, Herod reveals the heart of darkness in humanity, but he also reveals a devastating truth—that we share the very same human heart that Herod had. And there are things that we like to do. We like to play our own mental and religious games in some way of trying to keep at a distance what Herod does and how it manifests itself from us. And let me show you through just two illustrations.

The first is the zero-sum game that we play with God and with others. This was brought to my attention, of course, as Doctor Coke referred to. We were there last night at the showing of *The Great Divorce* on stage in D.C. Let me just say by way of advertisement that it is a wonderful, incredible piece of art. You can still go and see it Monday and Tuesday and then next weekend in D.C. Well worth your time taking your family. But what is interesting is this—it discovers the drama throughout the book, *The Great Divorce*, written by Lewis, which I believe is perhaps his most controversial work. Unlike *The Screwtape Letters*—*Screwtape Letters* wants to fit into a narrative that is at least comfortable to us. It looks like the problem is outside of us. The problem is the devil; the problem is the demons who want to tempt us into wrongdoing. But *The Great Divorce* shows that the problem isn't out there; the problem is in here.

One of the characters that shows up in *The Great Divorce* is a character who's struggling with this decision—does he want to go on into heaven. And he runs up into this decision because a person who's asking him whether he wants to come on up into heaven is a man who used to work for him on earth, who is a convicted murderer but who had repented of his sin and asked for forgiveness and was redeemed and is now in heaven. And now he's going to his former boss asking him, "Do you want to come up and in to heaven?" And this is the dialogue that breaks out. His former boss looks at him and says:

Look at me now. I've gone straight all my life. I don't say I was a religious man. I don't say I had no faults—far from it. But done my best all my life, see? I done my best by everyone. That's the short of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights. If I wanted a drink, I paid for it. And if I took my wages, I done my job, see? That's the sort of man I was. I don't care who knows it.

His friend responds: "It would be much better not to go on about that right now." And his boss, welled up with rage, says:

Who's going on? I'm not arguing. I'm just telling you the sort of chap I was. I'm asking for nothing but my rights. You may think you can put me down because you're dressed up like that which you weren't when you worked under me, and I'm only a poor man, but I got to have my rights same as you.

You see what he's doing? He's saying, "You're a murderer. Yeah you received the bleeding charity. But if going to heaven means *you're* there, I'm not going. Because see, I've got to have my rights. Yes, my sins are plenty. But my good deeds cancel them out."

That's what we do. We want to play a zero-sum game. But the truth is, the seed of anger in Herod is the same seed of anger that is in our hearts. Oh sure, it showed itself in Herod's life in infanticide, but how does it show up in our lives? One is the zero-sum game. The other is just having a technical view of murder and hatred. Perhaps even now, you're saying, "There's certainly no one that I hate. I've not murdered anyone." But you remember what Jesus would say later in his ministry: "If you have hated anyone in your heart, you have committed murder." The great catechism of our church, the Westminster Larger Catechism, says this about the sixth commandment of thou shalt not murder—here's the way the catechism works—it first says, "What are the duties that the commandment requires of us?" And then it says, "What are the things that it forbids?" And this is what it says. Allow me, if you will.

What are the duties required in the sixth commandment? A. The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

That's a tall order. And it makes you wonder, maybe as the old saying goes, we're just obedient because we can't afford to be bad. But then it goes on, and it says, "What are the things forbidden by the sixth commandment?"

The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.

It's upon this foundation of the gospel that Jesus would say, "I say to you, love even your enemies." And you begin to see very quickly that the heart of darkness demonstrates the devastating truth about us. That while, yes, there is a difference of degree, but not of kind between my anger and the anger of Herod. For it all starts off as the same seed of anger that threatens our honor, insults our person. Yes, for Herod it would issue forth in infanticide, but in me it issues forth a harsh word cloaked in humorous sarcasm.

Or perhaps, something like this happens to you as it happened to me on Christmas day. It was a warm day, was it not? And I thought, "Hey! Let's conspire against the cold. Let's grill." But I had no propane. So I said, "Is the Giant open?" Well, the Giant was open. So I took my empty tank, called: "Yes! We're open." They're open. Can I exchange? Okay, great. So I go to the Giant, I walk in, and this was my plan. There was a woman—and I have worked retail around the holidays; it's painful, it's infuriating at times. And the best thing I'm going to do, I said, is I'm going to say Merry Christmas. I said, "Merry Christmas!" And right as I said, "I'm here to get a new propane tank," she stops me mid-sentence and she says, "Sir, sir, you can't have that in here! It's a fire hazard! Take it outside!" I mean, it was like a fire alarm. It was embarrassing. I was like, "Woah, hey, back down just a second. There was no sign." And so I took my tank and I walked outside. And as I'm walking outside, I can guarantee you at least twenty different names crossed my mind for this lady. I was mad. I was making my own defense. There was no sign telling me I couldn't bring it inside. And I put it down next to the propane tank. How was I to know? And you can imagine the argument I was having with myself—and with this woman, by the way—in my head. As I walked back inside, she wasn't even at the help desk. I was even more infuriated. It's Christmas, you see!

A seed of anger in a moment, in a flash, erupted in me the very same kind of anger that would show itself in infanticide in Herod. Friends, what we celebrate at Christmas is that this is precisely what Jesus came to deal with. I don't know what it is for you, but I know in this passage it reveals the heart of darkness. A devastating truth about us.

