

“The Moods of Christmas: Tragedy”

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(Mt. 2:13-18)

Introduction.

This will be the first Christmas in the last 38 that Lorie won't be a part of my family's celebration of the holiday. It feels very, very different this year. After Thanksgiving my son David and his girlfriend helped me set up the Christmas tree, and we displayed a number of the nativity sets Lorie had collected from all around the world during her many travels. We also put out various decorations, like a Moravian star, which have become a part of our annual observance of this holy season here in North Carolina.

But to be honest, we displayed about 1/20th of what Lorie always did every Christmas. She had a way of making our home come alive with her creativity, and it always looked like a picture out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. This year the house looks a little vacant in comparison to how Lorie would have done it.

Many of you know that my father died unexpectedly on December 11, 1975. That was 41 years ago today. I was 22-years old at the time. Christmas was hard that year for my family and me, and ever since then, whenever December 11th rolls around, I feel a hole in my heart. I still enjoy the sights and the sounds, the smells and the celebrations of Christmas, but there is always a bittersweet twinge to it all. Tragedy hit at Christmastime in my family many years ago, and I feel it doubly hard this year in the wake of Lorie's passing.

I know I'm not alone. For many people, tragedy is a part of Christmas. It's one of the many moods we encounter. There's an empty seat at the dinner table. There's a broken relationship that hasn't been mended. A loved one will be spending Christmas in the hospital this year. Or you just lost your job, and you wonder how you're going to pay all the bills.

We aren't the first ones to be hit with tragedy at Christmas. As we have read together in our text this morning, the families of Bethlehem were too. And I believe there are lessons we can learn from this profoundly tragic story, because it shows that even in tragedy God is still at work at Christmas. Do you believe that?

I. The Escape to Egypt.

Up to this point in the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew's gospel, we've been told about the supernatural pregnancy of Mary, the plan of Joseph to divorce her

quietly, God's intervention by an angel in a dream, and Joseph's decision to take her as his wife and to raise the child as his own. In addition, Matthew tells us about the visit of the magi to the city of Jerusalem who came looking for the one who was born king of the Jews.

When Herod heard about it, he was greatly troubled and he sent for the magi to learn more. Herod plotted to use the wise men to locate this new infant king so he could eliminate any potential rival. He sent them on their way with the request that when they had found the child, they send word so Herod could come and worship Him, too.

You know the story. Following the star, the magi traveled on to Bethlehem, and when they found the baby and His parents, they bowed down and worshipped Him. And they presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Finally, God warned the magi in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned to their country by another way.

Then here in our text we read that when the wise men had gone, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream once more, and on this occasion the angel instructed Joseph to take the child and His mother and go down to Egypt. They were to stay there until God sent for them, because Herod was going to search for the baby to kill Him. The next day, they got up and did as the Lord said.

I want you to notice that almost from the moment Jesus was born, He was a *refugee*. That's an important fact to remember today when there is so much discussion in our country about refugees and immigration. Jesus was a refugee. From the moment He was born, Christ was hunted and hated, and the world wasn't a safe place for Him.

All His life, even in His infancy, Jesus experienced suffering. There is one verb in the Apostles' Creed that stands between Christ's birth and His death. It's the word "suffered." "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, *suffered* under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." Never forget that the suffering of Jesus, which culminated in the cross, actually began at His birth.

But why escape to Egypt? What part did Egypt have to play in God's plan of redemption? A careful study of Matthew 2 retraces the history of the nation of Israel. Jesus went from the Promised Land to the historic land of escape in the Bible, Egypt, just as all the patriarchs in the Old Testament from Abraham to Joseph had done before. And then, like a second Moses in a kind of second Exodus, Jesus was called up out of Egypt to return to the land of promise once again. By means of tracing Jesus' itinerary, Matthew was saying, "Hey, look! Here is the new representative of Israel!"

When the prophet Hosea wrote, "*Out of Egypt I called my son,*" (*Hosea 11:1*), he was referring to Israel. But when Matthew quoted it concerning Jesus, he clearly saw Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies

concerning Israel and its Messiah. Our Lord went down to Egypt and was brought up again in order to inaugurate the New Exodus of the people of God, and this time the exodus would include all humanity from their bondage to sin.

