

## Hope Amidst the Horrible

### Psalm 2    Matt.2:13-23

As we prepare to enter a new year, and observe Epiphany, we come to a part of the Christmas story that takes place *after* the magi visit the holy family and offer their gifts. It's a story about tragedy, unexpected detours in the journeys of those involved, and God's providence and guidance amidst political violence, particularly one madman's lust for power and control: king Herod.

And while this story pinches a bit, I'm grateful that this is in the Bible. Because the Bible doesn't paint a Pollyanna picture of a perfect world where nothing bad ever happens now that Jesus is born, and that *our* problem is that we're just more messed up today than 2,000 years ago.

And, I'm grateful it's the book because it tells us that amidst horrible events and horrible people who lord it over others, God is still present, God has not given up on humanity, and God still works his purposes out. Underneath the headlines and the turmoil and tragedy, God is still speaking. Usually quietly, on the margins, and in unexpected ways—giving instructions, working his purposes out, bringing his saving help to those who need it.

I'd like to give us a little bit of background about king Herod before we read our text this morning. This will help us get a picture of who we're dealing with

here. This particular Herod—called Herod the first, or Herod the Great—was one in a line of Herod's, who were Roman appointed rulers over the region of Judea, Samaria and Galilee. In other words, over the Jewish people, mainly. He was, in fact, king of the Jews—or more accurately, king *over* the Jews.

The whole Herod family had a pathology of violence. It was just part of their family system, handed down from generation to generation. We might call it leadership by killing everyone you are paranoid about (everyone you think opposes you). We meet some violent people in the Bible, and Herod comes close to being at the top of the list of most violent. For example, he murdered his wife and 3 of his sons because they displeased him. He had his brother-in-law assassinated because he was becoming popular as a leader and Herod was threatened by that.

When Herod began his rule, he killed 3,000 Jewish citizens right before the Passover, just to show he was in charge. It was simply a show of force. And, at the end of his life he had become so hated, even by Roman officials, that he rounded up hundreds of citizens and put them in prison when he knew he was about to die. And he ordered his prison guards to have them all executed at the moment of *his* death to ensure that there would be weeping and wailing and mourning in the land. Because Herod knew they wouldn't mourn for him. The

good news is that the guards refused to do this and they released the prisoners when Herod died. This is the Herod we meet this morning. No wonder God warned so many people to steer clear of him! Now, onto our text for today...

The magi came to Jerusalem—following the star—and met Herod who said “Tell me where he is born that I might worship him too,” which of course he had no intention of doing. After they presented their gifts to the Christ child, in Bethlehem, the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went home by another route.

And here is where we pick up the story...

### **Matthew 2:13-23**

<sup>13</sup>Now after they had left (“they” being the magi), an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, 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.”

<sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

<sup>16</sup>When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup>“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

<sup>19</sup>When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup>“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” <sup>21</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup>But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup>There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

This is the word of the Lord

I was reminded of a great story over the Christmas season about a family that, early in December, was setting out their manger scene in the front yard of their house. There was Mary and Joseph, all the animals, shepherds, magi, and the baby Jesus in the center of the manger scene. After they set it up, their 6 year old son went into the house and brought out his 4 foot tall inflatable Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaur and placed it next to the manger with the other animals. The dad tried to convince his son that a t-rex didn’t belong in this scene. Their son insisted it stay. The dad tried to use logic, like, “Dinosaurs were extinct by then,” and “The bible doesn’t say anything about a t-rex at the manger scene.” The boy stubbornly insisted. Logic didn’t work.

Finally, they came up with a compromise. The t-rex could stay, but it would be placed *behind* the manger. Their son seemed okay with that, and dad and

mom were hoping that the manger would then conceal it from sight as people passed by their house. But when they stepped back toward the street and looked at it, what they saw was the very large head of the t-rex sticking up and out over the manger. Kind of a menacing figure. Still didn't look quite right.

But when they reflected on it for a moment, they decided it actually belonged. Because they realized: there was a menacing presence over Jesus at his birth, as we just heard. So, the t-rex became part of the manger scene. It helped tell the story, in a creative way.

