

FOLLOW THE ESCAPE
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 2:13-23
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
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10:00 a.m.

This is a difficult story.

It is difficult because the thought of male infants and toddlers
being grabbed from their mother's arms,
and slaughtered is a repulsive one.

It is difficult because somehow,
with a logic that twists in the wind,
it appears that the slaughter could somehow be God's fault.
It seems God led the Magi, the wisemen, to Herod,
It seems God allowed Herod to have the heads up.
It seems that by sending his son at all,
God provoked Herod to kill.

Why not wait a generation or two,
and send your Son
when there wasn't a despot on the throne,

someone who wouldn't have felt so threatened
and so feel the need to slaughter toddler and baby boys.

It's difficult because it doesn't seem to make any sense.

Where is the redemptive message?

It is why we end all our stories at the Christmas season,
with the Magi bowing before the young Jesus,
presenting their gifts,
then having been warned in a dream,
returning home by another way.

Then we jump to our new year and our fresh start.

But that's not where Matthew ends his nativity account.

It's not where Matthew ends the birth story.

He includes this one last episode,

this one last message regarding Jesus' birth, Jesus' arrival,

and Jesus' escape and exile,

before we get to jump to the new thing,

before we get to jump to John the Baptist,

and before we get to jump to the beginning of Jesus' ministry,
we must go through Ramah and hear the weeping.

The Magi didn't just bring gifts for Jesus.

They brought news to Herod.

A new king of the Jews had been born.

The news disturbed him.

Here in Jesus, was a threat,

a threat to his power,

a threat to his way of life,

a threat to his control.

A new king is a threat to the old king.

Herod told the Magi, the wise men to make a careful search for the child,

then report back to him,

so he too, could go and worship him.

This is the same Herod who executed two of his wives,

two of his brothers-in-law,

and three of his own sons because of their challenge to his kingship.

Seven of his own family dead because of a perceived threat.

I don't think worshipping Jesus is what Herod actually had in mind.

When Herod realized he had been given the slip by the Magi,

his disturbance became fury.

He would not allow Jesus to threaten his way of life.

He resolved to eliminate the presence of Christ from his world.

And that resolve to remove Christ brought with it death.

The resolve to remove Christ brings death.

When we resolve to eliminate the presence of Christ from our lives,

death isn't far behind.

Because , there is life.

John 1 says, "In him was life, and that life was the light

of all humanity."

This difficult Scripture we read today,

The story of the slaughter of the innocents

can be simply summarized with verse twenty.

Those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.

Christ was driven away and death came.

Death came to the innocents.

Death of soul came to Herod.

We resolve to eliminate the presence of Christ in so many ways.

When Jesus is born into our lives,

when Jesus appears in our kingdom,

as he did in Herod's kingdom,

it is a threat.

It is a threat to the way we've always done things,

a threat to our way.

It is a threat to our a threat to our power,

a threat to our way of life,

a threat to our control.

When Jesus is born into our lives

he will prove a threat to how we've always done things.

and require a new way of doing things.

He will supplant your authority and kingship with his own.

It is with a myriad of little choices,

that we can send Christ into exile.

We can force him out.

How we answer someone's anger with us.

What we decide to do when the third child of the week
is at our door with chocolate covered almonds,

What we look at on the screen.

Whether we make the phone call that we should make.

Whether we choose to be at worship,
or pull up the covers and roll over.

With a myriad of little choices,
we can send Christ into exile.

But Christ is life.

Without Christ, there is death.

Sometimes we send Christ into exile

with dramatic choices

that we've convinced ourselves are no big deal.

Whether to let hatred rule over us, or to show love,

Whether to forgive or to continue showing contempt,

Whether it is to close the door, or to open our hearts

Whether to keep a vow or to choose ourselves,

Whether to be honest on the deal,

or to take advantage,

Whether to tell the truth, or to try and cover it.

We have choices about the direction Jesus takes in our lives.

So many of our choices reflect a resolution

to welcome or exile the presence of Christ from our lives.

The resolve to remove Christ brings death.

And death, not just to us,

but those connected to us will be at risk too.

Matthew quotes a verse from Jeremiah,

“A voice is heard in Ramah,

weeping and great mourning,

Rachel weeping for her children

and refusing to be comforted,

for they are no more.”

Let me help you understand this reference.

Rachel is the mother of Joseph,

Joseph of the coat of many colours fame.

Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt,

Joseph whose brothers

also tried to eliminate his presence from their lives.

Joseph, who, from Egypt, then saved his brothers.

Ramah is the place where Rachel was buried.

This passage is a quote in the Old Testament book of the prophet

Jeremiah .

It is a reference to the Israelites,

passing Rachel's burial site on their way out of the promised land

as they are being sent away into exile in Babylon.

