

The Rock: 12-13-2020

Advent 2020

Bringing in the Kingdom

First reading: Jeremiah 31:15-17 (Me)

Title: Herod (Tyrant / King)

Scripture: Matthew 2:16-18

Theme:

In one of the most awful stories we can find in the New Testament where tyrants rule, digging a bit deeper into what and why Matthew records this, we find HOPE.

Introduction:

Sometimes we come to a passage of Scripture that is hard to read. Why is something such as this part of what we have come to know as the Christmas story?

There are times when you just feel perhaps like skipping over it, after all Christmas is a happy time, a family time and a joyful time.

All of which is true, but we also know and understand that life being what it is, sometimes Christmas isn't so much like Bing Crosby in White Christmas, but

rather a bit more like Clark Griswold in Christmas Vacation.

How do we find encouragement in these horrific events of chapter two here in Matthew? Where is God in this? How and why would he let this happen?

These are all questions that I think we may find answer to in confronting these verses. Afterall, the Holy Spirit led Matthew to record them, even if no other secular author found it necessary.

Herod, being as evil as he was, this event didn't register as bad enough to warrant more than a passing mention to Caesar Augustus.

Who responded to the news by saying: "It seems safer to be Herod's swine than it was to be a child."

The Story:

There, now that I have thoroughly depressed you and have you wondering why you came to church today. You can get this kind of encouraging news in the day-to-day doings of our culture and world.

Because in the middle of weeping and great mourning we will find hope. In the groanings of child birth, and the travail which comes with that, New Creation is birthed.

In grief and loss, in our waiting here this advent season, we reach out to God, we look to Him and see that He provides for us every step of the way.

There is great encouragement there. We see it first in the miraculous protection of this family, as Joseph is rattled awake in the middle of the night.

Herod the tyrant is out to get you and your son, go into exile. There you will be safe until the time comes for me to call you out of exile and home again.

"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." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

-Matthew 2:13-15 ESV

God's providential care of and for His people. The first sign of comfort in what will be a terrible day. Let's pause to just acknowledge this: It is hard to say that here, because it seems here that God

will allow what is about to happen, in order to protect His son.

That is true. He does, just as He allows all things to happen. He is sovereign over all times, including this one. So, there are a couple things we should understand.

First is this, as Time Keller would put it: God gives us what we need, not what we want. That sometimes is so very hard to understand.

If we knew everything He knows it would be easier, but we don't. We are finite, he is infinite and omnipotent.

God ordains the comings and goings of all the world, messy and otherwise. His hand is in it all. That must be understood, as Dickens would say in A Christmas Carol, or nothing good will come of what I am about to tell you.

It is our duty as Christians to grow in understanding of God's common grace toward all of humanity. For it is in, as Paul says, God that we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

It's how, at least in part, how we learn to love and to understand God. You see, that Jesus would ultimately die the same kind of unjust death as these little ones, we must understand that the

authority which allows such events, does not come from the tyrants who act them out.

Pilate was put on notice by Jesus regarding this, when he thought that he was actually in charge of things. After having him flogged and hoping that would be enough to appease the crowds, he questions Jesus one last time:

"Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."

-John 19:9b-11a ESV

That timing of His death, that authority and the purposefulness of it, comes from God, and no one else. Jesus was rescued then because he wasn't to be rescued later. He would die, but it would be according to the sovereign plan of God the Father.

Matthew Henry was very helpful for me as I studied this, when he said about the death of these boys:

"A passive testimony was hereby given to the LORD Jesus. As when he was in the

womb, he was witnessed to by a child's leaping in the womb for joy at His approach, so now, at two years old, He had the contemporary witnesses to Him of the same age. They shed their blood for Him, who afterwards shed His blood for them. These were the infantry of the noble army of martyrs."

-Matthew Henry commentary -Matthew Pg. 14

So, to look at a story like this, painful and horrific, reminds us that outside of God's grace and mercy, we all have the tendency to be tyrants in our own way.

How we act and react within His sovereignty and His will determines our growth in Christ. Herod here chose to defy God and this is the result.

It was not that God was ok with letting His image-bearers die. It was that Herod and the world were dead set against letting the true King live!

And, they would do anything to keep the belief that they were masters of their own destiny.

The depth of God's love for us can get lost in this mess. But, if we go to Jeremiah, from whom Matthew quotes here, we get a parallel "back story".

Out of a mess, cleansing. Out of chaos,
peace. Out of exile, freedom and return.
Out of mourning, JOY.

Think of it as child birth here. Now, I
personally have never experienced it, but
am really close to someone who has. And
during the birthing of someone new -there
is pain which is unbearable.

But the moment that little one enters the
world and is placed on momma's belly,
there is no longer that pain, only joy.

I leave Jeremiah 31 for you to read
through on your own, but let's look at a
few verses there. Because Jeremiah is
writing about the lamentation of the loss
of the children who had been dragged off
into exile by the Babylonians.

"Thus says the Lord: "The people who
survived the sword found grace in the
wilderness; when Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to him from far away. I
have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my
faithfulness to you.

