

Matthew 2:13-23. Christmas in the real world – the issue of suffering

¹³ After the Wise Men were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him.” ¹⁴ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵ He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under. This was in keeping with the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men. ¹⁷ Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

¹⁸ A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. The angel said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to kill the child are dead.”

²¹ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there. Since he had been warned in a dream, he went to the region of Galilee. ²³ When he arrived there, he settled in a city called Nazareth. So what was spoken through the prophets was fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Dad was upset. Mom was frustrated. The kids were cranky and getting after each other over little things. ...and *Silent Night* was playing in the background.

The siren was blaring. The lights flashing, as the ambulance arrived. A stunned family looked on. ...and *Silent Night* was playing in the background.

Tears were flowing. The hurt was raw, and deep. The man gently laid a flower on his wife’s grave. ...and *Silent Night* was playing in the background.

Those thoughts (not word for word), from a devotion I recently read, stuck with me. And they bring to mind the issue that we come to today. The Christmas decorations may still be up in your home. And *Silent Night* may still be playing (if not on the radio, in our hearts). But then there is all this too. I mean the pain, the sadness, and the strife of life in this world. Christmas doesn’t take place in a vacuum (with all trouble swept away).

“See,” the skeptic or cynic says, “All that Christmas stuff – that peace and good news business from God – doesn’t do any good. It doesn’t make a difference. This is the real world still.”

Ahh, the real world. Indeed. We object to the cynic, or skeptic’s conclusion, that Christmas doesn’t do any good. But we better be ready to find common ground with them on a very critical point for us to perceive also: This is the real world. What happens in life still?

Take out the siren blaring. Replace it with a neighbor running to call for the town physician, a few streets over. Could the very same scenarios, which I mentioned a moment ago, have played out in the homes in the land of Israel (Judea and Galilee) some 2,000 years ago? A dad upset, mom frustrated, children cranky? A sudden sickness of a family member? The grief brought with the separation from a loved one caused by death?

Was it any different of a world then? The issue that we come face-to-face with here today is not something new to our age.

Maybe at a time we’ve been so fixed on the joy of God’s goodness to us, and rightly so, it’s good to “intentionalize” a way to “come down to earth” so to speak. Earth after all, with its every day happenings, is the place Jesus came. And it’s the same earth, with all of its evil, in which we presently live. That doesn’t mean we have to leave behind any of the joy of Christmas. Let’s just gain perspective (and keep it), so that we can bring it with us into the days ahead, to help us in whatever lies ahead (good or rough times) in this world.

By looking at this Bible section today, so soon after Christmas, we are following the practice of Christians that goes way back – 1500+ years. Going back that far, a remembrance of the sad events from Bethlehem - the tragic loss of life recorded in Matthew ch.2 - has been set on the church calendar for yesterday, Dec.28th. The early Christians by tying

these events so closely – Christmas and this tragedy – obviously saw some benefit, a spiritual usefulness to this. What direction and encouragement did they draw? Well, what do we see by taking this up today?

Does it seem a bit jarring? The suddenness of the change in scenes. From birth, to death. From angels singing of “glory and peace,” to men and women crying because of the life-altering upheaval from Herod’s rage. I admit it feels jarring. And maybe it’s the very timing of this, of looking at these two so closely together, that helps us carry home the encouragement and direction (helping it all hit home in an especially memorable way).

The issue of suffering, when at the same time we have an Almighty God, is perhaps one of the most perplexing concepts to the human intellect. Two realities must be allowed to stand side-by-side:

- It’s a fallen world in which we live, so life in this world will come with facing evil and suffering. &
- God, with His love, still accomplishes His good will.

And with those two it is good for us to identify the proper starting point. God didn’t bring the quarrelling, the health crises or the cemeteries filled with graves. Sin brought pain, upheaval, uncertainty and death into our world.

But in reply to humanity’s sin that brought all of that into our world...

God came. He, God the Son, came at just the right time. He came born of woman, born under law, to redeem those under law. He came and by His coming and life’s work brought about the only way to peace.

And so we return to these two realities that must be allowed to stand.

- This world’s evil is still here. We face it.
- God, with His love, still accomplishes His will.

Think through why it is so important to have this knowledge readily in mind. Look at Matthew ch.2, and you see.

Among the traumas we face in this world, the death of children is especially difficult for anyone to experience. Our hearts go out to the bereaved parents. Here we see in Matthew ch.2 multiple families going through such pain. What a tragedy! This mass murder by Herod. The families – and even we, from across the years, looking back – are left with no way to answer why (why did this have to happen?). Their children were innocent of the “crime” for which Herod unjustly determined to deliver a death sentence. They were not “the King of the Jews” Herod viewed as a threat, without reason even.

