

Sermon

“It Might Have Been Otherwise”

December 29th, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church

1st Sunday of Christmas

Based on Isaiah 63:7-9 and Matthew 2:13-23

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

For he said, “Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely”;
and he became their savior
in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, 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.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“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.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly 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 seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 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. 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.”

Prayer

Mighty God, the shepherds of old were full of your praise, saying that all they had heard and seen was mirrored by what they had been told. The magi came with expectation, then were overwhelmed with joy as they worshipped the newborn King. Move among us now with your Holy Spirit, that we too might hear and experience the wonder and joy of the living Word as we seek to welcome the written Word into our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sermon: It Might Have Been Otherwise

As I shared with the children, Matthew's version of the Christmas story is quite different than Luke's. Matthew's version has no stable, no angel songs in the fields, and no shepherds.

But Matthew added the magi, who came from the east following a star all the way to Jerusalem. Upon arriving, they went straight to King Herod to ask where the new king had been born.

Well Herod didn't like this rumor of a new king, so he instructed the magi to find baby Jesus, then return to him to report where this new king could be found.

And so, the magi left King Herod and continued following the star to Bethlehem, where they found Jesus. But after visiting Jesus, and leaving their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, the magi were warned in a dream to not return to King Herod, and so they returned home by a different way.

That's where our Scripture this morning picks up. And it begins with yet another dream...this time it's Joseph's dream warning him that Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.

And so, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and together they flee to Egypt...and then Matthew tells us this was done to fulfill a prophecy spoken by the Lord, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

With Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus safely in Egypt, the story returns to Jerusalem and Bethlehem and to King Herod himself...

When Herod realized that the magi had not reported back to him, his fear about this rumored new king turned to anger. And so, Herod 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.

But again, Matthew reminds us that this too was spoken of through the prophet Jeremiah, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud in lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

And then an unknown amount of time passes. Because the story picks up again with the announcement that Herod had died. And then Joseph has another dream, this time with an angel appearing saying, “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.

Now, there should be much rejoicing since Herod is finally dead and it would seem that all was well again, but instead when they return, Joseph learns that Archelaus, Herod’s son, was ruling over Judea. And was somehow Archelaus was even more cruel than Herod himself. And so, Joseph takes his family and makes a new home in Nazareth in Galilee.

And once again, Matthew reminds us it was so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

At first glance, this might seem like a strange way to mark the first Sunday of Christmas...we’ve gone from the traditionally peaceful manger scene, with angels, shepherds and some sheep to Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus fleeing for their lives as a power hungry Herod kills every child in and around Bethlehem under 2 years old.

In some ways it is strange indeed.

Yet, for so many the uncertainty, fear, perhaps even anger of Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing for their lives is actually quite relatable.

We celebrate the coming of this infant, but, at the same time, we’re all too aware that for some Christmas was spent in hospital rooms or anxiously waiting for test results. For others it was spent in tension-filled family gatherings, or perhaps without family at all. For others Christmas was a bittersweet day of celebration filled with reminders of loved ones who were no longer with us. For others it was filled with anxiety about the future. And then for others it was yet another reminder that they have no place to call home, no food to fill their table, and no gifts to place under a tree.

For some, in this room and around the world, Christmas was no silent and holy night and it was far from merry and bright. Instead Christmas was filled with fear, pain, grief, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and yes, maybe even anger.

No matter how Christmas might have felt in your own home, we’re all too aware that the coming of Jesus as a baby born in a manger doesn’t instantly create a world where sin, tragedy, grief and pain are joyfully absent.

It didn’t more than 2000 years ago, and it doesn’t today.

And yet, even while threats to Jesus and his family abound, Matthew shows us how God is at work carefully orchestrating Jesus’ earliest days.

It began with a dream instructing Joseph to go to Egypt. And it ended with another dream instructing Joseph to take his family and settle in a new city, the city of Nazareth.

Now, if I had to guess, Mary and Joseph weren't exactly thrilled when they had to flee to Egypt. And then when they returned, they probably weren't thrilled to be settling in Galilee...but what Matthew makes clear is that the hand of God has been upon it all.

And just as that was true 2000 years ago, so also is it true today....

Even when it seems like the things of this world, the power of things out of our control, will prevail, God is at work...because the good news of Christmas is that God chose to send God's Son, Immanuel, God with us, into the world, with all its problems, with all of its sin, and with all of its challenges.

Christians don't worship a God who simply fixes problems. We don't worship a God who hangs out somewhere with a magic wand to wave whenever God might feel like it or in whatever situation might need it.

Instead we worship the God who shows up in the middle of all the pain and suffering and sickness and grief, who comforts those who suffer, who visits us with dreams and visions and insights, and who guides and directs our paths, as unlikely as they may seem.

And so, even when nothing seems to make sense, I think it is our call to persist in praising God. To trust that God is somehow working even when it appears to be otherwise.

This trust in God doesn't save us by somehow helping us float above the sufferings of the world or even by removing us from the struggles in our lives; but it saves us by helping us endure, because we remain confident that as God has acted in the past, so also will God act in the present.

It's the instructions we heard in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 63. The prophet writes, "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and for the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love."

I imagine that as Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt and later made a new home in Nazareth, they spent time talking to each other about the promises of God. About the expectations of the coming Messiah whom they now held in their arms.

But I'm also pretty sure that as they looked at the situation immediately around them, they wondered, at the very least, how these promises would come about. Because fleeing to Egypt under the threat of death probably wasn't what they expected in those first two years as a family. And even settling in Nazareth, away from where we know Joseph's family was located, wasn't quite what they hoped for.

And yet, here they were. Protected by God through visions and dreams. Safe from the wrath and anger of Herod. Sheltered in their new home in Nazareth. At any moment it might have been otherwise, but it wasn't.

We see so clearly how God's hand was upon those early years of Jesus' life. And we are confident that God remains the same yesterday, today and forever. And so just as God has been faithful in the past, so also will God be faithful in the present and into future.

And so, perhaps, when we look at our lives or at the world and it seems that nothing is as it should be, perhaps it is our call to be those people who remember what God has already done. To recount the ways that God has been faithful in our lives and in the lives of those we love. And so then be confident that somehow, in some way, God is at work orchestrating our lives in ways we can't yet see.

For the way things appear now is not the way they have always been or even the way they will always be.

It is not meant to dismiss or deny the reality of the present, but it is a reminder that this moment is not the whole of our lives. And the God of our present is also the God of our past and our future.

It doesn't have to be a complicated practice; in fact, it can be rather simple. The poet Jane Kenyon puts it this way:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

And so, whether this Christmas season has been full of joy or grief, laughter or pain, health or sickness; may we learn to trust God's provision this day, and every day still to come. Knowing that while it always might have been otherwise, today is gracious gift from God.

Amen