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Matthew 2:13-23, "Purpose in Exile, Humble in Obscurity"

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We're in the middle of a short, three-week sermon series looking at the results of Christmas. Now that God has become a Man, in the form of the Christ Child, a Baby born in Bethlehem, there are alarming effects that ripple out in that current day and throughout history to us today.

Last week we looked at the magi and their worship of the Christ Child, how they bowed down and worshiped the King of the Jews, Jesus Christ... We talked about ourselves beginning this new year by re-engaging wonder; that we would find ourselves bowing down in worship of Jesus as well.

I also mentioned there is a difference between the cultural celebration of Christmas and the Christian/Biblical celebration of Christmas. One is wrapped up in nostalgia and holiday cheer, and the other brings with it the themes that we have before us today: hatred, tyranny, flight, refugees, death, atrocity, obscurity. These are not often attached to the Christmas narrative, yet they are direct results of Christmas and the birth of Christ.

Another important part of the Christian/Biblical celebration of Christmas is the fulfillment of Scripture. And our passage today, in these ten verses or so, has three different references to Scripture being fulfilled. 3 times in ten verses, we are presented with how the birth of Jesus Christ and the events that happen afterwards fulfill God's purposes.

So what I want to do today is actually use those three OT references here as our guide for how we look at the story of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus' flight to Egypt, the slaughtering of children in Bethlehem, and Jesus' return to Nazareth.

I want us to see:

- 1) Purpose in Exile,
- 2) Life Out of Death, and
- 3) Humility and the Messiah.

In the end, what this rather astounding story demonstrates is that God works through sovereign surprise (I like that phrase) to bring about His purposes always, EVEN when we encounter incredible opposition, whether against ourselves personally or the Church.

- 1) *Purpose in Exile - v. 14-15 - 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." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod.*

This is a story that has been talked about and interpreted many different ways throughout the centuries. Many have tried to argue that, though this story is in Matthew's Gospels, it's not historical - that there is no other corresponding evidence or records of the flight to

Egypt, or more importantly, the slaughter of the innocents, as it's come to be known - Herod's murdering of the little boys of Bethlehem.

Here are a few things we can say though that, I believe, make it historically trustworthy. Believe it or not, one of the figures of history we know the MOST about (not Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great); one that we know more about than those is HEROD the GREAT. Why? Because Josephus, a first century Jewish historian and scholar, wrote two full volumes/scrolls about Herod and his life and reign. There is A LOT of PRIMARY material.

And that primary material tells us that Herod was an extraordinary politician and survivor. He was able to navigate the Romans being in control AND keep his own power and control. He rebuilt the great Temple in Jerusalem - a lot of success. However, we ALSO know that he was an absolute tyrant and villain of history. He killed his own wives and children.

And towards the end of his life, Josephus writes that Herod became incredibly paranoid about his position. He wanted people to remember him. And so he plotted to arrest a bunch of Jewish leaders and have them executed in a hippodrome when he dies so that there would be weeping across the country upon his death.

So is it in line with Herod's historical character that he would give this order to kill the young boys of Bethlehem because of the magi's report of the Christ Child?
Yes. It certainly is.

Paul Maier was a historian at Western Michigan for many years. And he argues that we have to remember that at the time Bethlehem was a very small village - maybe a thousand to 1500 residents. So the number of boys under the age of two at the time perhaps was around a dozen, two dozen at the most. While we may have thought there were hundreds or thousands of children murdered, that is not the case. Couple that with the fact that infant mortality in the ancient world was so high, history would most likely not record for us the death of a dozen or so children. Even Josephus might not have thought it at the level of Herod's other atrocities...

That of course, does not diminish the absolute horror of this event... Matthew DOES record this event though, and because we trust the Biblical witness, we believe the Gospel accounts to be true accounts of what historically happened. And, as we'll see, these events are used by God to fulfill His purposes and the Scriptures.

