

## The Coming King: Advent Messages in Matthew

*Out of Egypt* (Matthew 2:12-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 22, 2024

### Introduction

- ❖ One of my favorite things about the Christmas season is seeing all the lights and decorations wherever you go. Whether you're driving through your neighborhood or shopping in the mall, you're surrounded by so many sights and sounds getting you in the holiday spirit. **And it's great to see so much explicit Christian symbolism displayed on store fronts or front lawns and to hear gospel-rich Christmas carols being played in public spaces.** I was in a store and heard *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* playing above us, and I was really curious if anyone was actually listening to the lyrics. The song straight-up preaches the gospel!
  - And then there's the nativity scene. You can't get more explicitly Christian than that. And it's great how prevalent they are around town. Many of you probably have one in your home. We've got that Fisher-Price Little People Nativity Set set up in our living room. It's cute. Talia played with it as a toddler. Ten years later and it's Maisie's turn.
  
- ❖ Now I'm all for displaying fun and playful nativity scenes, but I remember this one Advent season when I was reading Eugene Peterson and I was a bit convicted. He was lamenting at how we've overly-sanitized the nativity scene. He talks about how the nativity story has been, in his own words, "*sentimentalized into coziness and domesticated into worldliness.*"<sup>1</sup>
  - He goes on to say, "*Jesus's birth excites more than wonder; it excites evil.*" His point is that there's a dark side to the Christmas story that we often overlook. **On that first Christmas, evil forces in the cosmic realm were stirred up and agitated.** A great battle commenced that day and lasted for a good thirty-three years. Until a final victory was secured, on a hillside right outside the gates of Jerusalem.
  
- ❖ During this time of year, we "ooh" and "ahh" at the sight of well-lit nativity scenes filled with cherub angels, fluffy sheep, and a peaceful mother and child. **But rarely do we shudder and tremble over the cosmic battle that was taking place in the backdrop.** Rarely do we give attention to the bloodshed that accompanied our Savior's birth and the cries of agony that pierced the silence of those fateful nights.
  - But it does a soul good to meditate on these grim realities. If we allow the nativity to be "*sentimentalized into coziness and domesticated into worldliness,*" we lose sight of the true meaning and power of the Christmas story.
  
- ❖ So to help us recover the rougher edges of this story, I'd like us to consider – on this Lord's Day before Christmas Day – this passage in Matthew's account of the birth narrative where Jesus's life was in danger and a horrible massacre of children took place in a desperate attempt to snuff him out. There are three dramatic elements in this story.
  - First, we see (1) An incredible escape. Then, (2) an agonizing slaughter. And lastly (3) an obscure upbringing. In each of these elements, there's not only something important to learn that can help round out our view of the nativity. But there's also a lesson we can draw as worshippers of a God who was once born a baby in Bethlehem.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, pg. 121.

## An Incredible Escape

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the **incredible escape** that took place in those days – **where the Holy Family barely escaped the sword and only by miraculous intervention**. If you recall from last week's text, wise men from the east had followed a star in the sky, believing it to be a sign of the birth of a great king. They came to Jerusalem, inquiring of King Herod, asking for the whereabouts of this new king of the Jews, so that they might worship him.
  - The wise men were directed to the little town of Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David, and they were instructed by Herod to return with a report if they succeeded in finding this Messiah, this baby born king of the Jews. But we're told in v12, that – after finding baby Jesus and worshipping him and gifting him the gold, frankincense, and myrrh – **the wise men were warned in a dream *not* to return to Herod but to find another route home.**
  
- ❖ And that's because Herod's intentions were duplicitous and downright evil. He wanted to kill the child. So an angel of the Lord was sent to warn Joseph in a dream. Listen to v13, *“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.””*
  - We're told that Joseph immediately obeys and leaves for Egypt that night with his family. And they're told to remain there in exile until told otherwise. **Now Egypt would've been a sensible place for the Holy Family to hide out.** According to one ancient Jewish historian (Philo, 40AD), around a million Jews were living in Egypt around that time. And by then, it wasn't a hostile foreign nation. It was a well-ordered Roman province. The whole region of the Middle East was under Roman rule.
  
- ❖ **And just as it made sense for Joseph and family to hide out in Egypt, it made sense that Herod would seek to harm the Messiah.** It made sense that he would've seen this child as a rival to his authority. Herod was notorious for his suspicion of potential usurpers. History records that he executed one wife and three sons under the suspicion of treason. So it's completely within character for him to orchestrate this massacre in Bethlehem.
  - Joseph and the wise men were right to be afraid. **They were right to fear what this ruthless ruler might do to baby Jesus.** Remember, what took place in the nativity was a true Incarnation. The Son of God made flesh. That baby in the manger had real blood coursing through his veins. Yes, he was God but he was also man. His skin wasn't impenetrable. **If you cut him, he would've bled.** He could've died. So escaping Herod's sword was necessary. They needed to flee to Egypt for their safety.
  
