

## Matthew 2:13-23

### “Baby King”

In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the coast of Louisiana and Florida. It is listed as the fourth deadliest Hurricane in American history, or at least since they began keeping records. Everyone in the nation was devastated as we watched with horror the ways that the systems that should have protected the American people failed over and over.

One of the reasons that it was so destructive is because of faulty engineering in the levees, or flood protection system, which was supposed to keep the people safe. And it seems as if one system after another failed the people. Local and national politicians were criticized for their responses and shortcomings. Total property damage was estimated at \$125 billion. Approximately 9000 citizens and 550 National Guardsmen lived in the Superdome for weeks. In the end, 400,000 people were permanently displaced from their homes. On the news, they were often referred to as evacuees, but some people even called these American citizens “refugees”. I remember how the term made me bristle.

This time in our history was the first thing that came to my mind when I read Matthew’s account of what happened after the Magi’s visit to the baby Jesus. Convinced that they had encountered a new king, they bypassed Herod and went to their respective countries to share their experiences. What happened after they left is difficult to hear, and frankly even more difficult to preach from. But the circumstances that Joseph and Mary had to deal with surely offer hope to others who have had to leave everything familiar behind, like the evacuees from Katrina and other storms in life, both literal and figurative.

There are many avenues that a preacher could decide to go down after reading this passage. Of course, one *could* dwell on the horrible “slaughter of innocents” as this story is

often referred to. Was there NO other way that God could protect His own Son than for hundreds of innocent babies to die. IS God really all-powerful? And why do bad things happen to good people?

Or one could link all three dreams sequences to the Old Testament passages that predict that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, that Rachel would weep for her children, and that the anointed one would be raised as a Galilean. Another interesting perspective would be to point out the parallels between Moses, the savior of God's people in the old Testament and the baby King born to save the world. Fleeing to Egypt, living as a refugee in a foreign land, yet ultimately returning to Israel, these two men have much in common. Their similarities would have been important for Matthew's original listeners, who weren't quite sure who this baby king really was.

But you and I **KNOW** that the baby in the manger is God Incarnate. You and I know that he was placed in a simple feedbox, foretelling the tomb that could not hold him, so that each one here might be saved. Therefore, the Holy Spirit led me to talk about the HOPE that this passage holds for all of us. After all, hope is a very wonderful thing to start a new year with!

I traditionally preach on Christmas Eve from Luke because everyone just WANTS to hear about the shepherds and the angels the imaginary innkeeper who shouts "No Room" in our Christmas pageants. But truthfully, I have always preferred the birth narrative from the Gospel of John. My reasoning is that Luke places Jesus in the manger, but John places him in the world, where we need him most. "The WORD became flesh and dwelt among us."

But after studying today's reading and preaching for the very first time from it, I may have changed my mind. Because Matthew actually takes things a step further. Matthew takes the baby from the manger to the larger suffering of the world. In a world where Kings obtain

their power from might and destruction and domination, Matthew gives us a king who prevails through loving faithfulness, right from the beginning of the story. And THAT is the kind of King today's world needs. Matthew's account teaches us several important lessons.

The first lesson we really learn is from Joseph. Joseph is a man of faith and trust. How many times have you felt certain that God was leading you in a certain direction but have chosen the softer, easier way? I have. I knew from about the age of 14 or 15 that God was calling me to do something specific in the church. But I had never seen one episode where my role model, Mary Tyler Moore, even WENT to church. So I decided to follow my own path. But the truth is that, by the time I reached my mid-thirties, even though I had EVERYTHING a girl could want – married to a successful man, two healthy children, a beautiful home, involved in fulfilling volunteer activities – even a station wagon and a Black Lab, I was not really very happy.

This was because I lacked the faith and trust that Joseph had to follow God anywhere God called. It would be almost 20 years before I would finally and reluctantly answer God's call and thus find my way to wholeness through trusting God's plan for me. Joseph's story tells us all that when God calls you to follow, God provides what you need. Or to use one of my favorite quotes, "God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called."

Personally, I can only imagine how hard it was to move unexpectedly to a new country with a brand new baby. One where I didn't know the language or have any friends or family to lean on. Many of you may have had this experience and I can only assume you had faith that God would go with you into this foreign life. And because of Joseph's faithfulness and trust, Jesus Christ knows what it means to be displaced, to be ostracized, to be alone and vulnerable from the very beginning of his life. What a comfort to any of us facing the same challenges.