So how is that the case? The angel comes to Joseph and says, you need to leave because Herod is seeking to destroy the Baby. So, they get up and flee, leave their hometown and their homeland, and where do they go? Egypt.

Egypt had long been a place of refuge for Jews throughout their history, At the time, there was a Jewish colony in Alexandria that numbered more than a million people. The angel instructs them, this is where you should go. So they flee.

Not only is this flight because of Herod historically important, it is very obviously symbolically important.

Centuries earlier, Jacob, Israel and his family fled to Egypt for refuge because of famine. And the people of God spend over 400 years there, eventually enslaved.

The momentous event of the Old Testament and Israel is the EXODUS from Egypt - God rescuing them and bringing them to the Promised Land.

Jesus' flight to Egypt is a recapitulation of the Exodus. It is a retelling of Israel's rescue from Egypt. And in that retelling, in the body of the Christ Child, is the fulfilment of all of Israel's history.

Remember, Pharaoh tried to destroy the Israelites in Egypt. Now Herod is trying to destroy Jesus. In his rage, he slaughters the sons of Bethlehem. And just as Pharaoh failed to kill Moses, Herod fails to kill Jesus. Moses becomes the rescuer of Israel. And, ultimately, Jesus Christ becomes the Rescuer of Israel and, in fact, the entire world.

This is a fulfillment of the prophet Hosea's words that Matthew quotes, "*Out of Egypt I have called my Son...*" When Hosea uses these words hundreds of years before Jesus, he is doing two things through the Spirit of God: looking back to the Exodus in Egypt, and prophesying of the One Who is to come to this moment in time when God would call his VERY Son, Jesus, OUT of Egypt.

And so, very symbolically, Jesus' flight to Egypt is a NEW EXODUS. Yet, what is striking to think about is how something so symbolic, so rich in meaning, in real time, must have been terrifying for this family.

I was talking about this passage with someone this week and they pointed me to a striking painting from the 1800s by the French artist Luc-Olivier Merson. It's called "Rest on the Flight to Egypt," and it hangs in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. But it hauntingly depicts the darkness of night. The way he paints the night sky is incredible. And there is a donkey or mule, and Joseph is lying on the ground resting. And Mary and Jesus are actually sleeping on the monument of a Sphinx. It's really striking. And it makes me think of the confusion, and surprise of the entire situation - literally on the run for their lives to a foreign land.

And yet again, this is how God works. The God of surprises Who used the magi, now rescues this family so that Jesus might one day become Israel's true Rescuer.

2) Life Out of Death

If we are to truly be overwhelmed by the Light of the World dwelling among us, if we are to be overwhelmed by the Light of Christmas - singing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," we have to recognize the sheer darkness of the world to which He came.

And Herod's slaughter of the children is just another example of the evils of this world, the evil of unchecked power and tyranny. I think because this passage is so vivid, so striking,

beautiful and meaningful art and poetry have sprung up around it - artists throughout history trying to come to terms with this scene.

There's a English folk-duo, named Show of Hands, who have a song called "Innocents Song." It's a musical version of the 20th century Cornish poet Charles Causley's poem:

*Who is the smiling stranger, With hair as white as gin,
What is he doing with the children, And who could have let him in?
Why has he rubies on his fingers, A cold, cold crown on his head,
Why, when he caws his carol, Does the salty snow run red?
Why does the world before him, Melt in a million suns,
Why do his yellow, yearning eyes, Burn like saffron buns?
Watch where he comes walking, Out of the Christmas flame,
Dancing, double-talking: Herod is his name.*

Again though, this tragedy is a fulfillment of Scripture. I mentioned last week that Bethlehem was the site where Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. She became known by the rabbis as the "*mother of Israel for all time.*" YET, as Michael Green writes, "*Her death in childbirth was the gateway to life for Benjamin.*" The child of Rachel's pain and agony, Benjamin, would become the ancestor of the Messiah.

