

## Whence Does He Come?

Matthew 2:13-23

### I. Intro

Once upon a time, there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents.

And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands.

For if he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist - no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know?

Or, if he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted someone to love him, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden, and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

After much thought, the king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a mere servant, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity. He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers. (Kierkegaard, 93).

That is a modern-day parable by Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher and theologian, about the great mystery which is the incarnation. Why would God give up all His holy splendor and become human, become a mere servant? The answer: love.

Our advent theme today is love. Love is a profoundly misunderstood term in our time. In our culture, love is either a sentimental, sappy feeling, or it's used for a great liking of something like candy canes or it is romantic love. In the Bible, love, at least the kind of love that we are talking about today - the Greek word is agape – is none of those three. Agape love is seeking the well-being of others, regardless of circumstance or the response of the other. This is what the advent theme of love is all about. For the incarnation is a love story - for God so loved the world he sends his son. In the incarnation, we see the unbelievable depth of God's extravagant love! Jesus, *"though in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"* (Phil 2:5-7). That's the Advent reading for tomorrow, Christmas Eve.

## II. Review

This is our fourth Sunday of Advent, only two days before the great day. And, we have been walking through the birth narrative of Jesus from Matthew's perspective. His perspective, as we have seen, follows Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus.

And, as we've been walking through the text, we've been answering four questions: Who, how, where and whence. Who is this child? He is Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. How was this child born? From the Holy Spirit. Where is this child born? In Bethlehem of Judea. Today is whence, a word we don't normally use in our time, but means "from where." Our text today will answer the question, from where does this child come?

And, that brings us to our text. I've been wrestling over how to preach this text because this is not the typical Christmas text. So, let me provide some context for our text today.

- First of all, this text was understood as a Christmas text up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For various reasons, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christmas became sentimentalized, and has remained so ever since. Therefore, this text was forgotten. For there is nothing sentimental about our text today. This text presents the harsh reality of God becoming human. The harsh reality is that this world is a fallen place, full of darkness, violence and suffering. But, as we sing this time of year, "He comes to make his blessings known, far as the curse is found."
- Secondly, as we've seen in the first three weeks, and we will see today, Matthew's birth narrative relies heavily on the Old Testament. Perhaps no other section of Matthew is so clearly linked to the Old Testament. It's as if Matthew wants to make sure we get the story straight right from the beginning. Unlike the pagan birth narratives of Greek heroes and demigods, or even our contemporary legends of Santa Claus and Frosty the Snowman, Jesus' birth narrative is rooted in history. This God that comes to us as a child is the "only God who has a date in history" (Sayers, 12), which invites the question, "which story will you live in this Christmas season?"

So, I invite you into our text, beginning in chapter 2, verse 13.

## III. To Egypt (2:13-15)

*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."*

### A. The Characters

Well, we once again see the divine leading within the story. Angels appear again to lead our holy family. They will not appear again in the Gospels until the resurrection account. The angels

appear to warn Joseph that he must leave Israel and flee to Egypt. Why? Because Herod wants to destroy him. Indeed this is Christmas in fearful times.

Let's take a look at the three main actors in this story: Joseph, the child, and Herod.

- First of all, Joseph. The angel appears to Joseph in a dream. He awakes from his dream and immediately obeys the angel. He gets up, takes the child and Mary and heads to Egypt. Joseph is the third most important character in the story is Joseph, behind the child and Mary. Yet, he does not say a word in the entire story. Because of this, he has been called the forgotten man of Christmas.



I got this nativity scene in Liberia last year. A man there takes shell casings from the 15-year civil war and cuts and molds them into figurines in order to redeem some of the horrors that happened there. I just opened the package last week, and I set all the figurines up. And, when I was finished, I realized there's no Joseph. There's an elephant but there's no Joseph.

Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas. He doesn't say a word, but his actions speak louder than his words. A saying that has been attributed to Saint Francis is this, "Preach the Gospel, and if necessary use words." Joseph preaches the Gospel even before the full Gospel, without words. He is faithful and obedient, and has been throughout the story. He's a picture of true agape love. He is a righteous man loving God, and tangibly loving his family, Mary and the child. Because of this, he is a model disciple.

