

Sermon Notes - January 8, 2023

(Matthew 2:13-23)

I want us to think a few moments this morning about something entitled, “Much Love, Hope Sent, God is with you.” In the scripture today, we wonder how in the world it got to be part of the Christmas story, but most of the time the “slaughter of the innocents” was celebrated on December 28th/29th – somewhere around the first of the year. So, last Sunday we would’ve spoken on this scripture, and since I wasn’t here, I decided to preach on it today. You think, why in the world would you talk about something that sounds so evil, you know, and so bad at Christmastime and the beginning of the new year? ... I think because I want you to see that Jesus Christ came as hope. He came to bring us hope and the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people.

Have you ever thought about this -- Jesus started his early life as a refugee. Here he was, under two years of age, and he’s on the run for his life because of a murderous king, named King Herod. Now, he’s on this run and he doesn’t know it, but I feel sure that Joseph and Mary later told him about how he got from Bethlehem to Nazareth by way of Egypt, and how a king wanted to kill him. Jesus was born in a time of evil and suffering. Here was King Herod who felt threatened by anybody that wanted to take his throne. He had already killed three of his own sons because he thought they wanted his throne and to be king. He was very jealous, and he was selfishly ambitious. He wanted his way and he wanted to be the center of attention no matter who it was that threatened him. King Herod saw nothing wrong in going ahead and murdering little babies, two years and under, because the Christ Child was threatening him. It was predicted that this Christ Child was going to be a ruler in Israel and King Herod didn’t want anybody to take his place. So when the Magi infuriated him by not coming back to tell him where the baby Jesus was and they went another way home, he was so enraged that he sought to do evil, and he committed unspeakable acts. He had all the baby boys (two-years and under) in Bethlehem and the surrounding vicinity killed by his soldiers. Can you imagine the weeping and wailing that was going on in the city of Bethlehem? But, I want you to see that Jesus was born and

traveled as a refugee. He was born into a world of evil and suffering, and a time of Herod. It was also a time when the Jews were being oppressed. Jesus knew what it was like to deal with suffering and pain. No wonder he spoke so much to the poor and to those who were hurting, lonely, suffering, and lost. He had an affinity with them because of how he was born and how he was raised.

So, as a child he traveled as a refugee, fleeing his home from a murderous King Herod. He was taken from Bethlehem to Egypt. Now, I also want you to notice that God was still working out his promises and his prophecy. He fulfilled them by saying, “Out of Egypt, I called my son.” That was something that was said in the Old Testament about the nation of Israel. In the Old Testament, they often called “the nation of Israel” – “God’s Son.” You remember the story of how Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage and from Pharaoh. So, God saved his people miraculously at the Red Sea and delivered them from bondage. Now, Matthew is trying to tell us in this Gospel lesson that Jesus has been sent by God to deliver the Israelites and ALL people from sin and death. He’s going to be the deliverer; he’s going to fulfill a new covenant for God’s people, and us his children. And, so, God sent Jesus to do that. God did it because he loves us so much. “Much love” – God’s love -- brought Jesus to this earth knowing at some point that Jesus would die on the cross for us for the forgiveness of our sins. God loved us that much that he came in human flesh – Jesus – God Incarnate.

Jesus came and traveled his early life as a refugee. He was born in a world of evil, pain, and suffering. God was still at work protecting the baby Jesus, though. Did you notice in the story how, in a dream, Joseph is told, “Don’t go back yet to Israel because I know Archelaus is the king, and I know you’re afraid of him, and I know that he could kill baby Jesus.” So, he tells Joseph, “Don’t go back yet. Go to a different part of Israel, to Galilee to the town of Nazareth, and there Jesus would be called a Nazarene.” So, God was still at work protecting this child. He’s spared his life from King Herod who was killing babies. You say, “Miss Peggy, how in the world did God let all these other babies be killed?” I can’t answer that. You know the Bible says that God’s ways are higher than

ours - his thoughts are higher than ours. Why did he save baby Jesus, but all these other little kids age two years and under were killed? I can't answer that. Maybe one day, we'll know because the Bible says that one day what we know is partially now, but one day, we'll know fully. All I know is that God protected and saved the baby Jesus so that he could later save us from our sins and from death. God was at work in Mary and Joseph's life, and in the baby Jesus' life. He was at work protecting him, saving him, and he was at work guiding them because the prophecies were fulfilled that this child would come out of Egypt to deliver God's people.

So, I want to remind you that Jesus was born in a world of suffering, sin, and evil, and I want you to notice that God was at work protecting Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child. And then I want you to notice that God is still with him and with us even now. Just as God was with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus then, he's still with us.