-Jeremiah 3:2-3 ESV

"For thus says the Lord: "Sing aloud with
gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for
the chief of the nations; proclaim, give
praise, and say, O Lord, save your
people, the remnant of Israel.'" Behold, I

will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

-Jeremiah 31:7-9 ESV

Then comes verse 15:

"Thus says the Lord: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

-Jeremiah 31:15 ESV

What happens in Bethlehem is a recognition of the birthing of something new. That God is moving in this horrific scene, that He is and will bring comfort through pain.

How do I know that? Look at the end of chapter 31 in Jeremiah: (It is an exile / exodus chapter)

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

-Jeremiah 31:31-34 ESV

This boy born to Mary and Joseph, God in the manger, is the fulfillment of that promise and will cause the rising and falling of many -kings and kingdoms alike.

Herod would not last much longer, his belief and decision to kill this child were based on the Scriptures. He just

refused to bring himself under their authority.

Herod the Edomite, not even fully Jewish, knew the Bible too. He had scribes, whose job it was to explain them to him, and he knew enough because of what the wise men has told him, to believe that something of great significance was happening.

Someone, who, because of Herod's age at this time, will never be a significant threat to his throne, yet he gives the order:

"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."

-Matthew 2:16 ESV

Better the innocent should die, than the guilty should live, I can hear him say. I will keep my kingdom at all cost, and this child is guilty of being born.

Matthew Henry once again:

"Herod was now about seventy years old, so that an infant, at this time under two years old was not likely to give him any disturbance...it was purely to gratify his

own brutish lusts of pride and cruelty that he did this."

-Matthew Henry Pg.13

I have to resist the urge to go down the road of the wholesale disposal of children in our time for the simple guilt of inconvenience or of being born and messing up someone's life.

It is a sensitive issue, but the moment we can de-value and de-humanize one human being, we have started down the road and awful slope of de-valuing all at some point for convenient sake.

Now, I leave that with you to observe in our world today. From the unborn to the aged, how we handle and treat those who are the most vulnerable among us. For it speaks to the heart of who and what humanity is and has become.

You see, Herod has no sense of value of human life, save his own. He does the math; he gives the order.

Many commentators will downplay this event with the comment that in all probability there was no more than 20 boys who would have been murdered. I understand they are just putting it into perspective for us, that it wasn't thousands upon thousands. Not like today...

However, that ANY were killed ought to cause concern, and it speaks to the very reason as to why King Jesus came into this world.

To save sinners- and Herod was one! His issue was that he decided to be his own savior and kill the one who could save him from his worst enemy -himself. He would not bow down to anyone.

Just imagine if he had submitted to the Scriptures and recognized Jesus for who He was: King and LORD of all. Conjecture, I know, but just imagine.

How God would have blessed him. But that is not the inclination of the human heart, of Herod's heart, is it?

And so, God comes to us in a manger because his image bearers won't come to Him. LOVE! He loves you and me in spite of all the wrong and all the broken.

Paul is helpful here also. He writes to Timothy telling him that he is the worst of all sinners.

"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

-1 Timothy 1:15 ESV

But, what did Paul get for his recognition of this fact? Judgement? No, instead he tells Timothy:

"But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

-1 Timothy 1:16 ESV

MERCY. You see, God desires no one to perish. We learned that in our studies with John. But we have to choose to submit. Herod, here in this story, if nothing else, is the best example of a bad example.

Instead of recognizing the King, and recognizing his own personal need for Him, he kills all he can to insure he can remain safe and in power. But what a mistake! That very mistake actually guarantees that he will lose it all.

Again, I resist the urge to go down the road of how our world and its current systems are nothing more than what we are seeing here on the pages of Scripture.

The constant battle to keep power and control all in order to control the narrative. I pray that all in those positions find the humility to recognize

that the true King gives and takes away.
But, enough on that.

The panic and the screaming in the streets of Bethlehem, and then the silence. Silence except for the weeping of a mom, of a dad.

"Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "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."

-Matthew 2:17-18 ESV

Matthew remembers Jeremiah the prophet and sees the parallel here between the loss of Israel's children to exile, and the loss of Bethlehem's children to a murderous tyrant.

He sees it, not as a final cry of mourning and loss, but rather as the hope and the promise of our king. Remember Jeremiah 31, as much as these verses are of loss and weeping, that entire chapter is of hope, of New Covenant, of New Creation.

The covenant promise at the end that speaks so very clearly of this King Jesus, and Matthew does not miss it. He doesn't want us to miss it either. Then was fulfilled..

The hope of Christmas is here -It has to be! Even if only in the recognition that without God we are without hope in this world. And without God, this type of event is always the end result. History will, and had taught us that, at least.

But in Christ, oh what a difference. In mourning, there is joy. There is hope, mercy, grace, and there is salvation. We have been saved from our exile in sin and separation from God.

Bringing in the kingdom, birthing the New Creation will not be easy. But it will happen, because from the days of eternity, God decided He would save His people from their sins -Jesus.

He would do so by becoming one of us - Immanuel. If we would not seek Him, he will look for us. That is how loving and grace-filled our God is.

Come to Him today. If you have not submitted your will and your heart to Jesus, I say to you that today is the day of salvation, now is the acceptable hour.

Come to Him, who gave His very life that you may live. A sinner saved by grace -a debtor to mercy alone. That is the greatest Christmas gift anyone can receive and accept.