- Secondly, the child, Jesus, Immanuel, God With Us. Matthew continually repeats the word "child" for us. "Take the child... search for the child... took the child." Jesus, the almighty "with-us God," is a fragile, helpless, vulnerable child, learning to walk and needing his diaper changed. And being a helpless child means there are real threats to his life, including people in power...
- Such as Herod. Matthew, by the middle of chapter two, has dropped the title king from Herod's name, because he was no king. He was a monster. Herod had a mixed identity. "He was racially Arab, religiously Jewish, culturally Greek and politically Roman" (Bruner, 65). And, he was, as Brian shared last week, known to be a monster. He was wicked and did whatever was needed to stay in power. If you remember in the beginning of Chapter 2, the Wise Men called this child the king of the Jews, therefore he is a threat to Herod. Herod is a foil to Joseph. Whereas Joseph is righteous, the epitome of love, Herod, although religiously Jewish, wants to destroy his own Messiah.

## **B. The Whence**

That's our three main actors, but whereas Matthew focuses so much on people in chapter one, especially in the Genealogy, here at the end of chapter two, he changes his focus to locations. He becomes interested in the route Jesus takes, hence the whence. From where does Jesus come?

The angel has told Joseph to go to Egypt from Bethlehem and stay there until the angel says so. Joseph obeys which fulfills an Old Testament passage from Hosea 11:1, "*Out of Egypt I called my Son.*" What is Matthew doing here?

Well, the prophecies in Hosea are all about God's extravagant love for his first born Son, Israel. The entire verse of Hosea 11:1 says this, "*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*" Unfortunately, Hosea also recounts Israel's rejection of God's extravagant love. But then the prophet looks forward to another saving deliverance of God, like the one when God through Moses saved Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Matthew is showing that Jesus is tracing the steps of old Israel by going down into Egypt in anticipation of another salvation event.

Let's move to verse 16.

## **IV. Herod's Plan (16-18)**

*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."*

## **A. Hope in the Midst of Fear**

This is Christmas in fearful times, but even in fearful times, there is hope. Maybe you're wondering why Matthew keeps this unspeakably brutal act here within this love story? As I said earlier, it is at least to show the harsh reality of God becoming human in a dark, fallen and violent world. But, could it also be that Matthew wants to show us right away the reason why God has to send his Son? Could it be that the cross already begins to cast its dark shadow over the story. As Bonhoeffer said, "All Christian theology has its origin in the wonder of all wonders: that god became human" (Bonhoeffer, loc 399).

For God so loved the world, he sends his son, and at the same time and in the same place, we get a glimpse of why the Son needs to come. The world is a dark, fallen and violent place, and this child is the only hope. Yes, Herod is a monster, yet the sin and darkness that fills him is found in all of us, not to the same extent. We are not monsters, but the curse of sin has

infiltrated all of us. And, it is only in this child that something can be done about this sin and darkness. He will be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

Using Bernard's words, it is only through this child that anyone can move from the "is" of our sinful and dark lives, to the transformed "can be," and ultimately to the "will be." In other words, when we attach ourselves to this child, we enter the repair shop of transformation. The "with-us God" is also the "for-us God" who has not given up on us. "He comes to make his blessings known, far as the curse is found."

## **B. Hope from Israel's Story**

Once again, Matthew anchors us in Israel's story. Not only did Moses' birth narrative have the exact same thing happen, with Pharaoh as the monster then, but Matthew ends this section with a quote from Jeremiah 31 about Rachel.

What is Matthew doing here? Rachel is considered the mother of Israel and is buried in Ramah. In Jeremiah's time, Jeremiah is picturing the Israelites going off into exile to Babylon. And, Jeremiah symbolically pictures Rachel, who is long dead by the exile, weeping as the Israelites are walking past her grave.

But, behind this great grief is a glimmer of hope. For, within Jeremiah, this text is part of a larger section heralding God's extravagant love for Israel. The exiles will return, God says! God will not give up on them, even as they go off into exile. There is hope!

So, here, in the midst of all the darkness, in the midst of all the tears of the Bethlehem mothers, there is hope because "the one who will save his people from their sins" has escaped the monster. Indeed, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in" this child.

Let's move to verse 19.

