

## Out of Egypt Matthew 2:13-23

Out of Egypt did I call my Son. That's what Matthew says in verse 15, indicating that somehow the trip that Joseph, Mary and Jesus took into Egypt and out of Egypt fulfills something Hosea had said over 700 years earlier. But if you look back at Hosea chapter 11, you find that he wasn't making an obvious Messianic prediction. Instead, Hosea was simply describing what had happened in the history of God's people, how God had led them down into Egypt to escape a famine, but then had called them out of it at the time of the Exodus.

So how does the journey that Joseph, Mary and Jesus took somehow fulfill what Hosea was saying? By repeating the ancient Israelites' physical movements – going down into Egypt in order to preserve his life, and then later being called out of Egypt, back into the Promised Land, Jesus was, in a sense, completing their experience. He was demonstrating that their travels were somehow a foreshadowing, a prediction of things that eventually happened to Him. In other words, the Exodus journey out of Egypt wasn't just something wonderful God did for His people at that time. By bringing them out of Egypt, God was also telling them something about Jesus.

Okay, so what was God trying to say? What did the experience of the people of Israel have in common with Jesus? Well, think about it. Like His Old Testament people at the time of the Exodus, Jesus' first days were dangerous ones. Just as Herod tried to kill Jesus and did in fact kill many other little children in and around Bethlehem, so Pharaoh had tried to kill all the Israelites' male children, when he ordered them to be thrown into the Nile River. Jesus' journey into Egypt thus helps us understand that Jesus shares in the suffering of His people.

And verse 18 reminds us that the people of God have suffered at the hands of unjust rulers throughout their history. Here, Matthew quotes from the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy, written some 600 years after the time of Moses and about 600 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah spoke of the lamentations of Rachel, as he described the many mothers weeping over the children of the tribe of Benjamin, slain by the Assyrians who invaded and conquered Israel in 722 BC.

And the same sort of suffering continues today. This Christmas season, how many Christian mothers in Iraq and Syria, in Paris and San Bernardino are mourning their children, brutally slain by ISIS thugs? No, Herod's brutality was no fluke. It was part of an age-old pattern, the sinful world's attempt to stamp out the light and the truth of God through violence and oppression.

So, by reminding us that Jesus was called out of Egypt, Matthew points out something that should bring comfort to all those who suffer for the sake of Christ – Jesus suffered in the same way. Jesus knew what it was like to be a fugitive, a refugee. He knew what it was like to live in fear of a godless, tyrannical government. And that

means that He can understand what His people are going through, when we find ourselves in exile, strangers in a strange land, in danger from the godless world around us.

Ah, but why had the Assyrians invaded Israel in the time of Jeremiah? Why had God's Old Testament people been carried off into exile? The first part of the book of Jeremiah makes the reason all too plain, accusing the people time and time again of placing their trust in in all sorts of pagan gods, the same sorts of gods that the Assyrians worshipped and that the Egyptians worshipped, the false gods of wealth, stability, and power.

Yes, Jeremiah tells us over and over again: the people of Israel had turned away from God to serve pagan idols, and that's why God eventually gave them into the hands of the pagans whose gods they worshipped. As the Assyrians invaded their lands, God's people got a long, hard look at the way pagans really live, at the cruelty and selfishness that lies at the heart of paganism. And as we can see in verse 18, such a focus on the material world always leads to suffering.

And so if Jesus' journey into and out of Egypt shows us that He shares our sufferings, His journey is also a call to holiness – He came out of Egypt, and so all His people are to do the same thing, to come away from the worship of pagan gods.

But again, what does this have to do with us? Sure, at the time Matthew wrote his gospel, there were lots of pagan gods that people were tempted to worship. But we read about the exploits of Zeus and Athena and Apollo for entertainment, not for devotion.

But the sad truth is that, while the names may have changed, people are still focused on all the sorts of things that those old pagan worshippers wanted. For no matter what particular god they worship, all pagan religions have one thing in common – they make their sacrifices and do their rituals in order to manipulate their gods into giving them what they want. In other words, pagans really aren't focused on their gods at all – they are really focused on themselves.

Think for example about the Ancient Greek god Apollo. He's the god of healing and of music. He's depicted as an athletic youth. His brother, Dionysius is the god of intoxication. We may not worship Apollo and Dionysius anymore, but are any of the things they stood for any less popular today?

Or think about the pagan religion of ancient Egypt. They were taught that their Pharaoh was the son of the sun god, and they revered him as an ideal ruler, the source of order and justice. Now, we don't believe in the divine right of anyone to rule over us anymore, but can we doubt that many modern people look to the government and trust in the government in the same way that the ancient Egyptians did?