- ❖ But it was also to fulfill prophecy. That's Matthew's point in v15. **One important characteristic of Matthew's Gospel is that it was written to a predominately Jewish audience, trying to convince them that Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies.** That he's the fulfillment of all their messianic hopes. That's why Matthew is always mentioning how Jesus fulfilled this or that OT passage, allusion, or motif. Look at v15, *“This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.””*

- ❖ **In other words, he's saying the Holy Family's flight to Egypt and eventual return were all providential events that fulfilled what was once prophesied in Hosea 11:1.** This is what Hosea wrote, "*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*"
  - Now Hosea was making reference to Israel's storied history. When, all the way back in the book of Genesis, Israel escaped the dangers of a famine – when Jacob and his family fled to Egypt. Notice how Israel (as a people) is collectively described as God's Son. And, as the story goes, in the Exodus, God called his Son out of Egypt and led them to the Promised Land.
    - **But the point in Hosea 11 is that – in spite of God's loving faithfulness in calling them out of bondage and into a land flowing with milk and honey – the people of Israel continued to adulterate themselves.** They kept entertaining other lovers. Chasing after idols. Worshipping other gods. That's how Israel's story goes.
  
- ❖ So in identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 – as the Son that God called out of Egypt – **Matthew is implying that Jesus is Israel. He's the true and better Israel. He's the fulfillment of what Israel should've been.**
  - My oldest is reading *The Lord of the Rings* for school, so we're finally watching the movies together. And we just watched that scene in the *Two Towers* when members of the Fellowship are in Fangorn forest, and they're confronted by the white wizard. They're ready for a fight because they were warned that Saruman the White has been corrupted and is now in league with Sauron. But when they see the white wizard's face, they realize it's Gandalf. **The one they knew as Gandalf the Gray – whom they assumed had died in battle – is now arrayed in brilliant white.**
    - The scene is a bit confusing at first because – while the face and voice belong to Gandalf – he actually says, "*I am Saruman.*" Which is confusing. But then he goes on to say, "*I am Saruman as he should have been.*" In other words, Saruman the White was tasked to mobilize the free people of Middle Earth to resist the growing power of Sauron. But he clearly failed in that task. So it was up to Gandalf to fulfill his task. **To be the wizard that Saruman should have been. To live the life that Saruman should have lived.**
  
- ❖ **In the same way, Jesus fulfilled what Israel failed to accomplish. To be the Son that Israel should have been. To live the life that Israel should have lived.** In obedience to the Father and as a blessing to the nations.
  - **This is why Matthew makes a point of recounting all the ways in which Jesus's life is a retelling (a recapitulation) of the story of Israel.** But, this time, succeeding in all the ways that Israel failed. Just as Israel fled to Egypt, Jesus fled to Egypt (2:14). Just as Israel was called out of Egypt, Jesus was called out of Egypt (2:20). Just as Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea, Jesus went through the waters of baptism (3:13). Just as Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness (4:1-2).

- ❖ **And more specifically, there are parallels being drawn between Jesus and Moses, who led Israel in those days.** Just as Moses escaped a state-sponsored slaughter of baby boys (Ex 1:22), Jesus escaped the same. Just as Moses fled the wrath of a ruler (Ex 2:15), Jesus fled the same. Just as Moses only returned when those seeking his death were dead (4:19), Jesus's family only returned after hearing the same.
  - Remember, Matthew was writing his Gospel to a predominately Jewish audience that would've easily picked up these associations between the story of Israel and the story of Jesus. **They would've understood Matthew's point – that God is doing a new thing with this new baby.** That just as this special boy had been delivered from certain death – he'll turnaround to deliver us from certain death.
  
- ❖ If you've been at HCC long enough, you've heard me explain the salvation that Jesus accomplished in terms of him, "living the life we should've lived and dying the death we should've died." As you can tell, I'm just borrowing from Matthew. **Just as Jesus lived the life that Israel should've lived, he lived the life that you and I should have lived.** In obedience to God the Father and as a blessing to others in our lives.
  - All of us have failed in that task. All of us have sinned and fallen short. But Jesus was born into our world to serve as our perfect substitute. To take our place in life and death. My only hope of salvation depends on Jesus standing before the Creator and Judge over all and speaking on my behalf saying, ***"I am Jason Tarn. Or better yet, I am Jason Tarn as he should have been. As his Savior, I have lived and died on his behalf. That's why you can welcome him into glory with open arms."***
  
- ❖ That's my only hope. And that's yours as well. To have Jesus live the life you should've lived. **To be the Child of God that you should've been.** If you have yet to receive Jesus's substitutionary work on your behalf – to receive it by faith – I invite you to do that today.

