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Sermon Notes

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A King's Selfish Cruelty & the Fulfillment of Prophecy

Matthew 2:13-23

I. Meat, NOT Milk

A. Babies can suck & derive delicious nourishment from womb... adults need teeth for meat

B. TODAY... we encounter a deep issue, if we have the courage to face it

Power corrupts... absolute power corrupts absolutely

BUT what of God's absolute power? Is He corrupt in using it?? MAY IT NEVER BE!!

C. Three possible reactions to Christ

1. Indifference of chief priests & teachers of the law
2. Selfish rejection of King Herod
3. Glad worship of the magi

D. Herod's selfish rejection reaches the next level... open hostility, cruelty

Today, we consider one of the darkest moments in the Gospel of Matthew... the slaughter of innocent babies to protect the throne of a corrupt King

E. Deeper issue: the problem of evil and the plans of God

1. Good theology doesn't just touch the simple issues
2. God openly directs Joseph through angelic visitations; protects Jesus
3. Doesn't protect the infants from the being slaughtered
4. In fact... the whole thing fulfilled prophecy God had given centuries before

*three prophecies in today's text... continuing the theme of fulfillment

Today: we try to digest some meat... not just milk; and understand the problem of evil and the sovereign plan of God

II. The Escape to Egypt: Echoes from the Past (vs. 13-15)

A. The angel's warning

1. Afterglow of visit of magi... corroborated testimony from Elizabeth, from Zecharias, from the shepherds, from Simeon and from Anna
2. Joseph and Mary must have felt tremendously encouraged by these testimonies
3. Joy didn't last long!!... death hung over their heads

¹³ ***When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."***

4. Angel's message: FLEE IMMEDIATELY!!

- a. Greek word **pheugo** is where we get word **fugitive**... means to run for your life; also word **refugee**

Illus. Afghani refugees in Pakistan... look of haunted terror in their eyes; loss of loved ones; sudden appearance of Russian helicopter gunships; danger of landmines

- b. Joseph and Mary faced similar dangers: lions, poisonous snakes, highway robbers; most especially Herod's soldiers pursuing them
 - c. King David was so afraid of being chased as a fugitive he chose to undergo a deadly plague (or even a famine) rather than go through that again
- ### 5. Supernatural warning, BUT no supernatural deliverance
- a. In OT God sent an army of fiery angels and chariots to protect his prophet Elijah; he blinded the eyes of the Aramean army that came for him
 - b. God didn't do that for His Son... not, He must flee for His life!!

c. John Calvin says that Christ was living his life under the cross

6. Where to? To Egypt!!

- a. Alexandria most likely place; founded in 331 B.C. by Alexander the great; he set aside a large portion of that city as a refuge for Jews...
- b. Josephus tells us that in A.D. 40, right around Jesus' death, the Jewish population there was over 1 million

7. Reassurance from angel... "stay there until I tell you"

- a. angel himself will come back and let Joseph know when to return
- b. SO everything will be fine under the power of God

B. Joseph's obedience

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod.

1. Prompt obedience

- a. Joseph got ready immediately and fled with Mary and the baby Jesus AT NIGHT to escape detection
- b. No questioning... just obedience

2. Imagine Joseph's heart rate and he took them out on the dark road at night!!

C. One echo: Herod's own flight to Egypt

- 1. Major irony... in 40 B.C., Herod himself had to flee for his life
- 2. Parthians invaded and Herod ran to guess where... to EGYPT; probably along the exact same road!!
- 3. Now Herod was chasing Joseph and Mary out along that road as well

D. An older echo: The fulfillment of prophecy

vs. 15 And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

1. handling OT prophecy

- a. verbally predictive prophecy

Isaiah 7:14 “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son...”