There are so many cases still today – whether death of children, or senseless acts of violence, or other pains – where we aren’t given any way to arrive at a satisfying explanation to questions like “why did this have to happen.”

And so we come to this important principle. For the times answering “why” isn’t possible, we have this truth...

God loved us so much He came into our broken world. And at Christmas, after Jesus’ birth, we get to see the kindness and love of God our Savior. For the next 33 years, He walked in our shoes. He faced all the same kinds of pains, strife and loss that we face. And then to finish His work to save us, God the Father stood aside as His own Son was put to death by rulers that hated Him without reason. He was totally innocent.

“How could God let this happen?,” people sometimes ask. But for this question we have an answer. We know why. Jesus went to His death for us – to take our sin, to bring us forgiveness and freedom from sin’s curse of hell. And He lives again. And He gives forgiveness and eternal life to all who trust in Him, to save. No merit of ours. All credit is given to Him.

“God the Father did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all. How will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things” – Romans 8. That means all things we need. And it goes along with the promise, “In all things – even the evil happenings in this world – God works for our good, the good of all whose trust is in Him.” And so arrive with me at this first key application...

When answering “why” isn’t possible (about something in our life), we can trust our God. In Jesus our future home is certain. And there’s the promise for the present when we face evil, as Isaiah ch.63 from earlier so well state. When we are distressed, He is not distant. He is distressed. And He is here to uplift us and carry us. This is God’s promise for you as His child through faith.

And here’s another application: this account also gives us a reminder that in the midst of pain or loss, it’s normal to grieve. It’s not wrong. You don’t have to “shake yourself out of it.” And there is no “just get over it” command (or even

suggestion) in the Bible. What we do see in the Bible are accounts like this, where we are shown: grief at loss is expected. It's real. It's ok.

But there's also something to go with the grief. God is present with His love. And so we allow the two to stand side-by-side – both realities. That's the truth we hear in 1 Thes. 4: "we don't grieve like the rest of men who have no hope." But we grieve. We just also have the certain confidence of God's promises: He is here with His love. Grief and hope make it on the same line of the Bible. Much like news of *Jesus' birth with Christmas joy and grief in the town of Bethlehem at such tragic loss* make it into the same chapter of the Bible. So where does that leave us? It directs our eyes to our God. His care for now. The certainty of heaven to look forward to.

Here's a third application: though we can't answer "why" for all the trauma we face in the world, as we rest in God's care, a *Forward in Christ* article – from a former year – points us to something healthy and helpful we can do in the face of trauma. Pray. Some specific prayers are highlighted. And they tie in with this:

There are actually 3 commemorations on the Christian calendar on the days immediately after Christmas, the article cites. Dec.26th has been a day to remember Stephen, the first martyr who died in the time of the New Testament church. He was stoned for sharing the news of Jesus. Dec.27th the church calendar points us to the example of John, who in his old age was forced to live in exile on the prison island of Patmos. He was confined for sharing the good news of Jesus' love. And the sad commemoration held on Dec.28th we've talked about today.

Pastor Joel Seifert, toward the close, then gives us an encouragement: "Following the joy of Christmas, you see a world's evil—and God's people in the middle of it. But it's good for us to see that. Celebrate Christmas. Then consider a few 'new' post-Christmas traditions.

- Set aside some time to pray for those whose ministry puts them in harm's way.
- Pray for your brothers and sisters living in nations that lock up faithful Christians.
- Pray for our world, where madmen still rage and hurt people and where even little children are cut down without cause. Pray that more and more hearts would be led to see abortion for what it is, and that the taking of such vulnerable life would come to an end, that adoptions would increase, and that we'd truly love children the way God intends."

We trust Jesus lives to hear our prayers. He has promised to answer, in the way that He knows best. And so it is good for us to pray for others and ourselves – for evil to be thwarted and for God's good will to be carried out.

Final application: I want you to consider. Let's not forget that the sinful nature – exhibited unchecked in Herod, with his heinous act – still is present in us, and seeks constantly to regain mastery. And all its will is bent on that aim. So let's ask our Lord to guard our hearts and minds, so that we don't imagine the evil is all "out there." Ask that we continue to ask daily, "What do I see about myself?" And in reply, we admit our daily sins, and trust in Jesus: the Savior born for us. Amen.

Let's pray: Dear Jesus, send your Spirit to daily open our eyes and correct us, that we see our sin and live in repentance, that our hearts remain hungering for the righteousness that is ours in you alone. Then, at peace with you, calm our hearts amidst suffering or loss that we face in life. Drive away fear, anxiety or doubts about your love, as you comfort our hearts with what we've learned again today: True peace isn't found in the absence of troubles; it is found in the presence of you. You are for us and remain with us through it all. Amen.