

¹³After the Wise Men were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him.”

¹⁴Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under. This was in keeping with the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men. ¹⁷Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

¹⁸A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more.

¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. The angel said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to kill the child are dead.”

²¹Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there. Since he had been warned in a dream, he went to the region of Galilee. ²³When he arrived there, he settled in a city called Nazareth. So what was spoken through the prophets was fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

On Sunday, December 25, 2011, a headline read: “Christmas carnage in Nigeria; 5 churches bombed.” Imagine the families walking into church on Christmas Day, excited to welcome the newborn King, maybe with a special meal planned after the service. But instead of going home that day, they went home to heaven. Sadly, terrorist attacks on Christian churches, while extremely rare in our country, do happen on occasion. But Christmas? Christmas is supposed to be peaceful. Christmas is supposed to be *Silent Night* and *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. Christmas is supposed to bring peace, happily ever after.

We prefer our Christmas story to end in the manger, but it doesn’t. God doesn’t stop the story where it feels warm and cozy. Because even though you’ll hear us pastors complaining about the wise men in the nativity scene and how they didn’t come until at least a while later, the Christmas story goes on until they get there, and here the story takes a turn.

Matthew refuses to let us sentimentalize Christmas and make it into something that it wasn't. Jesus doesn't enter a world where peace and tranquility are already abundant. The Son of God comes to a world full of violence and brokenness. The incarnation of God with man immediately gets messy.

What do we find here in Matthew 2? A paranoid king who orders the baby boys to be killed. A visit from an angel to get this Christ child out of harm's way. A family living on the run and hiding out in Egypt until it's safe to return. And behind them in Bethlehem? Mothers weeping for their dead sons. Merry Christmas, right? It's the most wonderful time of the year, isn't it? I don't think you can describe this section of scripture without the word "chaos." No control. No order. Just destruction and gloom.

We expect God's salvation to look obvious in that manger. We expect it to be powerful and efficient. We assume that if it is God at work, things should always be getting better, never worse. When suffering increases, maybe we even wonder if God has lost control or cares too little to step in and save. We want God's salvation to be clean and tidy. We want Christmas without any crosses. But we're confused. We misunderstand silence, suffering, and disorder as the absence of God. This instinct reveals our weakness. We judge God based on appearances instead of promises. We decide how God should save.

We look at the world through the scope of power. Who's in charge? Who's conquering and bending history according to his will? Look at the Christmas and post-Christmas scene! Herod has control. His subjects fall in line under him because he's willing to throw his power around. And this keeps him on the throne. It keeps his perceived rivals from being able to overthrow him. Sure, there's some blood spilled in Bethlehem, but if it keeps the kingdom from falling, isn't it worth it?

Then look at Herod's rival. He's a baby, a baby born seemingly out of wedlock. He's a baby born in a stable out in the middle of nowhere. He enters this world powerless. He flees instead of fighting. He suffers instead of killing. He allows evil to strike him instead of striking back.

So, which king is from God? The strong one or the weak one? The one who is effective with his power or the one who has to grow up like a person in witness protection? You know the answer to this question, but it seems so wrong. Why doesn't Christ come into the world guns-a-blazing? Why doesn't the God of creation assert his dominance and tear every king down from his throne to seat his Son there? Why the Christmas massacre? Why the chaos?

Do not confuse weakness with purposelessness. Herod reigns to preserve himself and his authority. Christ comes to unlock the doors of his heavenly kingdom. Herod spills the blood of others to remain king. Jesus spills his own blood to bring sinners in from the desert of death. Jesus' humility is not accidental. It's voluntary. It's part of the plan. The glory of God is shown through weakness. We see it in the flight of Jesus and family to Egypt. We see it in Jesus'

humble ministry to the downcast and needy. We see it in a criminal death being the act that sets the world free from the slavery of sin and hell.

God's plan to rescue the world is not clean and tidy. It involves sacrifice, sacrifice that comes from him. What was the cost of Jesus entering our world? It's not just cross and grave. Matthew quotes Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." This connects three different biblical accounts.

First, it shows us Rachel, the favored wife of Jacob. She lived about two thousand years before Jesus. She was one of four women to have children with Jacob, and the polygamy of her husband caused many problems in the family. What made it worse, Rachel desperately wanted children, but dealt with barrenness, so she watched as the other three wives got pregnant and had sons. Eventually God gave her two, Joseph and Benjamin, rounding out the twelve sons of Jacob and twelve tribes of Israel. But Rachel died in childbirth as she delivered Benjamin. She was buried in Ramah. She would come to be thought of as the mother of Israel, even though her life was filled with sorrow and bitterness.

Second, we have what was going on in Jeremiah's time. The Babylonians had sacked Jerusalem. The southern kingdom of Judah had fallen. Now those still alive were being assembled and shipping into exile all over the empire. That staging was happening in Ramah. It was there that the prophet Jeremiah heard in spirit the voice of Rachel, weeping for her children, the lost of Israel.

Third and finally, in Matthew's gospel the Lord applies this prophecy in Jeremiah to the children whose lives were snuffed out in Bethlehem. We see a cost of Christ entering into the world to save it in these baby boys. These children really died. Their mothers truly wept. This is the cruelty of our sin-broken world. And it reminds us that Christmas is not soft lighting and comfy feelings.

God enters into this world on purpose. Jesus does not avoid the chaos. He does not wait for safety and order. He comes into this world ruled by fear and violence with one mission in mind: to get to Jerusalem and suffer so that Rachel no longer has to weep; so that these children murdered in Bethlehem could themselves be won for heaven; so that every man, woman, and child could look to the cross and find life.

Appearances suggest failure. The Son of God is hunted. Children die. And God's plan to save the world looks incredibly fragile. But Matthew shows us that the opposite is true. Three times in this section he points to the events as fulfillment of what God had promised before. God is not reacting or panicking. God is carrying out his plan. Because God works the hard and dirty way, not the clean way. His glory is hidden under suffering. His power is revealed in weakness. Our God is a grease-stained God. He gets his hands dirty in doing the messy work

that needs to be done. So, when you look at your life and start telling yourself that God can't possibly be working, remember that he is closest when he seems most hidden. See it in Jesus' ministry and how many sleepless nights he spent healing and teaching. See it in the faces of those he came to save sneering at him and crying out "crucify." See it in his naked body hanging lifeless above the world he created, the sacrifice that paid for the sins of the world.

We have many doubts and misunderstandings about God's plans, but how should we react when life gets messy? Let's look at Joseph. An angel comes to Joseph after the wise men leave to tell him to take the family to a faraway country and live in hiding until the king dies. Joseph doesn't pity himself. He doesn't hem and haw whether they should go or not. He acts immediately and trusts that God's plans will work out. And how could he know that? Well, this wasn't the first time an angel had appeared to him. While Mary was pregnant, an angel came to tell Joseph that her baby was from the Lord and that Joseph should still marry her. God was right before, and Joseph knew he would be right again. No, he doesn't see the whole plan, but he knows God does. His obedience flows from faith, not fear.

This is how God calls us to act when his plans seem flawed. He calls us to trust him and listen to his instructions. Why? Because Christmas does not end at the manger. His work to save mankind continues through the muck and mire of this sinful world, to cross and grave, and beyond cross and grave. Your salvation was won in Christ two millennia ago. But God's not done assuring you of that truth and keeping you close to him. And here's the best part: He is not afraid to get his hands dirty in your life so that you will be his forever. He promises these things to you, so as you face this greasy world, know that your grease-stained God is still at work. Amen.