Later in the Old Testament, very near Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem, lived a prophet named Jeremiah – who would write what Matthew includes in this story - ¹⁷ *Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."*

Wow. I mean, if we step back and really let the whole counsel of God's Word wash over us, it is astonishing. Rachel, weeping, giving birth to her son... Rachel, weeping at the loss of life and destruction of Jerusalem, and Israel exiled in Babylon... and Rachel, a voice in Ramah, weeping for her children, the children of Bethlehem that are no more.

And yet here, Jesus is saved. He is not killed. The Hope of Israel and the Light of the World will return and rescue. And so, even out of the most horrific of circumstances, Life comes from death.

Tragedy became the pathway to blessing. And once again, God's purposes reveal that, even in our disappointments and tragedies, the seeds of His purposes are for our good.

3) Humility and the Messiah -

Down in Egypt, after some time, the angel of the Lord appears again to Joseph and tells him it's time to return. Herod is dead. The threat is gone. It's time to return to Israel. And so, they go. But they also hear that Herod's son is in charge now. And Joseph and Mary want no part of that. So, they do not return to Bethlehem or Judea. They instead go to Galilee to live in a town called Nazareth. And for a third time in this passage, v.23 we read- *So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

The Scriptures point to the specialness, the chosen-ness, if you will, of the Messiah... that He is the SET APART One, Who will be pure and rescue Israel.

Why does Matthew include this note about being a Nazarene? Because, in Jesus' day, Nazareth was a nothing place. And nothing-kind of people came from Nazareth. That area was full of Gentiles. It was a place not to be celebrated, but despised.

Do you see the theme? Born in obscurity, in a manger in Bethlehem, fleeing to obscurity in Egypt for refuge, Jesus returns to live His entire childhood, teenage years, and young adult life in complete obscurity.

For the better part of 30 years, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, lived in humility - utter obscurity. Almost 5/6ths of the time the Savior of the world was on earth, he lived amongst the poor completely unnoticed. That is humility.

Now what does this episode in the young life of Jesus mean for you and me today? This part of the Christmas story, what is its impact for us?

Well, first, once again we encounter the sovereignty of God. His clear purposes that have been at work throughout history are at work here in this story. And, friends, as we begin a new year His clear sovereign purposes are at work in the world today... and in your life.

They may show themselves in surprising ways. In fact, they always will. They may lead us in surprising directions. They almost always do. But we are to be on the lookout, always, for God's purposes coming into play in the world and in our lives. Again, think about Rachel... in her weeping... how on earth are you using THIS for Your purposes, God? In time, there is a Child born that brings ultimate rest and healing to Rachel's pain.

Sometimes we go through life and we're just moving forward, we're not thinking too much about anything day to day. But God is doing something in all of us. And He will be doing it this year. And His sovereign plans and purposes, however surprising, are going to come to pass in your life. And so, let's trust that the good purposes and plans He has always had, will be recognized by us in these coming days.

Secondly, it's not hard to find the opposition to Jesus in this passage. It's clear. There is a real clear threat in Herod. Yet, in God's care and protection of Jesus and his family, we can be encouraged when we face opposition.

The reality is that we will face opposition. Real opposition. You will face it individually in some way, and as a family. And the Church of Jesus will face it in new ways going forward. But nothing... nothing, because of the providence of God, will be able to quench the mission and purposes of God.

The murderous opposition of Herod could not extinguish the Light of the World. No matter how broken and beat down we may feel, no matter how much the Church might struggle in this culture, no opposition will sink God' work in the world and in you.

Finally, with that all in mind, how could we be anything BUT humble? JC Ryle, the wonderful Bible commentator, says that Jesus became the Man of Sorrows when He was an Infant... in a manger... on the run... children dying... living among the poor.

The kings of the world will always raise their opposition because of their pride and arrogance. But the kings of the world... the Herod's always fall. It is the way of Jesus... it is the way of the humble... that brings life from death, joy from mourning, beauty from ashes.

In Jesus Christ, OUR prideful opposition is absorbed so that you and I can receive His humility. He alone is our Rescue, our Exodus. Life from His death. Let's pray.