

Out of Egypt Matthew 2:13-23

Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men. If that's what Jesus came to bring us, it's a bit hard to find these days. The people of the United Kingdom have just completed yet another highly contentious round of voting concerning their relationship to the European Union – they've had a national referendum and two general elections all revolving around this subject in three years. Meanwhile, the streets of Hong Kong and Iran have recently been convulsed with protests, as people cry out for freedom from tyrannical governments.

And things are no better at home, as our two major political parties are increasingly at each other's throats. Soon after the Democrats in Congress united to pass articles of impeachment against President Trump, that party's various candidates for President engaged in three hours of televised bickering among themselves. And with California cities pledging to obstruct Federal immigration rules and 85 counties in Virginia pledging to oppose any gun restrictions that might be imposed in Richmond, the possibility of peace on earth seems ever more distant.

And maybe your personal prospects for peace this Christmas aren't much better. Maybe you're wrestling with grief over the loss of loved ones. Maybe you're frustrated with your inability to re-create some perfect childhood holiday memory. Maybe your health makes it hard for you to participate in the dizzying round of activities, or even to feel particularly joyful. Or maybe you're just worn out from taking care of everyone else, frazzled from trying to meet everyone's seasonal expectations.

But that is precisely why the Christmas story is such good news. No, not the airbrushed, sanitized version of it that we see on our cards and ornaments and TV specials. No, Joseph and Mary's first Christmas was much more gritty, much more real. It was a story of government oppression and poverty, of loneliness and helpless desperation. On Jesus' first night in this world, He was not nestled all snug in His bed with visions of sugarplums dancing in His head. Instead, His family shared the experience of the thousands of people who slept on the streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco last night because they can't afford to blow their entire paycheck on rent. Far from being Romantic or sentimental, the real Christmas story is about Christ coming to share in the worst sort of suffering that this world can dish out.

And today's passage just ups the ante. For if Jesus began His life in homelessness and poverty, He continued it as a refugee from political violence. As verse 14 tells us, His family had to run all the way into Egypt to escape King Herod's paranoid fantasies, Herod's murderous mania to stamp out any potential rival to his admittedly tenuous claim to David's throne. Yes, today's passage reminds us that Jesus and His family had a whole lot in common with the 2 million Syrians who have had to flee from the ISIS thugs who have terrorized their war-torn country.

No, the suffering of God's people isn't some sort of isolated phenomenon, some sort of shocking variance from the norm. No, if Herod tried to kill Jesus and did in fact kill many other little children in and around Bethlehem, the same sort of thing still goes on in modern times, as Christian pastors are thrown into Turkish prisons, and as Chinese Christians are jailed and their houses of worship are destroyed, and as Egyptian Christians are beheaded on Libyan beaches because of their faith.

Moreover, verse 15 reminds us that this was an ancient pattern even in Matthew's time. For here he quotes from the Prophet Hosea, who points our attention back to the days of Moses, to the time when Pharaoh tried to kill all the Israelites' male children, ordering them to be thrown into the Nile River. "Out of Egypt have I called my son" reminds us that Jesus' family shared in the terror their ancestors had experienced as Pharaoh's slaves some 1400 years earlier.

And verse 18 reminds us that this pattern of suffering continued throughout the Old Testament. Here, Matthew quotes from the 31st chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy, written some 800 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 would invade and conquer Israel in 722 BC.

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 directed at God's people.

So, by reminding us that Jesus was called out of Egypt, Matthew points out something that should bring comfort to all those who suffer, and especially those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ: Jesus suffered in the same way. Jesus knew what it was like to be a homeless 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, whenever 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 false gods, the same gods that the Assyrians worshipped and that the Egyptians worshipped, the false gods of wealth and stability, of happiness and power.

And that's why God eventually gave them into the hands of the people whose gods they worshipped. As the Assyrians invaded their lands, God's people got a long, hard look at the way idolaters really live, at the cruelty and selfishness that lies at the heart of all such false worship. 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 any kinds of idols.

But again, what does this have to do with us? Sure, at the time Matthew wrote his gospel, lots of people still went to temples and bowed down before statues of Zeus and Athena and Apollo. But we don't do that anymore. We read the stories about the Greek and Roman gods for entertainment, not from some kind of 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 ancient statue-worshippers wanted. For no matter what particular god they worship, all idolatrous religions have one thing in common – they make certain sacrifices and do certain rituals in order to manipulate their gods into giving them what they want. In other words, idolaters really aren't focused on their gods at all – they are really focused on themselves.

Are we really that different? Think for example about the Ancient Greek god Apollo. He's the god of healing and of music – we still want those things, right? Apollo is 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 religion of ancient Egypt. The Egyptians 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?

Or think about Christmas itself. Why do we trim trees and put on pageants and bake cookies and wrap gifts? If we are trying somehow to get the happiness and contentment of childhood for ourselves by conducting these ceremonies, how is that really different from ancient idolatry, doing rituals, to get something for ourselves? The price may be different, but it's the same sort of bargaining, the same self-focus.

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 selfish core of idolatrous materialism open for all to see.

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 any more focused on the One True God than those ancient idolaters were? Or is our attention just on 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? Have we even been able to hold on to them? No, any attempt to find meaning in the things of this world always leaves us with Rachel in verse 18, crying in the streets, grieving the loss of what we have held most dear.

So, there's really only one thing for us to do. Like Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we must come out of Egypt. We must give up all our false idols, no matter how long we have worshipped them, no matter how much we love them.

For, Joseph certainly didn't place his trust in power or wealth, did he? He fled into Egypt, precisely in order 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 reject all the worldly idols of wealth and power, won't we end up being deplored, 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 if Jesus' flight into Egypt shows that He understands our greatest sufferings, and if Jesus' coming out of Egypt reminds us of our own need to reject the worship of any worldly idols, Jesus' move to Nazareth shows us that He shared in the subtle kind of persecution, the social disdain that Christians increasingly experience in our culture. And so if we find ourselves on the margins of our society today, 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.

And we find the confirmation that an unlikely place like Nazareth could be the source of great blessing in Isaiah 9:1. For in that verse, God says 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.

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. Even in the midst of our problems, will we celebrate His coming? Will we follow Him out of Egypt? Will we follow Him into Nazareth?