

“Weeping at Christmas,” Matthew 2:13-23 (Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017)

¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “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.”

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² 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. ²³ 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.

PRAY

Tomorrow is Christmas Day, obviously, and I know a lot of us are really looking forward to tomorrow. We’ve been looking forward to it and to the holiday season all year. Many of us have nothing but pleasant memories associated with Christmas and we can’t wait to get out of town later today or tomorrow and see our families.

But I know that’s not true for everyone. I know some people dread the holiday season. All you can think about is the family dysfunction you’ll have to endure over the next few days. All you can think about are your loved ones who have died and won’t be there to celebrate. Or, maybe you’re just sad in general about life, and the holidays always seem to make it worse.

In other words, Christmas for you doesn’t mean joy – it means pain. If your religion does not help you deal with suffering, then it’s not much use. I’ll be the first to admit that Christianity would be worthless if it had nothing to say in the face of pain.

But it does. No faith, religion, philosophy, or worldview addresses suffering like Christianity. We see it over and over again in the Bible. The books of Job and 1 Peter in the Old and New Testaments are devoted to the problem of pain, as do most of the 150 Psalms, and our text for today. We are looking at the last eleven verses in Matthew 2. They record the events that took place after the birth of Jesus. If there is a common theme in our passage for today, it’s pain.

Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and a lot of other people endured much suffering in the months and years after Jesus' birth. And from the pain they went through, I think there's some instruction for us.

So we'll look at these verses this morning through that lens, under two headings: *first, the pain of Christmas. Second, the hope of Christmas.*

First, pain of Christmas. We read in verses 13-14 that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were forced to flee Bethlehem soon after Jesus' birth because Herod wanted to kill the baby Jesus. Who is Herod? We talked about him a few weeks ago. This is Herod the Great, king of Israel for thirty-three years, from the year 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. He was an able administrator, he financed huge construction projects throughout his kingdom, and, like most kings of the time, ruthlessly protective of his throne and power.

Why did he want to kill Jesus? Because the wise men (we don't know exactly who they were – astrologers or philosophers from Babylon, likely) told Herod that they'd seen a star in the sky which indicated a king had been born. But that's Herod's title, so what Herod heard from the wise men was “a potential rival to your throne has been born, Herod,” so he resolved to kill Jesus. The wise men were supposed to find Jesus and come back and tell Herod where he was but they didn't – they were told in a dream to return to their home in the east by another route.

Now let's read Matthew 2:16: “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.” In his fury at being deceived by the wise men and in his fear of losing his throne, Herod unleashed what is known as the Massacre of the Innocents. Every baby boy two years and under in Bethlehem killed.

If you grew up in church of course you hear this story and you imagine a bloodbath in Bethlehem – hundreds, thousands of babies slaughtered. It wouldn't have been nearly that many. Bethlehem was a very small town, probably no more than one thousand people lived there, so it's unlikely that Herod killed more than twenty little boys. But still, even at twenty it is a massacre.

So every year when we read the Christmas story we must remember that even at very beginning of Christmas things weren't all cozy and comfortable. No, Christmas has always involved pain.

Here's the question: what about the pain Christians face today? I think we can learn something about three kinds of pain from this text. *First, there is the pain of disappointment.* Let's read verses 19-22: ¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.” ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² 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. Matthew 2:19-22.

Joseph hoped to settle in his ancestral homeland at Bethlehem. But they weren't able to because Archelaus, one of Herod's sons and by all accounts as crazy and ruthless as he was, now ruled

over that part of Israel, so Joseph understandably didn't want to risk living under his power. What if Archelaus heard about Jesus living in his territory? What if he had the same reaction to Jesus that his father had? So they moved north and live in Nazareth. And that had to be disappointing, at least to Joseph. They were leaving his home.

We will, friends, face many disappointments and troubles in this life. Job 5:7: "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." Sparks ride the heat of the flame and fly into the air. It's just the way it is. And for us, the way of this fallen world is trouble and disappointment. It's just the way it is.