Of course, a good Jew like Joseph knew that when Jeremiah talked about Rachel weeping over her children in Ramah, he was referring to the Exile. You see, when the Babylonians conquered Israel, the town of Ramah was a holding place for the Israelites before they went into this foreign land. So not only would Joseph remember that God went into Exile with His children, but this story gives hope to all mothers who have lost a child, who have stood silently while we had to let our children make bad decisions, who have had a child taken away by addiction or disagreement or service in the war. As Mary took her newborn into the strange land of Egypt, what a comfort she must have had as she remembered that God never left the chosen people, even as they became refugees. What hope this must give anyone in similar circumstances where their freedom was threatened, or they faced such hardships.

Honestly, I think this passage can give us all hope in any times of uncertainty. Hope that God is sovereign and always with us. Scholars do not agree on how long the new family remained in a foreign land, but we DO know that God continued to be present. Communicating with Joseph in dreams. Fulfilling the promises that God made to Abraham, Miriam, David and Esther by guiding and protecting the faithful.

And to bring this hope into our modern-day world, think of the message this allows you and I can to share our faith when we meet refugee children, people struggling with learning a new language, mothers who mourn, strangers in unfamiliar lands. Matthew's account of the baby king can show us the way of acceptance and service. The story of Jesus' displacement and his ultimate victory in following God's call for his life can help us have empathy for those who are facing changes that are hard to accept.

Now, you may not feel fully prepared to help people going through such trying times, but I have found that just LISTENING to people's stories about their own refugee journeys can be

healing. Actually, listening usually proves to be healing for the storyteller *and* the story catcher, or the one who hears. When I was serving in my first Interim pastorate, there was a church member who had a passion for raising money to provide clean water for people all over the world. She asked the Session for permission to make a presentation at our midweek dinners and they obliged.

This older lady, who gave a detailed plea for money to help dig wells in the western part of the United States as well as countries in Africa and Asia seemed SO emotionally invested. Several times she teared up and had to stop and gather herself in order to go on. I wondered how a woman who lived on beautiful Lake Jocassee and lived an upper middle-class life and could get a glass of clean water any time she wanted it became so fervent in her appeals.

Then she told her story. She had BEEN one of the evacuees, one of the refugees, who lost everything when Katrina hit and lived for over a week in the filth and lack of supplies in the Superdome. Unconvinced that the levees could be made safe, she and her husband had relocated to South Carolina, knowing no one, strangers in a foreign land. They completely started over.

Not only did her experience help all of us understand how hopeless she had felt but also impressed on us how God uses tragedies in our lives to grow us into better servants. Also, seeing her convictions, I realize now how ingenious it was of God to send our Savior to earth in the most vulnerable state. As a baby, completely dependent on other's choices. Matthew even helps us picture the shadow of the cross that was already present in Jesus' life as he was threatened by the establishment, the powerful, the rich.

From the minute of his humble birth, we know that Jesus is a king who lives quietly in an insignificant place, showing God's preference for those on the outskirts, the fringes of society. His ministry is one of inclusion and restoration while Herod lives in a palace, surrounded by

wealth. Jesus leadership manifests itself in love while Herod chooses violence and killing. Yet, Jesus, the baby King, never wavered from the direction of God's call. What hope this offers any of us who have ever felt less than, left out, forgotten or unaccepted.

But perhaps the most hopeful lesson from Matthew's account of the baby king is the assurance that God still directs our path. Think about it. God orchestrated every detail of the life of Moses. God used the tenacity of his mother and sister to keep him alive. God led the King's daughter to find the baby in the river and make sure he was raised in a palace in order to be equipped to deal with the Pharaoh. Yet God also led Moses into the wilderness to hide after he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. This of course, prepared him for this years in the wilderness, leading God's people to the Promised Land.

Similarly, God fulfilled every prophecy about the Messiah so that the Jews would recognize their King. And when they did not, God used Paul and the other disciples to extend the message of the Good News of grace, brought to earth by the baby in the manger. God has a plan, a place and a purpose for each of God's children. And when we have the trust and faith of Joseph, when we listen with open hearts and minds to the encouragement that God provides, even in the midst of a broken world, we find our hope.

Friends, Jesus entered a world of suffering, a world of inequity, a world where the powerful did not earn their dominance by the will of God but by their own selfish wills. And Jesus did this willingly. By this we have hope that God continues to direct our paths. God continues to listen to weeping mothers. God uses the broken and the powerless and the forgotten to demonstrate God's love. And because of the life that Jesus led, despite his beginnings in a foreign land, we can all find hope. And we can be assured that, even in the midst of a world that

seems to have lost its way, resurrection and redemption will always have the last word. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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