- b. typically predictive prophecy

Every animal sacrifice that was ever made was a prophecy of the death of Christ on the cross

- 2. the difficulties here

- a. Matthew picks out a phrase from Hosea which seems to have nothing to do with the Messiah

Hosea 11:1 “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

- 4. Matthew’s application to Jesus

- a. God’s love for Israel and the Exodus out of Egypt became a type of Christ
- b. Israel traveled through that same desert to enter the promised land
- c. Jesus’ journey back through that desert fulfilled the prophecy
- d. ALSO in a deeper sense, Jesus’ physically came out of Egypt with Israel because His ancestors made the journey... thus Jesus came out of Egypt with them

III. Herod’s Selfish Cruelty: Written in the Scrolls (vs. 16-18)

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi

A. Herod’s multi-faceted character

- 1. Generous when it suited his purpose
 - a. gave some tax money back during times of economic hardship
 - b. during famine in 40 B.C. took some of his own gold and gave it to poor
 - c. built incredible buildings in Jerusalem and in Caesarea for the people to enjoy
- 2. Ruthless when he felt threatened

- a. had his own brother in law drowned because he was too powerful, then gave massive funeral and pretended to weep
 - b. had his own son Antipater killed just five days before his own death
 - c. on the day he died, he ordered the death of two popular rabbis just so that there would be some weeping among the people when he died
3. God knew exactly what kind of man Herod was... precisely the kind who would fulfill these prophecies through his own selfish rage

B. Herod's rage... the failure of his deceptive plan

- 1. Magi "outwitted" him... but it wasn't Magi he was playing against!!
 - a. word in Greek means "mocked" "made fun of"
 - b. best translation is "deceived" or "outwitted"
 - c. they simply refused to be deceived by Herod's fake promise to worship the child
- 2. Herod's rage: absolutely apoplectic!!!
 - a. almost out of his mind
 - b. underscores how God protected Christ when the magi visited the first time
 - c. no reason for this reaction except that this was his natural state of mind when threatened
- 3. Herod's ruthless reaction... willing to kill the innocent to get one baby
 - a. "Bethlehem and it's vicinity" uncertain about the place, so he makes sure
 - b. "Two years old and under"... uncertain about the time, so he makes sure
 - c. makes a god of his own ambition... God's clear laws against murder mean nothing to Him
- 4. Herod's real crime: desire to kill God's Messiah
 - a. he had asked for the prophecy to be read
 - b. magi & star seemed to indicate the Messiah was born

- c. instead of worshipping, he seeks to kill God's Messiah
- d. bigger crime even than killing all these innocent babies

C. The fulfillment of prophecy again

vs. 17-18 ¹⁷ *Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:* ¹⁸ *“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

1. An single oracle in Jeremiah... Jeremiah 31:15
 - a. context: final deportation of Jews from promised land
 - b. many of them slaughtered

Lamentations 1:1 “How desolate lies the city once so full of people.”

2. Where is “Ramah”?
 - a. small town about five miles north of Jerusalem
 - b. on the border between northern & southern kingdoms... Israel & Judah
 - c. according to Jeremiah 40:1, it was the place where all the Jews were assembled to be deported to Babylon
 - d. Ramah stands for the region around Bethlehem where anguished women wailed aloud after Herod's soldiers did their evil work
3. Rachel... symbol of these Jewish mothers
 - a. Jacob's wife... mother of Joseph and Benjamin
 - b. Jeremiah used her poetically... Matthew picked up on the image
4. Herod's rage fulfills prophecy
 - a. Herod may have been senseless with rage, beside himself
 - b. he should have reasoned that the magi would have warned the Messiah's parents
 - c. despite all of this, God never forgot this small oracle in Jeremiah...

Luke 24:44 “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

- d. even the smallest details of Christ’s life were written out on scrolls before any of them came to be

IV. Joseph’s Return to Nazareth: A Different Kind of Prophecy (vs. 19-23)

A. More angelic guidance

vs. 19-20 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

- 1. angel keeps his promise to Joseph
- 2. gives supernatural information: Herod is dead
- 3. gives God’s directions... God named this child, and he directs His comings and goings
- 4. Joseph merely a servant in the hands of God

B. The death of the oppressors

1. Herod’s repulsive end

- a. Josephus’ account: God was punishing him for his sins
- b. lingering illness; worms attacked his intestines and ulcerated them; bled severely from inside; given to constant convulsions and extremely foul breath... neither physicians annointings nor warm baths could cure him
- c. shortly before he died, he tried to commit suicide with a knife he was using to peel an apple, but a servant stopped him... there was so much commotion in the palace that his son Antipater thought he was dead and rejoiced that now he would get to be king... Herod heard about this, and had his son executed; he changed his will so that Archelaus would reign after him
- d. just before he died, Herod gave the order that someone from every household in his kingdom be killed so that there would be mourning everywhere at his death; thankfully the order was never carried out
- e. King Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. in great agony and under the wrath of God for what he did, not only to those infants, but to God’s only begotten Son... Herod died without hope and without God, with no atonement for his many sins, and with only