## **V. Back to Israel (19-23)**

*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.*

### **A. The Move**

This continues to be Christmas in fearful times. An angel appears again and tells Joseph to take the child and his mother back to Israel. And, in character, Joseph obeys immediately. Because he is fearful though, he doesn't go to Judea. Herod's son, Archelaus, who is known to be a monster like his dad, is reigning there. Therefore, Joseph goes to Nazareth, which as Luke tells us, is their hometown. Nazareth, at this time, is an insignificant place of around 500 people.

## B. The Nazarene?

And, that fulfills the fact that this child would be called a Nazarene. This saying is baffling because it is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. So, what is Matthew doing here?

Well, he introduces the saying uniquely, *“so that what was spoken by the prophets.”* When Matthew uses precise quotations, he never introduces them in this way, which suggests Matthew has no specific Old Testament quote in mind.

But what does he mean by it?

Well there are several possible interpretations. The most likely is that Matthew is alluding to the Old Testament passages that refer to the coming Messiah as a branch of Jesse, in other words, a son of David. In this view, Matthew is connecting the Hebrew word that lies at the root of both Nazareth and Nazarene, the word “Netzer” in Hebrew. Isaiah 11:1 says this, *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (netser) from his roots shall bear fruit.”* Isaiah is looking forward to a time when God would go back to the good rootstock, Jesse’s rootstock, because the main trunk had become rotten. Matthew is saying that it has happened right here with this child! This child is the new shoot, the new branch coming forth to bring life to the world, light into the great darkness. And, so, Jesus will be called a Nazarene.

## VI. Implications?

### A. Whence?

Well, that’s our text this morning. And the main question we’ve asked is “whence does he come?” From where does this child come? Well, it’s a bit complicated. He comes from Bethlehem in Israel to Egypt, then back to Israel, to Nazareth. That answers the question, but why are these locations so important to Matthew? Well Matthew is re-telling God’s love story. Here’s the full story.

- In the early parts of Genesis, humanity fails miserably.
  - But the “for-us God,” out of his extravagant love, does not give up on humanity.
    - He calls a pagan, Abraham, to the land of Israel, so that through him all the world would be blessed. For various reasons, at the end of Genesis, Abraham’s family ends up in Egypt, eventually in slavery under Pharaoh. It is while in Egypt God’s people, Israel, are first referred to as God’s firstborn son. And, in the mighty saving act which is the Exodus, the Israelites travel back to the land of Israel, in order to be a light to the nations.
- In due course, they fail miserably. The main trunk becomes rotten.
  - But the “for-us God,” out of his extravagant love, does not give up on humanity.
    - He sends his son, this child, the one who will “save his people from their sins.” And, this child re-walks the same path as the ancient Israelites as God’s true Son. And, he will continue to walk Israel’s story.

- But, here's the point that Matthew is making, he will not fail. He will succeed where they failed.
  - He will be a faithful and obedient Son, and will be the new branch of life, bringing light into a dark world.

With this child, evil and darkness, even death, will not have the last word. This is the good news of Christmas.

### **B. Story?**

The other question we asked was which story will you live in this Christmas season? Perhaps you are here, and you are living Christmas in fearful times, like Joseph lived. Perhaps the reality of this Christmas is that life is difficult right now. Maybe it's finances or health or grades or relationships or fill in the blank. Hopefully Matthew's text shows you that this God really is a "for-you God." He is so for-you and loves you so much, even though a king, he becomes a servant, being born in the likeness of man. He loves you so much, he enters into your reality, identifying with your fears and pains and struggles in this dark world. Indeed, he goes through the whole of human experience, from spitting up baby to middle age death. And, because of that, you can trust him. We can trust him when he grows up and teaches us. He knows what he's talking about, and therefore he really is the only hope "far as the curse is found." So, which story will you live in this Christmas season? Will you live in this love story?

### **C. Gratitude**

And, finally, because God so loved you and I, he gave his son. And, the only proper response to this extravagant love is thanksgiving. That's how I want to end our time today. As we celebrate the gift of this child, what else are you thankful for?

### **Benediction**

May you go into this Christmas living gratefully within this story,  
The story of a With-Us and For-Us God,  
Who sends his Son to give you abundant life and abundant light,  
That the darkness will not overcome.

And may the **love** of our Great God  
The **joy** of the Spirit  
And the **peace** of this Christ-child  
Be with you  
And bring you **hope** this Christmas,  
and forevermore  
Amen.

Merry Christmas!

**Resources**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*

Dale Bruner, *The Christbook*

Soren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*

Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King*