And this is our story too, because sometimes there are menacing people, or menacing situations, looming over and around *us*. Threatening to rob us of our joy, and create fear in us. That's why Jesus has us pray, "deliver us from evil," right? But the great reminder this morning is that God, who came to earth as a human, is present and at work, to guide, protect, and thwart anything that might threaten to undo us.

The question I'd like us to reflect on this New Year's Eve, and the week of Epiphany is: What difference does Jesus make in your and my life? What difference does Jesus make in the world? What difference does his coming, his being born as a human being (his incarnation), make—for us and for the world?

I'd like to reflect on two differences that Jesus makes, based on this part of the Christmas story.

1. **Though there is suffering in the world, and sometimes in our lives, Jesus came to bear it with us.** From the moment of his birth, Jesus comes under persecution. And it will last his whole life. The savior doesn't escape suffering; or even death. And along those lines, I appreciate the fact that there is no miraculous rescue of baby Jesus here. God doesn't whisk him away, zap him out of danger, or strike Herod dead before he commits his atrocity. Herod actually lives out the rest of his natural life. So, baby Jesus here is totally dependent upon his parents' faithfulness and care. Had they—especially Joseph in his dream—not been in a listening and receptive posture, and acted on what he heard, baby Jesus may not have survived.

So, our savior was not immune to suffering. And not just the suffering of persecution, but the suffering of poverty as well. He was born into a poor family that spent their first few years as wanderers, and political refugees; pilgrims without a home.

And this is where his name, Emmanuel, God with us, takes on special meaning. Because his whole life he suffered *with* people. He is, as Isaiah calls him, the suffering servant, acquainted with it from childhood through adulthood.

God didn't stop the violent act of Herod. That's a mystery, and it remains a mystery today why God allows these kinds of things to happen. And it helps to remember that the Bible never asks questions about the origins of suffering or evil. It never asks why or where they come from (except, perhaps, for Job's friends who try to explain the reasons for his suffering; who end up looking like fools in their attempts to explain it). The Scriptures never ask why. The main question the Bible asks is: *does God care?* And the answer to that is clear...

God didn't stop Herod's violence. But God *did* provide Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, to walk with those who do suffer. The word became flesh and dwelt *among us*.

This is good news because it means that God is not off somewhere tending to more important business. *We* are his business, your next-door neighbor is his business, your coworker is his business, your fellow students in school are his business. He is right there, with the grieving, and the lonely, with the broken and the suffering. And he is right here with us, and we celebrate that this morning.

And, Jesus is with the suffering refugees in Palestine... and Syria, and Sudan, and in Congo, where there are ongoing humanitarian crises that aren't making the headlines like the wars in Palestine and Ukraine are. Those places also need our

awareness, our prayers, and our help as we are able to give it. To join with Jesus in his care for the wandering pilgrims and refugees in other parts of the world.

So, this account tells us, that though there is suffering in the world and in our lives, Jesus came to bear it with us.

Second, this account assures us that **though there is *uncertainty* in the world and in our lives, Jesus came to lead us through it.**

Think of the uncertainty in the lives of Mary and Joseph, as they hastily packed up their belongings to leave Bethlehem and head for Egypt. Not knowing where they would stay or what the future held for them. They were forced into exile, for a few years.

Put yourself in their place for a moment and think of all the amazing events swimming around in their heads: angels, dreams, what happened with Elizabeth and Zechariah (John the Baptist's parents, who also experienced a miraculous conception and birth in their older age); Simeon and Anna in the temple saying amazing and mysterious things about their baby, and about them; magi coming to visit and present gifts.

You can imagine Mary and Joseph wondering, "What the heck is going on here?!?" Luke tells us that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. Right! Who wouldn't!? There were a lot of uncertainties in their life, as was true of most



of the Biblical characters we read about. In fact, I can't find one Biblical character whose life was all buttoned up and planned out and everything went according to plan. I find that comforting, actually, and refreshing.

Because, think of the uncertainties of our lives: whether you're a student thinking about school or friends, or you're uncertain about work and vocation, or facing uncertainties about your health, or uncertainties about your children or grandchildren, or the uncertainty of our politics. Especially in 2024!