It is the weeping of the loss of the children,

the loss of the children of Bethlehem,

the loss of the children of Israel, on their way to Babylon,

the loss of the children to exile.

With the elimination of God's presence,
with the removal of Christ, we are sent away.

Life can become exile and death.

We lose and are lost.

Haruki Murakami wrote the book

'South of the Border, West of the Sun'

Set in Japan in the 1950's

It is a story of a young preteen solitary boy who builds a friendship

with a pretty girl his age,

but she has been struck by polio and thus

has been left lame.

Both isolated, on the outside, they became good friends,

and were for each other

the kind of friend you tell your secrets to,

the kind of friend that grounds you in a lonely world

the kind of friend that helps you make sense of who you are.

They went to different high schools and lost touch.

They had a chance reunion meeting when they were 36 years old.

The meeting throws the now grown man into a crisis,
as he wonders if his life took the correct path.
He reflects that without his friend from childhood, he's lost.

“Have you heard of the illness hysteria siberiana?”

Try to imagine this:

You're a farmer, living all alone on the Siberian tundra.

Day after day you plow your fields.

As far as the eye can see, nothing.

To the north, the horizon, to the east, the horizon,
to the south, to the west, more of the same.

Every morning, when the sun rises in the east,

you go out to work in your fields.

When it's directly overhead, you take a break for lunch.

When it sinks in the west, you go home to sleep.

And then one day, something inside you dies.

Day after day you watch the sun rise in the east,

pass across the sky, then sink in the west,

and something breaks inside you and dies.

You toss your plow aside and,
your head completely empty of thought,
begin walking toward the west.
Heading toward a land that lies west of the sun.
Like someone, possessed, you walk on,
day after day, not eating or drinking,
until you collapse on the ground and die.
That's hysteria siberiana.”

There is a soul hysteria siberiana,
a condition where we can wander off, losing our soul.
With the elimination of God's presence,
with the removal of Christ,
with the removal of the one who knows us, loves us
and reminds us who we are and where we are going,
with the removal of Christ
we lose and are lost.
When Christ is sent into exile, there is death.

It is Luke who extrapolates this risk to the soul.

His are the lost stories.

The lost sheep.

The lost coin.

The lost son.

In these stories we learn that the shepherd

is willing to leave 99 other sheep to find the one.

We learn that the woman,

finding her coin, calls in friends and neighbours

to rejoice with her.

It is the third story where we wander off with the son to an empty horizon.

We watch him as he leaves his Father,

burns through his money,

landing himself at the mercy of a foreigner,

caring for pigs,

hungry for their slop.

Completely exiled and completely lost.

But the redemption in these stories,

and in Matthew 2,

Is that with God, there can be a return of Christ.

You can find your way back.

In the story of the lost son,

the pivot point comes when some translations say

he came to his senses.

But the literal translation is,

he came to himself.

His head cleared.

He knew he had to return.

As horrible as the Herod's massacre of the innocents is.

As dark as his attempt to banish and remove Jesus is.

As hopeless as the future appears.

That isn't the entirety of this passage.

Jesus returns.

You can come back.

You can come back from your captivity.

You can come back from death.

There is hope on the other side of death.

So even within this story of death,

there is hope.

In his caring protection for Mary and Jesus,

Joseph resolved to hold Jesus close to him.

He protected the presence of Christ in his life.

In his dream came the words,

get up, take the child and his mother,

and go to the land of Israel.

Those who were seeking the child's life are dead.

Go back.

They are the very words God spoke to Moses,

when Moses was in exile,

having fled Egypt for his murder of an Egyptian.

Now the Lord had said to Moses in Midian,

'Go back to Egypt,
for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.
Those who were seeking your life are dead."
Moses would deliver his people to freedom.
Go back.

Joseph heard the words,
Go back, those who were seeking to remove the child's life are dead.
And so echoing Moses return to deliver his people,
Jesus returned,
after attempts to eliminate him,
after the resolve to remove him,
and exile him,
Jesus came back.
To proclaim good news to the poor.
To proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the captives free.

Matthew shows Jesus to the new Moses.

Coming up out of Egypt.

Coming to set the captives free.

You can return from your exile.

You can be released from slavery to sin and death.

You can come to yourself.

Christ has been to both places and knows the way back.

Trying to remove Christ from your life will only bring death.

Banishing Christ is an open and empty horizon.

Refuse to send Christ away.

Refuse to send him into exile.

Keep him close, protect his presence in your life,

in worship, prayer, Scripture, in obedience,

you will find he leads you to life.

Hold to God's dream,

keep Jesus close to your heart.

You can come back.

He'll deliver you to life. Amen.