

## **Sermon Series “Jesus Now & Then”:**

### **Escape to Egypt/Slaughter of Innocent – Jer. 31:15 and Matt.2:13-28**

(Regula A. Brandle, St. Paul's, Edmonton, Jan.3/2010)

We are at the beginning of a new year, but instead of a happy and undemanding Scripture passage, I am going to address and preach on the passage in Matthew, chapter 2, where we are told of the escape of the holy family to Egypt and the slaughtering of innocent little children.

It might feel a bit of a depressing story to look at, but let's see!

However, before we get into it, let me explain the context of this sermon.

Today's sermon is a continuation of our sermon series on Old Testament prophecies regarding Jesus and their fulfilment in the New Testament.

We started this series at the beginning of Advent as we were preparing for Jesus' birthday again.

We first looked at how Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make him into a great nation and that through him all the people on earth will be blessed.

After that we looked at the powerful link between king David and Jesus and how Jesus was the promised righteous king in succession to king David.

And on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Advent we looked at the virgin birth of Jesus as it was foretold and because it is absolutely essential to Jesus humanity and deity.

In fact, the virgin birth is especially important to understand because the current attack on the historic and orthodox Christian faith includes very prominently the notion that the virgin birth did not happen or was not necessary.

And now, for a couple of Sundays after Christmas, we are looking at prophecies related to the early life of Jesus.

Today's Old Testament prophecy from the book of Jeremiah relates to King Herod's order to kill all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and how God prevented Jesus from being killed.

Now, the original prophecy in the book of Jeremiah made total sense in its immediate context. The prophecy was about the tears and sadness over Israel being taken away to exile in Babylon.

Rachel, the favourite wife of Jacob was buried at Ramah (near Jerusalem) in the land of the tribe of Benjamin (one of her sons). She is kind of a personification of "Sorrow" since she had died in sorrow at the birth of her son Benjamin.

So, she was “weeping” at seeing the whole land depopulated of her sons.

*“A voice is heard in Ramah (this was a place close to Jerusalem), mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”*

Now, Matthew in his gospel connects this prophecy to the horrible act of king Herod.

It is, like with all prophecies regarding Jesus, a strong reminder that nothing happened without God’s knowledge or God’s purpose and direction.

Now, having said this, you might think what so many people probably think when they read the story of the killing of the innocent bay boys:

How could a loving God allow this to happen!?

I often also say that when God is in charge of something, it is a win-win situation. But obviously it was not a win-win situation when innocent children were killed while Jesus was rescued?

This story brings up important questions and concerns about pain and suffering in relation to an all-loving, all-powerful and just God that we believe in.

Our story is a strong reminder that yes, God knew a long time before it happened, that some innocent children would die.

It is also a strong reminder that some of the pain and suffering occur not because God doesn’t care but because of man’s inhumanity towards man.

You see, we are dealing here with a person, who was well known for his brutal, inhumane and evil actions.

In fact, King Herod’s slaughtering of the innocent children was mild compared with his other infamous deeds.

For example, he killed half the Sanhedrin (the supreme court of Israel, 71 members), he killed the remnants of the Hasmonean dynasty who had ruled before him, he killed three of his own sons, one of his wives and one of his mother-in-laws.

He was a man of ruthless cruelty and with a fanatical neurosis about any competition. So, it was quite in his character to order the execution of boys under the age 2 in Bethlehem, because one of them was to be the king of the Jews.

Bethlehem was a small place and there would have been maybe thirty children, and their deaths would not have made a ripple on the history of that day. But God knew and we continue to remember because God cares.

But why did God not stop it?

Well, because God created us with a free will to either respond to God or go our own way, we are free to sin and do things that are not part of God's good plan.

Yes, God could stop any such harm to happen, but He doesn't, because of how he has created us.

But God was there, weeping with Rachel over the unnecessary pain and suffering inflicted, because of the selfishness and insecurity of a human being.

So, to put it differently, king Herod, because of his inhumanity towards others, was able to thwart God's good plan and purpose of a win-win situation.

But that is also still true today!

How much suffering and pain is due to the fact that we choose our ways and are not interested to follow God's good plan?

King Herod was not able to thwart God's ultimate plan in and through his son Jesus though. But because of man's selfish ways God needed to intervene in order to preserve Jesus' life.

And how did he do it?

Through a dream.

Besides the reminder that some of the pain and suffering is due to our own love-less doing, we also receive the reminder in this story that God continues to speak to us directly through dreams, impressions, pictures, etc. (and not just through his Word).

I find Joseph being incredibly courageous and with an intact ability to hear/see and obey God's voice, not just once, but repeatedly!

How often do we miss out on God's protection or blessing, or simply stall God's good plans because we do not listen to his voice?

One reason why we continue to put such an emphasis on listening to God here at St. Paul's is, so that we continue to learn listening to God's voice and become more alert and in tune with His voice.

What a story this is....we are reminded that pain and suffering is very much a possibility even if we follow Jesus, because so often it is because we inflict it upon each other.

We are also reminded of how important it is to be in tune with God's voice, so He can do His good work in and through us.

Back to our text...

The fact that Joseph had to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt is not without importance.

It is not just a historic fact but also highly symbolic!

It was a fulfilment of Israel's history.

Egypt's Pharaoh had tried to destroy the people of Israel in Egypt, but Moses brought them out of Egypt into the land of promise.

King Herod, kind of a new pharaoh, tried to kill Jesus, and in his rage and frustration he slaughtered other innocent baby boys in Bethlehem.

Herod failed to kill the Saviour, just as Pharaoh failed to kill Moses.

Eventually Moses brought the people of Israel out of bondage and death.

Jesus, the ultimate successor of Moses, came to bring people out of a much worse bondage and a worse death, the death of sin.

Again, I find it very reassuring, very fascinating and truly faith strengthening in how God in his foresight, wisdom and power foretold an event.

What an awesome God we believe in.

God is good – all the time!

Maybe, after all, this was a good text for the beginning of the new year - not that all pain and suffering will be taken from us, but knowing that God is who he is and he will continue to accomplish his purposes, especially if we follow his lead.

And that's my prayer for us all;

Lord, help us to listen to your voice so that you can fulfill your plans.

Amen.