All of us have had certain hopes and certain dreams we nurtured for years dashed. If it hasn't happened yet, just wait a few years. Whether it's in marriage, or with our families, or in our careers, we've been forced to admit that it's just not going to happen like we thought it would. Even for those of us who really have been blessed and haven't faced all that much adversity, still it has turned out to be so much harder to be happy than we ever could have anticipated. As surely as the sparks fly upward, man in this fallen world is born to trouble and disappointment. The Bible knows that, Christianity admits that.

Second, the pain of opposition. Obviously, Jesus early in his life faced serious opposition from Herod. Later, in John 15:18-20, Jesus is talking to his disciples and he says, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." All will face disappointment in life no matter what we believe, but those who follow Jesus will in particular face the opposition of this world.

Now what is the "world"? I like this definition from the Scofield Study Bible: it is "the present world-system [is] organized ... upon cosmic principles of force, greed, selfishness, ambition, and pleasure ... [it] is often outwardly religious, scientific, cultured, and elegant; but seething with ... rivalries and ambitions."

To say that the world hates and opposes those who follow Jesus does not mean that every time you, as a Christian, meets someone who is not a Christian, that unbeliever will snarl at you and take a swing at you and root for your destruction. Not at all. There is common grace, by which this fallen world is in many respects a better place than we have any right to expect it to be.

Nor does it mean that you can be sure you are following Jesus because you are being opposed by the world. A lot of Christians seem to think that. They say, "Well, a bunch of people don't like me – I must be doing something right." Not necessarily. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," not "Blessed are those who are persecuted for obnoxiousness' sake." Sometimes Christians are hated by the world because we're acting like jerks.

Yet Jesus couldn't be more clear: his people will be opposed by the world. Sometimes that opposition will be open and hostile. I read a few months ago an article in *The New York Times*

by a Chinese pastor who says that the President of China and the head of the Communist Party there, Xi [Chee] Jinping is encouraging more and more active, governmental persecution of Chinese Christians. Church buildings are getting bulldozed. Worship services are being outlawed as “unlawful assemblies,” and the pastors who lead them are arrested. And when Chinese Christians do meet, the Communist state influences the messages of the preachers to try and get its propaganda out. At one of the summer camps organized for Chinese teenagers last summer, the leaders of the camp told the campers that Xi Jinping’s pet infrastructure project known as “One Belt, One Road” was “the path that God had prepared,” and they needed to support it because God would use it to spread the gospel.

Sometimes the opposition of the world will be open and obvious like that, but more often the world will hate us in a subtle, yet no less insidious way. You’ll be opposed by the world, but you don’t realize it. This kind of opposition is like carbon monoxide poisoning. The dangerous thing about carbon monoxide poisoning is you don’t know when it happens to you, because carbon monoxide is colorless and odorless. You just breathe it in and get sicker and sicker until you ultimately succumb.

A couple of years ago a video was smuggled out of North Korea. The video showed North Korean Christians praying on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Now, North Korea is a place where we can all agree: Christians are opposed by the world. But you may ask, like I did, “What do the most persecuted Christians on the planet pray for on the international day of prayer for the persecuted church? Do they pray for themselves?”

No, they prayed their brothers and sisters in South Korea and the United States, because they believe we are being persecuted by our wealth. They fear our prosperity is distancing us from God and they were praying that we will remain faithful to him.

I think the devil is very pleased with the pace of life we keep to in the United States, and by how many things we all have that keep us busy. I think he’s very pleased with all the time we spend at work, and on the ball field, watching other games on television, in the deer stand and duck blind, in the stores shopping, in the gym working out, and on our little smart devices. Not that any of those things are necessarily bad things, but you add them all up and it leaves so little time to reflect on the things of God. We have so little time to pray about eternal things and for one another. We have so little time to serve each other and talk and enjoy the blessings God has given us.