### **An Agonizing Slaughter**

- ❖ Let's move on and consider the next dramatic element in this story. **Let's talk about the agonizing slaughter that's recorded in vv16-18.** This is where the story gets dark. This is the part we're tempted to sanitize. Let's listen to v16, *"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."*
  - Bethlehem was only about six miles from Jerusalem, so couldn't have taken the wise men more than a day or two to return to Herod's palace. So when they were a no-show and Herod realized he had been tricked, he gave the order for the slaughter. To kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all that region, two years and under. Two years was probably older than Jesus was at the time, but Herod wanted to be sure.

- ❖ Now as bad this massacre sounds – and truly was – it’s still important to place it in context. Bethlehem was *not* a large city. **Some estimates suggest it had a population under a thousand, so that means, on average, there would’ve been no more than twenty or so boys at a given time within that age range.** That doesn’t make it any less heinous, but that probably explains why this particular slaughter is not mentioned in other ancient records.
- ❖ Now in v17, Matthew tells us that this slaughter fulfilled **Jeremiah 31:15**. “*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.*” Ramah was an area allotted to the tribe of Benjamin, located north of Jerusalem. **Tradition has taught that Rachel – one of Jacob’s wives – was buried in the vicinity of Ramah** (1 Sam 10:2). We also learn in Jeremiah 40:1 that Ramah was the location where the exiles from Jerusalem were gathered in preparation for their long march to Babylon, when the Babylonian Exile took back in 586BC.
  - **So back in Jeremiah 31, when he spoke of Rachel weeping with loud lamentation, he was speaking figuratively of Rachel, from her tomb, weeping for the children of Israel as they were forcibly taken into exile.** So just as mothers in Jeremiah’s day grieved the loss of their sons to exile, the mothers of Bethlehem were in similar grief and agony. Refusing to be comforted because their sons are no more.
- ❖ **In Revelation 12, you’ll find a graphic illustration of this agonizing slaughter through a vision that the Apostle John receives.** It’s a vision full of symbolism and imagery (as you’d expect from a book like Revelation). We’re told that John saw a vision of a “*great red dragon*” and a woman who was pregnant “*who was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.*” **These are allusions to events taking place in the unseen cosmic realm as the Christmas story was unfolding.**
  - And John says he saw that “*the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.*” (12:4). That’s a frightening image! **Just picture this woman, in the act of childbirth, but with a great red dragon, who is the devil (12:9), crouched below her. Just waiting for her child to exit the womb and drop straight into his hungry, gaping jaws.**
- ❖ **You could say that the devil has been in this posture, trying to swallow up God’s Anointed from the beginning.** Ever since he was warned that an offspring of the woman would one day bruise his head (Gen 3:15) For centuries, the devil was haunted by those words. He made it his mission to snuff out this child before he could grow up to threaten him.
  - **That’s why, throughout Scripture, you come across multiple instances of the sons of Israel – of boys – being targeted by the devil.** And so we read in Exodus 1 of the devil inciting **Pharaoh** to kill the baby boys of Israel. Even when settled in the Promised Land, he tempts Israel to adopt the idolatries of their neighbors, including the sacrifice of their sons to **Molech** and other false gods.

- ❖ Later, when it looked like David was that promised child, **Saul** (filled with an evil spirit) tried to kill him a number of times. Then there was a wicked queen mother named **Athaliah** in 2 Kings 11 who, after the king (her son) died, she tried to kill the rest of the royal family. But her grandson was rescued and hidden away. And then there's the **book of Esther**, and how she foiled a wicked plot to kill all the Jews in Persia. If it had worked, it would've ended the line of the woman and the promise of a Messiah. That was the devil's plan.
  - **But all through the years, he kept guessing wrong and failing to snuff out the messianic line.** But here, in Matthew 2, he has a good feeling about this baby born in Bethlehem. He's pretty sure it's him. **So he incites King Herod to carry out the slaughter – but still misses.** Then he waits, years later, to tempt Jesus in the wilderness. But unlike Adam, Jesus doesn't take the bait and remains true to his Father's will (Mt 4:1). So the devil incites the townsfolk of Nazareth to try to throw Jesus off a cliff but Jesus walks away unscathed (Lk 4:29). As Jesus goes on from town to town, all of the devil's demons go shrieking from his presence. So the devil turns to the religious leaders of the day, the governing authorities, and a close companion. And he twists their hearts to resist, oppose, and betray the Son of God.
  