At first reading, it's surprising to me that we should read of Jesus' escape to Egypt. You see, just a scene earlier we find angels, wise men, and the miraculous birth of the Messiah. But now we read of a family on the run, refugees high-tailing it down to Egypt. Where's the miracle when you need one? Why not just zap mean ole Herod, or have the baby haul off and whack the soldiers who come to kill him? That's how I would have written the script. In spite of the miracle of Christ's birth, the baby Jesus had to be rescued not by a miracle but by an escape, and by becoming a refugee.

The ancient preacher Chrysostom posed the question in a fascinating way when he said the following:

"Joseph, when he had heard [these orders to flee], was not offended, neither did he say, 'The thing is hard to understand: Did you not say just now that He should "save His people?" and now He saves not even Himself: but we must fly, and go far from home and be a long time away: the facts are contrary to the promise.' ...[But] if from His earliest infancy [Jesus] had shown forth wonders, He would not have been counted a Man."¹

The self-limitation of the Son of God was part of the miracle of the Incarnation.

In His providence and grace God chose to do the ordinary by means of an escape instead of a miracle in order to do the extraordinary by retracing the spiritual journey of the nation of the Hebrews so that Jesus as the Messiah might truly be the New Israel who brought salvation not only to the Jews but also to the whole world as well.

II. The Slaughter of the Innocents.

"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (2:16).

There was a powerful article in an issue of *Christianity Today* several years ago which was written by a woman named Wendy Zoba. In it she asks the question, "How shall we reconcile the glorious birth of the Savior with the bloody deaths of the boys of Bethlehem?" She poses and answers her question in a profound way in the course of the article. And there she writes:

"The disastrous event that took place in Bethlehem...is part of the picture of Christmas, too. But we tend to allow sleigh bells, evergreens, and shopping frenzies to push it out of view. Yet it is, in fact, in all its brutality, what Christmas is about: the Savior's invasion...and his confrontation with the forces of evil. To

subsume this aspect in wafts of potpourri and roasting chestnuts misses the essence of Christmas....Matthew's narrative of Christ's birth juxtaposes noble and wretched characters in stark contrasts: stars and swords; majestic kingly visitations and twisted kingly agitation; Mary rejoicing, Rachel weeping; the children who die, and the Child who gets away."²

The slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem is as much a part of the Christmas story as are the shepherds and the wise men. But we tend to zoom past this text when we read about Jesus' birth. If you look at it honestly, it all seems so unfair. However, Matthew sees a correlation in this tragedy to an Old Testament passage. He recalls the memory of Rachel, as portrayed by the prophet Jeremiah when he lamented the deportation of Israel in the Babylonian exile of 586 BC. As Matthew saw it, what Jeremiah had written about poetically in regard to Rachel's weeping over the exile of the nation reached its fulfillment in the history of Jesus.

I think a mother weeping for the loss of her children is as bad as it gets in this life, and it's God's chosen metaphor for the deepest point of anguish. Ramah was a town that was about 5 miles north of Jerusalem, and it was the place where the Jews gathered before they were carried off to Babylon. Rachel's weeping gives voice to God's own lament over the loss of His children. It was a sign that did not solve. Rather, it was a sign that sympathized. And God sympathizes with you and me in the midst of all our tragedies.

But why? Why did such a tragedy have to happen in the first place? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why couldn't Lorie have been healed from her cancer? Why didn't God give us a miracle? Why? It's a question we've all asked at one time or another.

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, the intellectual agnostic, puts the question well when he asks his brother, Alyosha, "...what about the children? How will we ever account for their suffering?" He continues, "If the suffering of little children is needed to complete the sum total of suffering required to pay for the truth, [then] I don't want that truth, and I declare in advance that all the truth in the world is not worth the price. We cannot afford to pay so much for a ticket. And so I hasten to return the ticket I've been sent.... It isn't that I reject God; I am simply returning to Him most respectfully the ticket that would entitle me a seat."³

Perhaps if the mothers of Bethlehem understood that the birth of the Savior would cost them the lives of their babies, they, too, might have returned their tickets. Had they known of the dream that alerted Joseph to flee, they might have asked, "What harm would there have been in God sending us dreams, too?" Maybe you've been in that very place yourself. It seems like God is too hard. He's asking too much. Life isn't fair.