Hebrews 10:27 “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”

2. NOTE: Herod was not the only one who died

vs. 20 “THOSE who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

- a. all those involved in the plot to kill Jesus died very quickly under the judgment of God
- b. this extended to counselors, advisers, even the soldiers who carried out this plan

C. Joseph’s consistent obedience

vs. 21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

1. steadfast, obedient Joseph such a contrast to Herod and his men
2. Joseph again simply and immediately did what he was told
3. Joseph was a man of faith... fear did not hold him back

D. Joseph’s fear: another fulfillment of prophecy

vs. 22-23 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

1. Archelaus named Herod’s successor after Herod changed the will five days before
2. Archelaus turned out to be just like his father... ruthless and evil
3. God directly warned Joseph again by a dream

E. “He will be called a Nazarene...”

1. Problem: this verse found nowhere in the entire OT
2. NOTE: different construction... “Said through the prophets”
 - a. only time in entire Gospel of Matthew that a specific quote ascribed to prophets
 - b. usually ascribed to a named prophet or unnamed... but NEVER plural

3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

- a. verbal tradition, never written down
 - b. culling of a major theme found in the prophets, but nowhere openly stated
4. The humble origins of Jesus
- a. Nazareth in Galilee openly scorned by Jews in Judea

[Nathaniel, speaking to Philip when Philip told him that Jesus was from Nazareth]
John 1:46 “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathaniel asked.

- b. Gentile region, mixed blood, far from religious center
- c. YET Nazareth located in region assigned to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali... a region seen to be under the judgment of God

Isaiah 9:1-2 “Nevertheless there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress, In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea along the Jordan. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

- 5. The rejection of Jesus

Isaiah 53:3 “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.”

John 1:11 “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

V. A Deeper Issue: The Direct Guidance of God and Problem of Evil

A. Two major themes in Matthew 2:

- 1. God’s immediate guidance by the angel for every move Joseph made
 - a. angel guided Joseph to marry Mary and what to name her baby
 - b. angel warned magi not to go back to Herod, thus giving Joseph time to escape
 - c. angel guided Joseph to flee from Bethlehem to save Jesus’ life
 - d. angel guided Joseph when to return to Israel after Herod & the others had died

- e. angel guided Joseph away from Jerusalem to settle in Nazareth
- 2. God's long-range guidance in the fulfillment of a divine plan written more than 700 years before Jesus was born
 - a. each of these moves helped fulfill prophecies
 - b. the whole plan had been laid out perfectly long ago... BETHLEHEM, EGYPT, NAZARETH... all written out precisely in the ancient scrolls

B. One central conclusion: God is orchestrating history for His own purposes

- 1. God's guidance leads us both in specific ways to take, and in the big plan for our lives

Isaiah 30:21 "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"

- 2. Christ openly taught God's sovereign control over all things

Matthew 10:29-30 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from the will of your father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

- 3. We can't always understand how every little event fits into God's grand design, but it does
- 4. THIS GIVES US PEACE IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES!!! God rules all things for our good

B. BUT what about deeper issue? Horrible evil of Herod also under God's plan?

- 1. God could have spared those babies in Bethlehem; ANGELIC ARMY
- 2. God could have struck Herod dead BEFOREHAND... why didn't He?
- 3. Ancient problem of evil and the sovereignty of God

C. Bad solution: Begin to dispense with Biblical doctrines to reconcile these truths

- 1. Some have said God of OT was an evil warlike God... Christ revealed a loving God
- 2. Deists deny that God is involved in any way with events on earth
- 3. In 60's TIME magazine asked if God is Dead
- 4. Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* denies the sovereignty of God

C. Only solution: this physical life not all there is!!

1. God willing to allow terrible suffering in this world because this world not all there is
2. Evil men like Herod cannot long endure before judgment comes on them