

Christmas: The Prophecy Still Speaks
By Jason Huff
January 2, 2016
Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:15-17; Matthew 2:13-23

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 2:13-23. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. “When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “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.” After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.””

We like pretty packages. Most of us do, anyway, which is why Amazon wanted to charge me \$5 a gift to wrap presents for me, even though the actual wrap and bow probably cost 5 cents. My idea of a wrapped present is a bow stuck on the top of an Amazon packing box! Isn’t it funny that the present itself is not enough, that the new sweater or game or toy or book isn’t enough on its own? We like to smooth out the rough edges. When I get done wrapping presents, it looks like a walrus sat on them, but at least they’re wrapped! Sometimes the box is important. My racquetball buddy worked for a high-end collectibles dealer and he had to learn how to gift-wrap without damaging the box, because the trinkets and figurines were worth less if the boxes were damaged. I don’t think I would have lasted an hour there!

We don’t just want gift-wrapped presents; we want gift-wrapped lives. We like life to be sweet and wonderful. There’s nothing wrong with that. Christians long for the perfection of the world as God created it. Paul commanded us in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” As we find joy in Christ, we should find more joy in the admirable things we see in this life.

But Philippians 4:8 starts with one clear charge to think on: “whatever is true.” As painful as it can be, our thoughts should always first focus on what is real and genuine about God, about ourselves, about human nature, and even about history. We can only know God’s intent for us if we see the whole picture – not just the parts of the story that we like.

We like to gift-wrap the Christmas story. Our carols stray from the Bible with a Jesus that doesn't cry...but that's hard to believe, especially if some drummer boy came banging in the middle of the night! We forget that Mary was a young girl accused of adultery; she and Joseph found shelter with animals because no one made room for a pregnant woman to give birth.

But tonight's passage probably makes us uncomfortable, and it should. What I've missed in the past is that Matthew's ending of the Christmas story isn't just a tragic historical event, but three separate stories of suffering. It's painful, it's sad, and it's true. Matthew included this part of the story because it fulfills prophecy, but also because it speaks to God's people in every generation. The truth we find behind the aftermath of Jesus' birth will help us with the reality of sorrow and God's promises that go far beyond it.

Sometime shortly after the magi leave the scene, Joseph is warned of Herod's plans to kill Jesus. The angel of the Lord tells Joseph to flee to Egypt and not to head back to Israel until he returns. So Mary, Joseph, and the very young Jesus are suddenly on the move, in the middle of the night. If they had begun to start a life in Bethlehem, all that's left behind them. They're running with nothing more than their lives and the gifts the astrologers had left for them.

Things are no picnic in Egypt. There were small enclaves of Jews there; maybe they connected with one of them. But if they were fleeing in fear that anyone might learn that Jesus was the boy Herod was after, they likely laid as low as possible. They are in the midst of a foreign culture, a foreign language, in a time where a Jewish carpenter would be skipped over for any available Egyptian who could do the job. The gifts Mary and Joseph might have thought would sustain them for decades disappear more and more quickly every week. They are cut off from family and friends, stuck for anywhere from two to four years far from their home.

Their escape to Egypt is one of considerable suffering, but we miss it because of the incredible grief Herod brings on the city of Bethlehem. He's a madman who had at least a dozen children slaughtered and perhaps many more. It's a tragedy on so many levels.

It's a tragedy for the parents and families who have done nothing wrong, who are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, and lose a child, one of the worst things imaginable. It's a tragedy that shows the corruption of the nation, where Jewish soldiers would commit an act just like their oppressors in Egypt did 1500 years before. It shows that Israel, which under the Pharisees believed they were following the Old Testament law perfectly, had fallen just as low as the other nations. They committed child sacrifice. It is heart-breaking.