But today's passage clearly shows the limitations of trusting in worldly things, and especially in worldly rulers, doesn't it? Look, for example, at Herod. Last week we saw

how he lied to the wise men, trying to use them to do his dirty work. And this week, we see his callous brutality on full display. He was clearly a man of the world, someone who didn't care anything about the things of God. So, why shouldn't he put what he doubtless considered to be a few peasant brats to the sword – just for safety's sake, just to insure that he kept what was his, just in case there might be something to all this pagan astrology stuff? After all, he had put his own wife Mariamne to death over 20 years earlier because he was afraid of her power and influence. And he had also murdered his own two sons Alexander and Aristobulus because he thought they had been plotting against him. Given Herod's legendary cruelty, the slaughter of the innocents is frankly one of the most believable if chilling passages in the entire Bible. It's just what tyrants do – and it lays the core of selfish pagan materialism bare.

So, what about us? No, we may not be worshipping pagan gods. We may not be looking to rulers like Herod or like those ancient Pharaohs to solve our problems. But in this Christmas season, are we really focused on God, or is our attention directed to the things we want from Him? Are we looking to the Giver, or do we just want the gifts He brings? And if, like those Old Testament people of God, we have focused our lives on material things, on worldly comfort or power or health or wealth, have those things ever satisfied us? Or do they always leave us wanting more? Has our vain attempt to find meaning in the things of this world left us crying in the streets?

Well, Joseph certainly didn't place his trust in power or wealth, did he? He fled into Egypt, not to escape famine, but to escape the murderous rage of a tyrant. And when he returned to the Promised Land, he was just as wary of Herod's son Archelaus as he had been of Herod himself. That's one reason why he and Mary moved all the way up to Nazareth in Galilee, far away from the centers of worldly wealth and power.

But Nazareth wasn't exactly a desirable address. Most of the Jews looked down on Galilee because it was what we might call a transitional neighborhood – they thought it was sketchy because there were too many Gentiles there. Even one of Jesus' own disciples initially scoffed when he found out where Jesus had grown up, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

But isn't that what coming out of Egypt looks like in the real world? If we intentionally turn away from the worldly idols of wealth and power, won't we end up being looked down on, even despised by those who consider themselves more worldly, more sophisticated? And as our culture increasingly deviates from traditional Christian values, especially where marriage and family issues are concerned, those who hold to the teachings of Scripture should not be surprised to find ourselves increasingly marginalized.

But that's the good news we find in this passage as well. For Jesus' move to Nazareth reminds us of the first thing we learned, that Jesus understands the suffering of persecution. But going to Nazareth also tells us that Jesus shared in the subtle kind of persecution, the social disdain that Christians increasingly experience in our culture. And so the good news is that if we find ourselves on the margins of our society, we can

be sure that Jesus knows what we are going through – for as verse 23 says, He was a Nazarene.

But Jesus' move to Nazareth also fulfilled the words of the prophets in another way. For Verse 23 may be a reference to Netzer, the Hebrew word translated as "branch" in Isaiah 11:1. In other words, even though Jesus was living at the margins of society, even though he was continually despised as a nobody from nowhere, He was actually a branch from the root of Jesse. No matter what the world may have thought about Him, He was actually the royal Son of David, the true King of Israel.

We find the same idea, that an unlikely place like Nazareth could be the source of great blessing in Isaiah 9:1. For there God promised that Galilee, the region where Nazareth was located, the area that was held in such contempt, would be the source of great light for God's people. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah said that God's greatest blessing would come, not from the centers of power and wealth in Jerusalem, but through Galilee of the Gentiles, the despised margins of Jewish civilization.

And who would be the source of the blessings God promised to His people, starting in Galilee? The baby whose parents were so poor they had to lay Him in a manger, the Nazarene, was actually the Branch of the stump of Jesse, the Son of David Who would arise to rule His people with justice and righteousness. And this One Who would suffer such contempt all throughout His earthly ministry would eventually be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So what does all this mean for us? It means that Jesus didn't just come to share in our sufferings, large and small. It means He came to keep the same promise God made through Jeremiah – although Rachel would weep for her children, God promised that the people would eventually return from exile. Just so, Jesus has come to bring a great light into our dark world. No matter how humble His beginnings, He has come to bring us out of Egypt, out of bondage to all that would seek to enslave and persecute us.

But He has also come to shine the light of His holiness into our hearts, to bring us to repentance, so that we might turn away from all the idols of Egypt and turn to Him alone – even if that means enduring the contempt of those who continue to worship the things of this world.

And so I suppose that's the question for us today: will we follow Him out of Egypt? Will we follow Him into Nazareth?