- ❖ The devil thought he had won. The women weeping at the foot of the cross thought all was lost. **But what none realized at the time was that all of this grief and agony was just a precursor to hope and resurrection.** In the same way, Jeremiah 31:15's reference to the grief and agony of Rachel immediately shifts to a prophecy of hope and restoration. Listen, two verses later, to Jeremiah 31:17, *“There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.”*
  - So just as the Exile in Jeremiah's day would eventually give way to another Exodus – coming out of a foreign country of occupation and returning home – in the same way, this grief and agony felt in Matthew 2 will eventually give way to a New Exodus accomplished by a New Moses. A New Deliverer.
  
- ❖ **The tears that began to flow in Jeremiah's day – that continued with the mothers of Bethlehem – finally culminated in the eyes of Jesus's own mother at the foot of the cross.** But then those tears dried up. For the Messiah had come. And through his death and resurrection he led God's people through a New Exodus and established with them a New Covenant by his own blood (Jer 31:31-34; Matt 26:28). That's the gospel story.
  - Again, if you don't know Jesus as your Deliverer – if you haven't put your trust in his life and death – if your tears of grief and agony don't have resolution in the hope of the resurrection, then place your hope in Jesus and find your peace in him.

### **An Obscure Upbringing**

- ❖ But I realize, for some of you, you might be thinking, “I know who Jesus is. Or at least who Christians think he is. And that's fine if Christians want to attribute to him divine power and authority over their lives. But he's just a man to me. A great man who has significantly shaped world history. But still just a man. So I can give him my respect. But I won't give him my worship. I won't go as far as giving my life to him.”

- ❖ But you're not alone in coming to that conclusion. That's what many, in Matthew's day, thought about Jesus. And what many, in Jesus's day, thought about Jesus. **And that relates to the third dramatic element in this passage – the obscure upbringing of the Messiah.**
- ❖ We're told in v19, that after Herod's death, Joseph had another dream and was told it was safe to return to Judea. But Joseph didn't think it wise to return to Bethlehem. With the town being so close to Jerusalem. Especially now that Archelaus was in charge.
  - Look at v22, *"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."* **Archelaus was the ruthless son of Herod who was given rule over Judea.** Augustus Caesar promised him the title of "king" if he earned it. But he proved to be a poor ruler and was removed from office in a few short years.
- ❖ **So we're told that Joseph settled his family in Galilee – in the town of Nazareth.** Which in Luke's Gospel, we learn that Nazareth was already their former home. Listen to v23, *"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."*
  - Matthew is not citing any particular OT text. There's no passage predicting the Messiah would be called a Nazarene. In fact, there's no mention of the town of Nazareth in the OT. Neither in the Mishnah nor in the Talmud. **Which means that Nazareth was truly an obscure town of no significance.**
- ❖ **Matthew was just drawing attention to the overall thrust of the OT and its prophecies about the Christ.** About his humble origins and seeming insignificance. You see, if he had been known as "Jesus of Bethlehem" – the association with royal lineage would've been too obvious. And the messianic expectations surrounding him would've been too much too soon.
  - **But "Jesus the Nazarene" was more of an insult than anything else.** Remember when Nathanael was surprised to learn the Messiah's name was Jesus of Nazareth? His first reaction was, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* (Jn 1:46) And when Acts 24:5 says that Christians were described as followers of that *"sect of the Nazarenes"* – that was supposed to be an insult.
- ❖ **The whole point is that Jesus's obscure upbringing – his growing up in a small, insignificant town like Nazareth – just serves to underline how unlikely it was for him to be the Christ.** It would've been much easier to believe he's just a man. A respected teacher and rabbi. But still just a man. And one from a town of no importance.
  - **But the prophets of old already prepared us to expect an obscure and unexpected Messiah. They said we would be despised and rejected** (Isa 53:3). And many would be astonished at him (Isa 52:14). He would be an unexpected Savior. **No one would've expected God himself would come to deliver.** That he would come as a vulnerable baby boy in need of protection. **That he would deliver his people – not by dominating – but by dying.** Dying for us and for our sins. No one expected it.

- ❖ But the question is – will you receive it? **Will you receive Jesus?** What makes him a wonderful Savior is that he understands what it's like to feel small, to feel insignificant, to be overlooked and ignored. **He can sympathize with our weaknesses.** He has been tempted as we are yet without ever falling into sin. Which is why we can confidently draw near to God's throne of grace, to receive mercy and help, in our time of need (Heb 4:15-16). Some of you need to do that, especially this Christmas. **It's time that you drew near to the God who first drew near to you.** As near as humanly possible. And quite literally so. Which is the story of the Incarnation that we're all here to celebrate!