But the suffering doesn't end there. Eventually, Herod dies and his son takes the throne. The angel returns and tells Joseph that Israel is safe again, but not anywhere near the capital, not anywhere near the Herods who might find the young Jesus. And so Joseph leads them to a town in Galilee, a three-day journey from the capital, a town called Nazareth. Scholars debate why they settled there because Matthew's language has a subtle change. He says "all the prophets" point to Jesus being a Nazarene. Yet there's no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament.

Did Matthew make a mistake or reference some prophecy lost to time? I don't believe so. You see, Nazareth is nowhere. Bethlehem was a little town, smallest among the clans of Judah. But Nazareth was nowhere. If Bethlehem was a one stoplight town, Nazareth didn't even have a stop sign. It had no trade routes. It wasn't on the historians' lists. Until archeology proved it was there, some scholars thought it didn't exist. At its height, Nazareth had 400 people, and likely had less than two dozen families when Jesus lived there.

While Micah confirmed the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, other prophecies suggested the Messiah would come from parts unknown. It led rabbis to believe there might be two messiahs coming! But God fulfills both prophecies through Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his life until the age of 30 living out of sight, away from most of society except when His parents took Him to the festivals in Jerusalem.

This too is a story of suffering for reasons that aren't immediately apparent. The Son of God doesn't grow up in a king's palace, as would befit Him. He doesn't grow up able to visit the temple every day and commune there with His Father. He wouldn't have access to the great rabbis and religious figures of the day. The Lord of the universe lives in rural poverty, traveling several miles each day to work alongside Joseph and learn His trade.

This is not a royal life. It makes even the least of us here today look incredibly blessed. And because then and now, because we judge people by where they come from, Jesus was taken to be of no account. His disciple Nathaniel had to be forced to meet Jesus. Nathaniel's first thought was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Jesus' background made it unbelievable to many that He could be the Messiah. Their prejudices got in the way.

None of this fits our portrait of Christmas. The biblical Christmas smacks us around. We don't get a beautifully-wrapped Christmas present in the Bible. We get a righteous man contemplating divorce, a pregnant young woman who has done nothing wrong but is stigmatized, impoverished shepherds, bizarre Eastern magi, a psychopathic king, a refugee crisis, and out-and-out murder. Those aren't the pictures I put on the Christmas card we send out each December. Neither do you; if you do, I'm not sure I want to know!

But there are several reasons we don't get a gift-wrapped Christmas in the Bible. It's my hope today that if we leave here today knowing them, we won't get Grinch-like about why these verses are in the Bible but we will come to know and love God even more.

The thing I have come to love about the Bible is that it's real – all of it. Sometimes folks want to throw parts away they don't like or don't understand. Back in high school, when I started reading my Bible seriously, I did too. But eventually, I realized that I loved the whole Bible because it is true - true to life, true to what we experience, true to the realities we see around us today, true to what we know about the human condition.

Biblical stories are full of grit and dirt and mess. Bible stories don't make good Pinterest posts. But Scripture says to focus on what's true. In Philippians 4:8, the word translated "lovely" is rare and it means "pleasing" and "agreeable." It's not about focusing on lovely things like sunsets and artwork, though those can be good; it's about keeping in mind always the things that are lovely, pleasing, and agreeable to God.

Plenty of religions have earthly, even profane stories. What sets Christianity apart is that in the Bible, human interactions are always tarnished with the mud of sin and the dirt of sorrow. But God Himself stands apart; He is always holy, always gracious, always supreme. We believe the good we read about God because we believe the bad we read about people like David and Saul and Peter, who are used by God despite terrible things they did. We see events like the modern crisis in Syria and realize that the ancient world and our world are not far removed.

Matthew didn't have to include this passage. Mark, Luke, and John don't. But Matthew tells us because it's true – it's real – it happened. He doesn't do it to rain on our Christmas. But Matthew has no need to clean up history. That's God's job. God makes sense of history, even the most terrible events. As heart-breaking as the end of Matthew 2 is, its inclusion tells us that God works in real time, in real history, in the broken places of life.