Third, the pain of being ignored. “And he [meaning Joseph] went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he [meaning Jesus] would be called a Nazarene.” Matthew 2:23.

This verse has been much debated over the years because nowhere in the Old Testament is Nazareth mentioned, the town of Nazareth didn’t even exist while the Old Testament was being written, so scholars have wondered, “What prophecy is Matthew referring to?”

Here’s the best explanation I could find: by the time the New Testament was written, and for reasons that aren’t entirely clear, the word “Nazarene” came to refer to someone from an obscure

and unimportant place. In John 1 we read that when Nathanael heard from Phillip that the Messiah was Jesus, and that Jesus was from Nazareth, he said, “Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?”

You know exactly what that feels like. You know how I know that? Because you’re sitting in this room. You’re in Oxford, Mississippi. And being in Oxford is important to only two groups of people: those from even smaller towns in north Mississippi and Ole Miss fans. You get beyond that, you go basically anywhere else in the world, and people say, “Oxford, Mississippi? Can anything good come from there?”

Even if you don’t feel actively oppressed because Oxford is despised by the world (and if that’s you I’m glad you don’t), it still is easy feel like you are a Nazarene. You may think Oxford matters, but it’s really easy to feel like you don’t. One of the ways the enemy attacks is you hear the voice in your thoughts which says, “Nobody cares about you, and nothing you do will ever matter at all.” Do you ever feel like that, that no matter how hard you try you’re just not making a difference and that really, truly no one cares about you?

Jesus knows what that feels like. All through the Old Testament there was a line of teaching that when the Christ, the Messiah, finally came he would not come in triumph and glory, but that his people would reject him, and that he would be despised – in other words, his people would regard Jesus as unworthy of their interest or concern. They wouldn’t care. “[H]e had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Isaiah 53:2b-3.

Some of you, I know, will go home for Christmas, see friends and loved ones, and you’ll want more than anything else to talk to them about things that matter – about eternal things. About Jesus. But the conversation will never go there. It’s all football and money and gossip about the folks you grew up with. You’ve tried to mention Jesus before, and all it gets you is blank stares and uncomfortable silences. Why? He’s despised in that house, so you feel despised too. You’re a Nazarene to them. It’s one of the real pains of Christmas.

But in this text we don’t just see pain, we also see hope. Second, the hope of Christmas. Over and over again in Matthew 1 and 2 we read that God intervenes in the lives of the characters. How? He sends angels to speak to Joseph and the wise men in dreams, he sends a star to lead the wise men to precisely the right spot so they can find Jesus and worship him. He send gifts to Joseph and Mary through the wise men, and those gifts no doubt enabled Joseph and Mary to live for a time as refugees from Herod’s persecution. What does all that show us?

First, God is at work in the pain. God is in the story, he is leading his people in the Christmas story, guiding them, directing them precisely where they need to go. There is pain, but there’s also plan and purpose.

In one of my former churches there was a lady who at the time was in her early forties and her body just started falling apart. One health issue after another after another. It terrified her. She had always been a hard worker, a go-getter, but for the first time in her life she felt lost. But then

another woman in my church, a very wise woman, called her up and asked her a question. She asked, “What has the Lord been teaching you through all this?” And the woman who had been suffering said that it was like the veil over her eyes was lifted and she really understood for the first time – the Lord is sovereign even over my pain. He’s doing something in my life; he hasn’t abandoned me – he’s right here with me.

God is at work in the pain; he’s always up to something. We may not for a long time what it is he’s doing but we can be sure he’s at work. And because we can be sure he is at work in the pain we can be sure he will not allow the pain to destroy us. The pain for a time, for a season, may seem too much to bear, and it will go on far longer than we would like, but when we really do reach our limit (and, by the way, we don’t ever know what our limit is – only God knows that) but when we reach our limit and often times long before, God shows up somehow to bring us relief, to show us compassion, to give us what we need.

