Sermon – Matthew 2.13-23 (Christmas 2 – 2022)

Let us pray: O Lord God, heavenly Father, You allowed Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, to become a stranger and a sojourner in Egypt for our sakes, and led Him safely home to His fatherland: Mercifully grant that we poor sinners, who are strangers and sojourners in this perilous world, may soon be called home to our true fatherland, the kingdom of heaven, where we shall live in eternal joy and glory; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,

15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping *for* her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."

21 Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

These are Your Words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed,

Rachel, along with her sister Leah, were wives of Jacob. Rachel was the one that Jacob favored, and she gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin. Benjamin and Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, became three of the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Generations later, Israel’s king Solomon had turned away from God, and God told Solomon, that the kingdom would be taken from his son, Rehoboam. At Solomon’s death, his son Rehoboam inherited the 12 tribes of Israel, however shortly thereafter 10 of those tribes turned against Rehoboam, and followed a man named Jeroboam. Those 10 tribes were called Israel, or the northern kingdom. Ephraim and Manasseh, two of the tribes that came from Rachel belonged to Israel. The third tribe that came from Rachel, Benjamin, was in the south. They remained loyal to Rehoboam, and became united with the larger tribe of Judah, and that kingdom was called Judah.

In 720 BC, the powerful nation of Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and besieged it. Archeological evidence shows the great damage that Assyria did to the biggest cities of the Israel. In 722 BC, Assyria conquered Israel. The Assyrians took a large number of the Israelites into exile, and spread them out to several lands. Then they imported a large number of people from heathen nations into Israel, so that those Israelites who remained in the land, would lose their identity as Israelites, and instead they would be completely absorbed into those imported peoples to form what we know in the New Testament as the Samaritans.

And in 587 BC, another powerful nations, the Babylonians, destroyed the temple and took Judah into captivity. Along with the tribe of Judah, went the tribe of Benjamin into exile.

In this context, Jeremiah wrote the words, “**A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children because they are no more**” (Jeremiah 31:15).

Yet, these words of Jeremiah find their ultimate fulfillment in the horrors of our gospel reading today.

Herod, in an attempt to kill the King of kings that had been born to Mary, ordered the death of all male children under the age of 2 in and near Bethlehem.

It’s dreadful to even imagine the sound of the lamentation and bitter weeping. They were in such grief, they refused to be comforted. They needed to grieve. They needed to cry out their laments, over the wickedness that they just suffered.

In the death of these children we find the first instances of those who were killed for the sake of the incarnate Christ.

Now, we suffer things in life that bring us tremendous grief. But I want to focus on persecution, the suffering that is inflicted upon Christians by individuals, governments, and other religious groups that because of Christ.

This is happening today in other nations. A recent report from a Catholic group that tracks persecution around the world says that persecution in the past year has increased. You will find it India, Pakistan and Nigeria, and many other nations. Christians are being imprisoned, kidnapped, and killed.

Among the children of God you will hear weeping and lamenting, because of such suffering that they endure.

We’re not quite in a time and place where that is occurring to a great degree. The suffering we endure for the sake of our faith is quite tame, though lives are truly affected. There are business owners that suffer the hostility of the world on account of their faith in Christ. There is, for example, Baronelle Stultzman, who has been through the courts regularly because he refused to bake a cake for a gay wedding. There are others who were fired from their jobs, or at least pressured to leave, because of their Christian convictions. I imagine that if we weren’t so shamefully timid about our faith, we would have stories of our own of some minor hostility from the world. If we simply say we’re Christians, that probably won’t get many people up in arms, but if they find out that you actually believe what the Bible says, you have a target on your back.

But we should expect that the day will come when the persecution will become fierce as the society around us is becoming increasing godless.

Jesus said to His disciples, “**’A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you**” (John 15:20). Peter warned the Christians in our epistle today, “**Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.**” We shouldn’t be surprised when it comes.

And thus it is so important for us to be equipped in the armor of God, and to have the God’s Word of spirit and life dwell in us richly, that He may keep us firm in the salvation and victory that is ours in Christ our crucified and risen Lord. Besides this, there are a couple things from our text that we can learn to help us prepare for those days.

The prophecy of Jeremiah, fulfilled in the mourning of the people of Bethlehem, teaches us to prepare for lamentations. We are human. We have emotions. God created us this way. And it is right for us to mourn and weep and lament. Surely Jesus lamented during His earthly ministry, and particularly we hear Him lamenting on the cross as He prayed the 22nd Psalm, “**My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?**”

And so it is good for us to lament as Christians, and we should be well acquainted with the Psalms of lament which give us words to say in our lament and weeping. To use a shorter one these, hear the words of Psalm 43:

**Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!**

**2 For You *are* the God of my strength; Why do You cast me off? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?**

**3 Oh, send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your tabernacle.**

**4 Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And on the harp I will praise You, O God, my God.**

**5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.**

This is a lament of a Christian. The mourner wishes to have joy, and wishes to praise God, and is praying for it. He trusts in God’s help and deliverance, yet he is in the midst of deep sorrow.

One other point I want to make here is about the comfort that we may have. Though Rachel refuses to be comforted, she may know that there is comfort for her. Jeremiah after that prophecy says that there is comfort, for he writes, “**Thus says the LORD: ‘Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the LORD, that your children shall come back to their own border.**”

We can see this fleshed out if we ask a couple hard questions about the gospel text before us. Why did God send the angel to warn Joseph so shortly before the slaughter of the innocents began? The message of the angel had some urgency. They need to go now! And the second question is, why didn’t God warn the other parents, that they may flee and bring their children to safety.

Now, those questions alone demand a full sermon, but I’ll get to the point. Jesus

Words of lament.

It is okay to grieve.

But there is comfort.

Wonder, Why did Gabriel, notify Joseph just in the nick of time, it seems. Why didn’t God have the angel warn the other families that they could also flee?

Don’t you think that God’s heart was grieved by the wickedness of Herod?

Jeremiah’s words were in this

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.