And it's all too easy to become anxious about these uncertainties. But this Jesus, whose little body was jostled around on his family's journey to Egypt, would one day tell the multitudes: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, and what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... Your heavenly Father feeds the birds and clothes the flowers of the field. He knows what you need. So, fear not! Rather, seek first God's kingdom day by day, and all these things will be added to you."

This is not just pious platitude. Jesus learned this from his parents growing up, who had to learn not to worry about what to eat and drink and wear, and trust that their heavenly Father would provide. And in *their* faithfulness, seeking first God's Kingdom, they discovered *God's* faithfulness to meet them in their uncertainty, and lead them through it. And this Jesus, who lived through suffering

and uncertainty, will lead *us* through the uncertainties of our lives as well, as we learn to trust our heavenly Father, and exercise faith.

And it's important to observe that God doesn't tell Joseph his whole plan all at once; what the timing is and all that. God simply says "go to Egypt." And they have to trust, and have faith. God didn't say, "Go to Egypt, and on this specific date in 15 months and 8 days come back to this specific location." They simply had to go and wait... and wait... and trust. Just go to Egypt and wait for a while. Until Herod's death, specifically. Whenever that would be.

And maybe you're in a waiting place too, and feel like you're wandering, without a map or plan or destination. We affirm, every Advent and Christmas, that God meets us in our waiting places. And eventually guides us—like he guided the holy family, and the magi—to where we need to be. Or need *not* to be!

And so here are Mary and Joseph, simply obeying and doing what God tells them to do without a clear timeline or specific plan. Yet, in God's good timing, he *does* speak again, and leads them out of Egypt and back to a place they can call home.

However—and here is yet another twist in the story of God's faithful people—when they are led back, it's not where they expected to go. It's probably not even where they *wanted* to go: they end up in Nazareth. They want to go back to

Israel, probably to Bethlehem or some place they are familiar with where they had family and friendship ties.

But they end up in Nazareth. Nazareth was a truck stop type of location, which wasn't even on cartographer's maps at that time. It was a mountain village that was known to harbor rebels and insurgents, very much like one of the mountain villages of, say, Afghanistan. Remember what people said about that town? "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" was what people would say, which tells us what they thought of that place. And that's where Mary and Joseph and Jesus end up, and make their home.

And sometimes we end up in a place (literally or figuratively) we don't expect, or perhaps don't even want to be. But it's the place God helps us to call home, and it *becomes* home for us because... *God is there*. Again, the word becomes flesh and dwells among us, moves in with us, provides for us, and continues to work his purposes out through us. No matter where we are, or end up, or what life serves up for us. God was just as present with Mary and Joseph and Jesus in Nazareth as God would have been in Bethlehem, or Jerusalem.

Which brings us back to our account, which, as I read it asks a question: who is in charge? In our story from Matthew this morning, who is in control? Herod thinks he is in control. Is he? Whose Kingdom is being sought here? Herod's

kingdom is the kingdom of self, the kingdom of power and manipulation, and of fear. But it's *God's* Kingdom that is being built, under the radar, away from the headlines, yet still powerfully and intentionally. The people who think they are in control usually aren't in control at all, in the big picture of things. It's God who is at work. Quietly, yet powerfully. Herod is a bad actor on the stage of this drama. Violent, yes, yet void of any real power or leadership. Because God's will and God's activity prevail, in spite of him.

So, with David in Psalm 2 we say in response to Herod, "The one who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has him in derision." I love how it's put in Handel's Messiah, from the Old King James: "*He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn...*"). Herod is ridiculous. In spite of his awful, violent ways, he is nothing.

And David's response can be our confident response to those in the world today who are only interested in the kingdom of self and power and control: the one who sits in the heavens laughs at them. The Lord has them in derision. They are nothing. The book of Revelation tells us that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Nothing can thwart God's purposes and activity. Nothing.

Because underneath the *appearance* of power and control by the world's crazy people, we know the One who is truly working things out, for good. Yet who is

exercising his power and his will *quietly*, often in hidden ways. Which means that the invitation to us, as always, is to pay attention to things like nudges, whispers, dreams, serendipitous events; and then wait, and trust that God will work for good—in our lives and in the world.