When pain comes, hold onto 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

Second, God is a partaker in our pain. The message of Christmas means that God knows our pain and then some. Because God became a man in Christ Jesus you can be sure he knows everything there is to know about disappointment and opposition and being despised. Jesus also knows about betrayal and abandonment and death. In fact, Jesus knows far more about pain than you and I ever will, because on the cross he bore the pain of the wrath of God. That’s the wrath you and I deserve for our sins. Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross ... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha - - his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agony of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross -- nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me!”

My hope is this Christmas you will confess your sin, you will admit you cannot run your own life and you are your own biggest problem and worst enemy, and you will give your life to Jesus Christ. I pray you’ll make him Lord of your life and follow him wherever he leads.

Third, the hope of Christmas is that Christians can be joyful sad people. I said earlier that scholars have been confused by the Nazarene reference in verse 23. They’ve been almost as confused by verses 17-18: “Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ ‘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 is quoting the prophet Jeremiah, by Jeremiah is talking about the weeping that took place when the people of Israel were carried off into exile by Babylon. Rachel is weeping, but not the literal, historical Rachel, wife of the patriarch Jacob – she'd been dead for centuries. But figuratively Rachel, symbolically as the mother of Israel, refuses to be comforted because her children are gone. They've been forcibly removed from their inheritance, their homeland.

That's the context of the quote, but the reason Matthew's use of the quote is confusing is because it's hard to see what the exile of Israel has to do with the baby boys being killed in Bethlehem. On the surface, it has nothing to do with it. So why does Matthew quote Jeremiah?

The Jeremiah quote – this dark, hopeless reference – is found in chapter 31 of the book of Jeremiah. Do you know else is found in Jeremiah 31? The promise of the new covenant. It's the only time it's prophesied directly in the Old Testament. And the promise of the new covenant is that God will one day work in the hearts and minds of his people in such a way so that they will never turn away from God again, that he will forgive them of all their sins and they will always, always, always be his people.

The despair Rachel feels as the loss of her children is *just around the corner* in the Bible from the most important promise of the Old Testament. And I think Matthew is reminding his readers that God is not only at work in the pain, but *that God will one day redeem it*. No matter what pain we endure in this life, we know that because of Christmas God will one day right every wrong and not just heal but pay us back many times over for all our pain.

In the book of Isaiah, chapter 25, the book before Jeremiah in the Bible, there is a promise that when the Lord returns for his people at the end of the age he will “wipe away the tears from all faces.” That promise is repeated in Revelation 21.

What does it mean to “wipe away the tears”? If you know anything about Joni Eareckson Tada you know she's been a quadriplegic since 1967, when she dove into some shallow water in the Chesapeake Bay. And in one of her books she writes this: “I sure hope I can bring this wheelchair to heaven. Now, I know that's not theologically correct. But I hope to bring it and put it in a little corner of heaven, and then in my new, perfect, glorified body, standing on grateful glorified legs, I'll stand next to my Savior, holding his nail-pierced hands. I'll say, ‘Thank you, Jesus,’ and he will know that I mean it, because he knows me. He'll recognize me from the fellowship we're now sharing in his sufferings.

“And I will say, ‘*Jesus, do you see that wheelchair? You were right when you said that in this world we would have trouble, because that thing was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. It never would have happened had you not given me the bruising of the blessing of that wheelchair.*’

“Then the real ticker-tape parade of praise will begin. And all of earth will join in the party. And at that point Christ will open up our eyes to the great fountain of joy in his heart for us beyond all that we ever experienced on earth. And when we're able to stop laughing and crying,

the Lord Jesus really will wipe away our tears. I find it so poignant that finally at the point when I do have the use of my arms to wipe away my own tears, I won't have to, because God will."

Christmas means we can be joyful sad people. We fully acknowledge there is pain in the world. We aren't Pollyannas, we look at the suffering with eyes wide open. But we know the pain won't have the final word. Jesus does! Paul describes Christians. "...⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ *as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...*" 2 Corinthians 6:9-10. Because of Christmas, we have hope. Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Amen. Let's pray together.