And that leads me to why I love this part of the Christmas story, despite the suffering – God is indelibly in control of history and putting it to its right ends. Each of the story threads – the escape, the murder, the move to Nazareth – fulfills prophecy. Now these prophecies were not big ones. Most rabbis thought that Israel was the son God brought out of Egypt. Jeremiah 31 was supposedly the cry of the exiles, the Jewish people taken from Israel to Babylon. Nobody predicted the town named Nazareth. But God had other plans. God told His people of the Messiah in scriptures they never imagined. And God fulfills each prophecy in its right way.

God is sovereign. He is King of all. He is not an absentee landlord or a clockmaker watching for the watch to tick down. He rules the universe. Nothing happens without His permission. Does He enjoy the death of the innocent or the sufferings of Mary and Joseph and Jesus? No. But He uses those events for His purposes. He steers them right. He was not surprised by the brutality of King Herod. He arranged for outsiders to bring gifts so His Son's family would survive exile. He sent an angel to guide Joseph away from Jerusalem and Bethlehem. We don't understand God's plan, but He executes that plan in His perfection.

None of the suffering came without purpose. In every situation, God's divine knowledge and control of the future is proven true. In each situation, God is working out the perfect redemption of His people for all of time. And ultimately, that leads us to the real truth: *God does gift-wrap the perfect gift for us...we're simply looking for it in the wrong place.*

In Revelation, we see the final end of all things as we know it. The old heaven and earth pass away. Sin and death and the devil are completely and forever defeated. Those saved by the blood of Jesus are raised to everlasting life. The benefits of faith in Jesus and salvation through His saving life, death, and resurrection are finally realized.

In the midst of it, in Revelation 21, we enter the new Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem is the gift wrap. The city is paved with gold pure as glass. The foundations are covered in precious stones, and the gates are made out of enormous perfect pearls. There's the river of the water of life flowing down the center of the city and the tree of life stretches over both sides of the river. And for all the magnificence, that's the wrapping and the bow and tape. Because the true gift is found in Revelation 22:3-4 – "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

It isn't how the story begins that's so important. It's the ending that matters. Science has found that when people go through surgery and are lightly sedated, they don't judge the surgery on the overall pain they experience but on the most severe moment of pain and the pain at the very end. They think the experience was bearable if the ending was good. That's true of a lot of things. Nobody's happy to watch the Lions win for fifty-five minutes if they spend the last five losing. You might change your mind about a movie if the ending is really great or really awful.

The two endings to God's story are great. The first ending sees Jesus alive and well after His crucifixion, raised from the dead, ascending to life beside the Father, sending the Spirit, and providing salvation for all who would turn to Him. The second ending, the one yet to come, will bring to fruition everything that Jesus' salvation achieved – life eternal in the presence of God, in a paradise without sin, without ever falling away from relationship with God ever again.

And so once again, the message of the Christmas story is, do not be discouraged, even in your greatest suffering. We've had some difficult times, and so have you. You might be frustrated at your work or exhausted in your marriage or facing a medical problem you've struggled with. You might read today's passage and say, "Where is God in the heartbreak? Why doesn't He stop the slaughter of innocents? Why does He make His own Son suffer?"

But God is at work. All around the world, God is still working out His plan among the seven billion of us. He is fulfilling His promises to us. God never said His people would not struggle or suffer, only that they would be redeemed and restored and made whole. And that's what we cling to. Romans 5 tells us that suffering produces perseverance produces character produces hope. Hebrews 2 says that it was "fitting" that Jesus would suffer so that many of us would come to glory. 1 Peter 4 tells us not to be surprised by suffering, and Paul actually encourages Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel!

God is working even through our hardships for our joy. So don't go away sad or angry or disappointed that the Christmas story isn't as pretty as we'd like it to be. Instead, may we recognize that God is in our midst in our sufferings and sorrows. Christ lived through sufferings and sorrows and, through them, became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Jesus was called a Nazarene, a son of nowhere, so that we could be called sons and daughters of the Most High God. Just as the Father called the Son out of Egypt, may we be called out of darkness into His incredible light.