I want to share two stories with you today. One is called, "Much Hope. Love Sent." There was a girl named Elizabeth who was a drug addict. Now, she went through N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous) and she also became a follower of Jesus Christ. She found help for her addiction. After she had gone through rehabilitation, she wanted to do something to help other people who were addicted to drugs. And so, she came up with this thing about writing notes to people. She wrote those notes for other drug addicts -- a little bit of a testimony of how God had helped her and N.A. had helped her overcome drugs, and that there was hope for them as well. When she signed her notes, she put them on telephone poles and utility poles in parks where she knew a lot of drug addicts hung out. She also put them under windshields of car windows. On these notes, she signed each one with, "Much Love. Hope Sent." She didn't put her name. "Much Love. Hope Sent." And the hope was that you can get better - there's hope with God - there's hope that you can be cured of your addiction. "Much Love. Hope Sent."

And, then I want to tell you a story of a woman named Beth Pottle who is from North Carolina. It is a story of "God is with you." Just as God was

with Mary, Joseph, and the baby, so he is with us today. Hear now the mysterious way God was with Beth Pottle. She was 58-years old, from North Carolina, and she was going to run in a multi-day relay race in the California desert. She didn't start running until she was 52-years of age, and she was running with a team of people who were much younger and more experienced as runners. She was concerned that she wouldn't be able to finish the race even though they chose her to run with them. She was afraid that she'd let them down - that she wouldn't be able to complete the race. Anyway, a few days before she and her team were to fly out to California, one of her neighbors saw her running, and she stopped her and talked for a few minutes. She said, "Beth, how are you doing? Are you getting excited about your race?" She said, "I'm scared to death. I'm afraid that I'm going to let my team down and that I won't be able to complete the race. I'm much older than my team mates and they are so much more experienced than I am." The lady said, "Do you mind if I put you on our prayer chain? We have a text prayer chain and I would like to add you to that chain, so we can pray about your race - that God will give you the strength to see you through." She agreed and was added to the prayer chain. A few days later, Beth and her team left by airplane to go to California. They rented a Jeep and they traveled to the desert in California where they were going to run this multi-day relay race. While they were in the desert, the organizers of the race had already told the runners that there was no cellphone service out in the desert. "When you leave the desert and head back to the highway, you'll have phone service. But, out here, there is no service." Well, on the first day of the run, they are standing there getting ready to run, and guess who's phone pinged? ... Beth Pottle. Nobody got a ping on their phone, but Beth Pottle. It was a text message from that prayer chain group in North Carolina, and guess what the message said? ... "We are thinking about you, praying for you," and it had a scripture verse -- Isaiah 41:10. This is what it said: "Don't be afraid. I am with you. Don't be dismayed for I am your God. I will help you and strengthen you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." That's all it said. Beth shared that text message with her team mates. They were all confused on how they got a text out there with no cellphone service. That day they all ran well. That evening Beth said, "I was so tired that I wasn't running. I was barely walking. I got so

discouraged that I wanted to quit. All of a sudden, that scripture verse popped into my mind - 'I am with you. I will help you. I will strengthen you.' After that verse popped into my mind, I got the strength to start running again. I got faster and faster and I want you to know that my whole team finished that race. We didn't win, but we finished. We got back to the Jeep, loaded up, drove to the highway, and all of our phones pinged. Everybody was wanting to know how the race went. All I could do was sit in that back seat and think, we were out in the desert and there's no cellphone service, and I'm the only one that got a text. ***It was exactly what I needed to be reminded of - that God loves me and God is with me. God gave me the strength I needed when I needed it most.***

What I want to say to you today is that Jesus was born into a world of evil and suffering, and he feels for all people - especially people who are hurting, sad, suffering, and refugees. But, he brought hope to the world. You see, the Israelites had been in exile. God called them to be a "light to the world," but they failed. God decided he had to come in human flesh in the form of a child. And, he came as the Christ Child to bring us love - to bring us hope - to bring us light, joy, and peace. You see, Herod didn't get what Jesus was wanting to do - he didn't want to take his physical throne. He just wanted to be on the throne of his heart and his life. He didn't want to take stuff away - he wanted to give him something - forgiveness, joy, peace, love, and hope. He wanted to give him something that Herod didn't know anything about. But, Herod didn't get that.

You see, Jesus came to bring hope to the world and to all of us. This story today is here to remind us that Jesus knows what it is like in the world we live in - that there are innocent people who suffer, just like those little innocent children years ago. Jesus feels with them and cares for them. He wants us to care as his Christian people - his children. Then, he wants us to be reminded in the story that God was at work in the life of Mary, Joseph and Jesus - protecting them, fulfilling his promises, his plans, and his prophecies. And, he's still at work in our lives today. God is with us even in all that's going on in our lives right now - no matter how bad it is. God can bring good out of tragedy, under unexpected tragedies, under things that cause innocent suffering. Jesus

can still bring good out of it. And, God is with us today. Who would have ever thought Beth Pottle would've gotten a ping in the desert where's there's no phone service? But, she got the message from God. It was a promise to God's people (the Israelites) and that promise belonged to her. And it still applies to us. God is with us. God's love and God's hope (Jesus Christ) can heal hurts, change lives, and rescue the lost. May you remember today that God loves you - and He is still at work in our lives and our world.

"Much Love. Hope Sent. God is with us" -- may we take that message to the world we live in. Amen.