

**Matthew Gets Real. Real Quick.**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Matthew 2:13-23**  
**12-29-2019**

Matthew's gospel mimics the story of the Exodus. For the author, Moses introduces Israel to Torah, and Jesus fulfills the living out of Torah for Israel. The two characters are not in opposition, but in symmetry.

If the life of Jesus is gonna mimic the life of Moses, he's gonna have to come out of Egypt, and deal with a more modern Pharaoh. Therefore, Herod's ego jeopardizes the safety of Baby Jesus, making Egypt a place of refuge. Later, mean old Archelaus (Herod's son), makes Judea unsafe, allowing Jesus to go to Nazareth, a really convenient geographic location that has no actual relation, short of phonics, to the prophecy of a Nazarene. Not to mention, this explains how Jesus could live in the Galilee, but still have a connection to Bethlehem, David's birth city. And voila, the story arc is back on track.

Matthew's birth-telling and Egypt flight are short on historical and scriptural accuracy -- this is a Wikipedia-style account. Herod was by all accounts an awful human being, cruel and vicious, but it's highly unlikely he would murder thousands of male toddlers, his future labor source, just to exact revenge. It is not out of the realm of possibility, however, to believe that Herod's security forces would seek out any person, infant, child, or adult, who posed a threat to his security. Matthew's author also frequently uses passages out of context as proof-texts for how Jesus' life fulfills centuries-old scriptures. In many cases, these connections are clumsy at best.

And I'll be honest with you, I have been scratching my head this week as to why the lectionary committee believes that today's passage is one we need to hear, especially on Christmas. I'm still at the manger. I've still got the baby in the crook of my arms. I still believe that God has come into the world. I'm not ready to talk about the forces in this world who want to tell me it isn't so. I don't want to hear about abuse of power, the cruel reality of empires, and the flight of those fleeing their terror.

So... I think we have to take deep breath. And step back for a moment. Matthew's gospel, much like the Exodus story, is steeped in its historical setting, but it's not necessarily historically accurate. As modern readers, we hear infanticide, or the

drowning of an Egyptian army in the Red Sea, or prophecies that confirm the identity or calling of spiritual leaders, or details about the harsh, stubborn, indifferent rule of tyrannical leaders. These images are so grotesque or exaggerated that we often lack the ability to process the deeper meaning of the stories.

Here's my takeaway from today's passage: Jesus, like Moses, lived in a world dominated by monarchs who ruled with God-like authority. And even when God's presence is revealed, whether it's in a baby being drawn up out of the water, or in a bush that isn't consumed by flames, or in a manger that becomes a crib, or in a star that reveals a true king, the empire is still gonna strike back. Matthew's author wants to remind us of the resistance to the God movement.

But if we look hard, there's grace, and a providential God, who is steering the called, protecting them so that they might live into their callings.

*(And again, I realize such providential thinking is not without its problems -- we can get tied up in knots wondering about how providence doesn't seem to help those who aren't in the spotlight of the story, or crucial to its final outcome. That's a debate worth having. I would argue, we can see grace in this story AND at the same time be critical of the way such grace is described, always searching for newer, more affirming and inclusive ways to describe the vastness of God and God's workings in the world).*

If Jesus is to be the modern Moses, the one who reveals Torah, if he's that long-awaited Messiah, then just like his predecessor, Jesus is also gonna have to experience the grace and resiliency of God.

Moses was discovered in a basket and raised and loved by the daughter of the very tyrant who endangered him. Moses was exiled twice, both times for forty years, first in Midian, next in the wilderness, but God provided: manna, and wisdom, and covenant, and eventually, a homeland.

Sadly, the birth of Moses doesn't still the immediate violence that affects those around him – other babies aren't so lucky, and other slaves don't get to go and live in the palace. But those who hear the story are made aware that God is working in the chaos, God is present in the unrest, and God's peace will be the final word.

So, we meet Matthew, not nearly as joyful and tender as Luke. But in his violent world, so many centuries later, hope is revealed in the birth of a child. He'll be born

in Bethlehem, he'll spend time in Egypt, and the Galilee, and other places, too. Like Moses, he'll be a wanderer, and a refugee, and someone always seeking a home. And his calling, just like Moses', will endanger him to the fury of the empire, and yet somehow, protect him, too.

A special child is born, so special, wise woman and men travel great distances to see him. And despite the best efforts of an evil, manipulative king, this child will be protected, will grow to become somebody special.

Maybe the benefit of hearing today's text is that it isn't presented with the kind of expectant joy we are expecting. This joy's a bit more raw, and a bit more subtle, and it lacks the luster of bright stars and a hallelujah chorus.

The text calls to mind the familiar words of Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and the princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.

Somehow, some way, many years ago, a child was spared from the atrocities of Herod's minions. The child wasn't spared hardships. First, he was a fugitive, a hard thing for a little one to be; later a refugee and a re-settler, and eventually a prophet without a hometown to speak of, or a place to rest his head.

But lost in his own wilderness, he helped lost souls find direction; Broken down by the systems of this world, unemployed and uneducated and unwanted and undocumented, he helped others find healing; Food-insecure like his fellow peasants, he helped all who hungered to gather gladly; He proclaimed liberty for the captives; He built a nation, not bound up in systems, but united in spirit; He was a

peacemaker; And shake your head all you want, but the man liked to sing and dance, and share his wine.

The work of Christmas starts here. And the hope continues, too.

Yes, today's text has its exaggerations. We say it's ancient. And brutal. Maybe so. But I don't think it's irrelevant.

We do live in a time where children at our borders are considered fugitives, because their parents dream of peace – peace in the form of asylum from violence, escape from poverty, equal opportunity to pursue their God-given calling. Unfortunately, such dreams stand in contrast to a president's sordid dependence on privileged systems, and the whims of his fragile ego. A world away in Hong Kong, young students and protestors risk their lives for freedom of expression, as a brutal regime flexes its power. And on every continent, people groups risk retaliation ranging from marginalization to extinction, from powers who fear their differences.

The kings of this world have long fingers. And their grip on power is firm. But even with all that might, God still finds a way to be revealed in the birth of children, who will one day work for justice, peace, and love.

The story of Christmas, the one we find in Matthew, and in Luke, too, is being born out today, in every corner of our globe. I think the challenge each of one us faces this morning, is to decide how we're gonna live out Christmas in every moment of the year ahead. For there are stars to follow, and choirs to hear, and kings to defy, and precious lives to nurture. In the days and weeks and years to come, may God empower each of us to be stewards, protectors, nurturers, proclaimers, and family members to all the dear children who reveal God's presence and God's inbreaking realm.

Amen.