But glory be to God that God sent his Son, because just as surely as this passage tells us a truth about us, it also tells us the greater truth about God. Greater truth. Do you see it? First this passage definitely demonstrates to us that God in the midst of this darkness had his pattern of redemption reach its fulfillment. That's the first thing I want you to see. It shows us the fulfillment of God's pattern of

redemption. It's there for us in bold black-and-white. Notice what it says. You see, God is fulfilling here an old pattern of redemption that started way back early on in the Bible. What happens is that there was another Joseph who, to save his family, ended up in Egypt. What men meant for evil, God meant for good. And that Joseph went there and God would use Joseph in Egypt to save Israel. Here, another Joseph sent by God, though it was through the death threat of a leader, would send them to Egypt.

And then, as Moses—this is the other part—what happened with Moses? Moses's life was spared. Why? Because another leader was after Moses's life when he was an infant. And his life was preserved. But then God would call Moses and say, "Moses, you are to lead my people out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage and exile, into the promise land." Here we see that pattern of redemption finding its fulfillment. Jesus would go to Egypt and then it would say: "But now, bring him back into Israel. For out of Egypt I have called my Son." You see, this pattern of redemption has been at work from the beginning—that God wants us to see that He is a good who gives us his redeeming power. And what it was for Israel, the bondage in the country that was not their own—and bondage in slavery is to be a picture and a metaphor of a type of slavery—and our slavery is of sin and death, and the bondage of sin. Yet Jesus Christ has come as the greater Moses to redeem his people from their sin.

We see not only does this passage show us the greater truth about God and the pattern of redemption; it also shows us that God plunges into the darkness. We cannot escape the fact that Jesus was not born into a comfortable existence in a nice suburb outside of Jerusalem. He was born in poverty in a poor town and would be taken from his cradle straight into a refugee existence into a foreign country, not knowing when he would be able to return with his family back into Israel. Jesus would be one who from the very beginning, from his earliest days, would telescope what he's going to do on the cross. He would be a Savior who would come into the darkness of sin, sin that was aimed at him even from his earliest moment. And yet God knew this, and he would be plunged into darkness as God's light and not have any pillow for his head, would not have any comfortable existence. And I daresay, there is not a darkness in anyone's life by suffering or difficulty that this Savior has not himself experienced. God loves us so much, and that God so loved the world, that He gave his Son and plunged him into the darkness of humanity to redeem.

Here's what I want to tell you. If Herod had confessed his sins—if Herod had repented of his evil and sought the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ—he would be redeemed. There is no one who is out of reach of our God. His grace has the longest of arms. Some will say that the confession of sin is not very seeker-sensitive. But I want to do something that's unusual for us. I want to break here, just a few moments in the middle of this sermon, and I want to call you whether you're a Christian or not—do you know that this Savior came that you might have the forgiveness of sins and life? And perhaps what we most need is a thing that we know down deep we really want. We finally want to confess to someone who will hear us, and who can actually forgive. I want to lead us in a moment of just silent confession. I'm not going to say us. I'll lead us in a moment of confession, and then I'll pray for us and I'll finish the sermon. Let's pray.

Lord, by your mercy and by your grace, hear our confession. Let the bones that you have broken be healed. Separate our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. Through Jesus Christ who plunged into our darkness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The truth about God is that He has a pattern of redemption. Jesus has plunged into darkness. But finally, God doesn't waste the suffering. What do I mean that he doesn't waste the suffering? All of this, God knew was going to happen. God sent his Son knowing that he would live just this life, and that he would experience every kind of suffering that you and I experience, and that he would be tempted in every way that we are tempted—yet he would be without sin, and not separating himself from us. He would be identified *with* us. He would walk a life of suffering that would find its culmination in his suffering on the cross. You see, all of this suffering that is spoken about here for his family and for himself and even for the loss of these children would not be for nothing. Rather, he would go to the cross and to

take all the weight of sin and the judgment and wrath of God for sin on himself. Isn't that what Paul says when he says to the Philippians:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! [Philippians 2:6-8]

Jesus doesn't waste his suffering. And our suffering is not for nothing. For, as those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, you need to be reminded that in fact our suffering is following in the way of Christ's suffering. For, as Peter would say to his fellow Christians, he says to them in his letter in 1 Peter:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.  
[1 Peter 4:12-14]

What that means is, because Jesus who has plunged into darkness here in the midst of a death threat—he can turn Rachel's weeping in Lamentation, he can turn the death of these children, he can turn his own suffering ultimately on the cross into glory. Because the end of the story isn't suffering; it's resurrection. For on the third day he rose again, victorious over sin and death. Therefore, our suffering doesn't end in suffering. Our suffering has a hope to it, because he has risen from the dead. And the final word will be made by his authoritative glory.

Therefore, when we suffer, we know that Christ is the one who we can call on to redeem it. Because he is the one who has experienced it. He's the one who brings hope to it. He's the one who can turn our evil and the evil of others into good because of what he did on the cross and resurrection. This is the God we worship at Christmas. This is the God who invites us to receive the gift of eternal life. This is the God who so gave that He plunged his Son into human darkness as the light. But the darkness did not overcome it. And today I can say to you by all authority given to me by the Word of God and the ordination of this church that Jesus is Lord, and he came for you and me as a gift. We can rejoice and say alleluia. All of life is gift because of him. Let's pray.

Father, as this year ends, may it end with rejoicing. Father, I pray that the sweetness of your grace and the beauty of your love would wash over everyone here—that we could rejoice and give thanks that you sent your Son to redeem us and our hearts of darkness and to give this life meaning and hope. We give you thanks and praise for Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.