Why did God save Jesus and not all the babies of Bethlehem? We really don't know the answer to that question. But we do know this. The logic of the Gospel

says that in saving Jesus from the slaughter of the innocents, God actually did save them all. As Wendy Zoba put it in her article, "In fact, the One that got away *is the ticket* that Ivan so cavalierly handed back to God. Jesus had to get away in order to face the day when the angels would *not* intervene and when Joseph would *not* whisk him to Egypt; when Mary, not Rachel, wept and could not be comforted. Jesus 'got away' [this time] so that He could later on 'atone for' the blood of those children and their mothers' tears."⁴

For Jesus to live now, innocent children died. For all to live hereafter in eternity, the innocent Jesus would die. And so He did on the cross of Calvary as the payment for your sin and for mine, and for the sin of everyone who calls on His name. God was at work in that tragedy, too. And He is at work in whatever tragedy you're facing this Christmas. I truly believe that.

Conclusion.

A tragedy will either make you *better*, or it will make you *bitter*. It will either take you deeper into the heart of God in trust and faith, or it will drive you into depression and deep sorrow from which it's very difficult to recover. It will either be the end of your hopes and dreams, or it will be the new avenue for discovering God's greater purpose for your life. It all depends on how you respond to the tragedy.

I have personally found that the only way to deal with tragedy at Christmas is to go back to the biblical truth about heaven. If this world is all there is to our existence, then the tragedies that befall us in this life will be too much for us to bear, and we will be crushed by the emotional weight of it all. But if this world is only a prelude, a dress rehearsal for a better world to come and the promise of heaven the Bible talks about is really true, then every tragedy we've ever experienced on earth can be redeemed by God through faith.

It is our hope of heaven that helps us put one foot in front of another, because we know that the Bible is true when it says in Revelation 21, "*Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (21:1-4).*

The day after Lorie's memorial service last month, Fran Harrington of our congregation wrote me an email. And in the email she shared with me the following.

“Last night I heard the news about the terrible bus crash in Chattanooga [in which six children were killed and more were injured]. It was so tragic and sad to me, and it has been on my mind ever since. But I woke up this morning at 4:30 AM and God told me not to worry about those children because Lorie is looking after them and welcoming them into His heavenly world. You know that there has to be a reason she left us so early and maybe this is the first of many tasks she will gladly be involved with. She is going to be busy looking after God's children because He knows she is the perfect person to welcome them into heaven. May peace surround your family this week and may you feel our Lord God's presence in everything you do.”

Isn't that amazing?

Our grandson Lleyton is 4. He's really into letters and numbers right now, and he's trying to make sense of heaven and his grandmother Lolo's passing. When he and his parents were at our home over Thanksgiving and after Lorie's service the previous Monday, he asked my son David and me, “How old was Lolo when she died?”

We told him, “Well, Lolo was 64-years-old.”

“And now she's in heaven, right?” he asked

“Yes, Lleyton. Lolo is in heaven now,” we answered.

He thought for a moment and then he said, “So if Lolo is in heaven now, that means that on her birthday, she's gonna be one. Right? And then she'll be two, and then three.”

It's so fascinating to listen to a child try to figure out how heaven works. It's a mystery to us all, but Lleyton may not be far off.

It is the hope of heaven that enables us to deal with tragedy and to have faith to keep moving forward. With Christ a tragedy never has the last word, and God can redeem the worst tragedy in your life and turn it for good somehow some way. That's what Paul says in Romans 8, “*All things God can work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose*” (Rm. 8:28).

Where has tragedy struck you this Christmas or in the past? How have you been laid low by the unfairness of this world and all the random hurt we experience from time to time? What is the ache you carry in your heart this morning, the sadness that simply won't go away? Take it to Jesus. He's been there before, and He understands. And set your sights on heaven beyond the tragedy you've experienced. There is hope in Christ, and there can even be joy in the midst of your tragedy. That's the message of Christmas. Let's believe it by faith. Amen.

¹John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, preached 386-338 AD, 8:4:52.

²Wendy Zoba, "Mary Rejoicing, Rachel Weeping" in *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997, p. 25.

³Adapted from Wendy Zoba's article, p. 26.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.