Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Christmas 1A
Peace, Seattle
December 29, 2013
Matthew 2:13-23; Hebrews 2:10-18

HOPE IN THE FACE OF DEATH & EXILE

The scene, on many levels, could be ripped from today's headlines.
- Anxious refugees leave their homeland for fear of what might happen if they stay.
- Innocent children become victims of a madman.
- Tyrannical leaders take violent action to preserve their power.

We've watched these scenes play out over the past weeks and months in Syria, Newtown, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and in too many other places to count.

And this morning, only days after celebrating Christ's birth with carols and feasting and gifts, these tortuous scenes, which have become so common we cease to be surprised by them any more, march into our midst in the gospel reading.

It's as though the joy we celebrated only yesterday has suddenly been stripped away by the reality of the perils of this world. And it's tempting to just shake our heads, turn the channel, and find something more palatable to think about. But if we did so, we'd miss a central point of this gospel: that in Jesus, God enters the full reality of human life, even its bleakest aspects.

From the very beginning, the life of Jesus is a mixture of joy and sorrow, the revelation both of God's compassionate love and the terrible price that attends that kind of love.

Joseph, a man who (as we observed last week) listens to his dreams and has the courage to act on them, packs up his family and flees to Egypt, and baby Jesus is, for the moment, safe.

But we have learned something crucial to understanding the meaning of God with us:
- To the poor and outcaste Emmanuel may represent HOPE.
- But to those in power Emmanuel represents THREAT.

And the evil forces of this world, the corrupt leaders and dictators and violent men, are not going to lay down their arms and walk away. They will resist God's promised one with every fiber of their being.

Matthew's nativity reminds us that Emmanuel has come to the same world where we live and work and struggle. Jesus does not remain above the fray, but enters into it in order to bring God to us.

But there's something else also operating in this story that I'd like to notice with you this morning, and it has to do with Matthew's understanding of prophecy and fulfillment.

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew seems the most intent on connecting the dots for us between the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and the life of Jesus. To make sure we get those connections, he'll say something like: *"This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet..."* and then he'll quote the verses of scripture he has in mind.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Now, sometimes his technique may strike us as a somewhat wooden—or even fatalistic—formula for understanding how things work. But for Matthew it's really a statement about the dynamic nature of God's word, which, though it was spoken first in the past, finds new fulfillment in Jesus.

Take the story of the Holy Family's escape to Egypt, for example, which opens our text.

> For Matthew, this escape is not simply an expedient move or an accident of history. Instead, scripture foresaw this geographical detour… God chose this path in the distant past. Citing Hosea 11:1, Matthew appeals to a prophecy that originally focused on the people of Israel but now refers to Jesus alone. Matthew's claim then is that Jesus in some significant sense embodies the people of Israel. He is the recipient, bearer, and fulfillment of the promises made to Israel by God.[1]

The focus on Egypt as the location of the family's temporary exile, also evokes memories of the cycle of stories about Jacob and his sons we find in Genesis. They sought refuge in Egypt during a time of famine…a refuge that was possible only because Jacob's exiled son, Joseph "the dreamer," had risen to a point of authority under Pharaoh.

At the point in the story where Joseph is reunited with the very brothers who'd sold him into slavery, he tells them not to fear; for though their intentions toward him had been evil, God turned the situation around, using what first was Joseph's loss, to achieve a greater good: the preservation of a whole people.[2]

There's an important distinction to be made here. It's NOT that God WILLED that Joseph be sold by his brothers into slavery. RATHER, it's that GOD was able to take what began as evil intent, and to use it, transform it, and reshape it, so that, ultimately, it lines up with God's redemptive purpose.

Exile and death, violence, abuse and other losses we experience are NEVER God's will for us. They are the darkly real consequence of a human realm that is in bondage to sin. But God takes even such horrible experiences as these, and turns them, so that, finally, they move us toward a greater good, turning what is deathly toward resurrection.

There's one more prophetic element evoked by our text from Matthew I'd like to mention: the story of Moses. Today's gospel story of innocent death parallels the Exodus story about Pharaoh's genocidal command that all male offspring of Hebrew slaves be killed.

Through the ingenuity of his mother and the watchful eye of his sister, one of those boys, baby Moses, survived that purge. He grew up in Pharaoh's own household and ultimately became God's chosen instrument for leading God's people out of bondage.

Like Moses in the exodus story, Jesus will be presented by Matthew in many ways as the new Moses, sent by God to lead both Jew and Gentile alike toward a new promised land and a covenant which more deeply embodies what it means to be people of God, loving both God and neighbor.

As we can see now, more fully, these ten brief verses of Matthew are chock full of allusions and connections that knit together the ancient story of liberation from slavery with the new chapters of the salvation story that are coming to life in Jesus.

---

[1] Eric Barreto, Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=772
[2] Genesis 45:4-8 & 50:15-21

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

While Matthew wants us to know that God in Jesus has come to the same world where we live and work and struggle, he also wants us to know that there is a deeper history to the struggle of humankind, and that this time around, God will see the story through to the end.

To the question, "What kind of God-with-us does the world need?" this gospel answers: The kind who, fully cognizant of the long, complex, and darkly tempered human narrative, enters this human sphere fully without turning away, flinching, or backing down.

And this is the God-with-us we have in Jesus Christ.

> "The mystery of God's love," writes Henry Nouwen, "is not that he takes our pains away, but that he first wants to share them with us. The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pain and participates in the fullness of the human struggle."[3]

How do we respond to Matthew's story this morning?

First, we trust in God's presence and in the story God is bringing to fruition—even at those times of personal loss; even at those times when we cannot discern the way forward with our own eyes.

Second, we resolve, by the grace God has sown in us, to become together a community in which violence is not an option; a congregation which provides a safe place for children, which invites and welcomes refugees and strangers, which protects innocent ones; which advocates for the "least of these," whether they live in South Sudan or across the street.

For by doing so, we protect and welcome the Lord himself. Amen

[3] H. Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).