

December 21 & 22, 2024

Do Not Be Afraid | Choose Love

Matthew 2:1-11

Pastor Sarah Fike

Please pray with me:

Through the written Word and the spoken Word,
may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our
Savior of the world.

Amen.

We have made it to the final Sunday in Advent, where we light the 4th candle on the advent wreath. Where we have learned more about the themes for each week of Advent: Joy, Hope, Peace, and now Love. Our scripture today told us the story about what happens after Jesus is born. What happens when a baby is born out of the abundant love of God?

Well, the part of this story that is left out from reading in church of the Christmas story in Matthew, is the flea to Egypt and the slaughtering of the innocents. Here it is, the full story:

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ "A voice was heard Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel

weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

This isn't the Christmas story most of us share with the children in our lives or even one that we like to hear. It's not the Christmas story any of us read on Christmas Eve. And, truth be told, it's not the Christmas story we like to remember. And we usually, for some reason, spare ourselves of the worst part! But it is in Scripture, and it's important to take it seriously.

Here are the troubling elements most briefly: An easily threatened and manipulative ruler who turns to violence when thwarted; traveling and well-intentioned astrologers or seekers first deceived but then enlightened into resistance; a family on the run for their lives given sanctuary in a foreign land. And then the slaughter of the innocents omitted by the lectionary.

Having named even this much, though, it's hard not to admit that while this may not be the Christmas story we want to hear, it's a version of the Christmas story that resonates deeply and troublingly within our own times. It is not an exact result, we should be clear and trying to transform it into an allegory by substituting our least favorite leaders for Herod, etc., doesn't finally do the biblical story justice.

We, too, have too many families on the run from their lands for fear of their lives. We, too, have too many innocents being slaughtered, whether by violence or treatable disease or preventable starvation. We, too, seem to see a plethora of leaders terrified by the prospect of losing power and willing to do almost anything to hang onto it. We, too, see all kinds of well-intentioned people manipulated by individuals, corporations, and governments via social media and countless other ways to view the world in a distorted way. We, too, see some who have become wise to the schemes of others stand firm in their resistance. So, while this may not be the Christmas story we prefer, it does feel like a more realistic account of events.

But before succumbing once again to the temptation of allegory that slams our opponents and validates our own convictions, and while noting these echoes and patterns that seems consistent across the centuries, let's turn our attention that this isn't intrigue and scheme and plots and violence in general, or even for the gain of political power or wealth, but rather that all of this is provoked by the promise of God's coming messiah and the salvation he will bring.

Let's be clear this isn't God who brought this suffering and appointed this tyrant leader, no all of this happened because the leaders felt threatened by God's coming messiah.

What is so threatening about God's salvation, mercy, and grace? Simply that it is a stark reminder that we need salvation, mercy, and grace. That we are not in control. That we, no more than Herod "and all of Jerusalem," do not have the final say in how the world, or even our lives, will run.

Jesus comes and he will be a sign that will be opposed. So, it was then. So, it is now.

But let's also note that what is constant across the centuries is not simply that Jesus occasions opposition, but that he comes. That he comes in love and mercy. That he comes to save. That he comes for all, leaving out no one who admits their need.

And let's note God's consistent action to side with the oppressed and save those who are in need. God chooses to work through love. God works through the magi, God warns in dreams, God helps the family take flight, God provides shelter and sanctuary in Egypt, a foreign country. Very little of this is what the various characters in the story would have hoped for or planned, yet none of it is devoid of God's presence.

So, it was then. So, it is now.

This isn't a touchy, feely, warm Christmas story that we want to hear each year about the birth of Jesus, but it's necessary for us to hear and give witness to. That the world is difficult. That many

entrusted with power are not trustworthy. That many who are well intentioned will fall prey to manipulation. That far, far too many children are threatened and sacrificed to violence. But also, that God is still at work through God's love for us. At work for the sake of the vulnerable. At work on behalf of those fleeing violence. At work for the sake of the world. And not only in mysterious or intangible ways, but also at work through us.

God is fashioning the people all around us, even you and I, to do God's work in the world. To take stands against leaders who manipulate through fear. To offer shelter and sanctuary. To advocate for those who have had to flee their homes. Who resist oppression and violence and manipulation.

God is at work in us moving and calling us to go follow the star to witness God being born into the world through Christ, in order to create us to be bearers of the light that has come into the world, the light that the darkness neither understands nor has overcome. God is at work fashioning people of the light, people who know that the joy and grace of Christmas is not a gift to be admired but one to be put to work for the sake of the world God loves so much.

So this may not be the holiday season you had planned, maybe you won't be able to gather with your friends and family this year, maybe you are ill this year, maybe you haven't been able to decorate or get all the gifts you wanted to give, maybe this season has felt more sad than not, and you can't quite get into the holiday spirit. But in that God is still present, God is still choosing to show us the love God has for us, God is still caring for you showing you that the promises are much bigger than our expectations.

Indeed, perhaps Matthew sketches his story of Jesus' birth – and our lives – with the darkness of the world so that we might perceive the glory and grace of God's redemption in Christ all the more clearly, like a bright star shining high in the heavens and leading us to greet our Savior and Lord, Jesus the light of the world. Love has been born in the world...for us.

Amen.