

“Echoes From the Past and Hope for the Future”
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
 12/29/13

Matt. 2:13-23

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 in Ramah,
 wailing and loud lamentation,
 Rachel weeping for her children;
 she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

ECHOES FROM THE PAST
 AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Tis the season to prepare bulletins early so your secretary can have a few well-deserved days off during the holidays.

Unfortunately that poses a problem for the preacher. The title that's in the bulletin is not the title of my sermon for today. In fact that happens quite often. As I begin to study a text I realize that the sermon I'm writing really needs a different title.

So, this morning the first thing we're going to do is fix the bulletin. Take out the little golf pencils in the pew and mark through the title, "The Unwanted Gift." Now replace that with this title: "Echoes From the Past and Hope for the Future." I know. That's a long title. If your pencil isn't sharpened, you can get it off the church website later.

But, that rather long title really does get at the heart of this passage. This passage is about how God's actions in the past point us to hope for the future. In fact that is the function of Scripture. It is never just about what happened way back when. It is also about what happens here and now.

We know all about echoes from the past. The holiday season is in many respects all about the past. Our Christmas traditions provide pegs on which we hang our memories.

I don't know about your family, but our family has certain traditions that we follow. On this Christmas Day we followed the tradition of watching some favorite holiday movies. First we watched A Christmas Story followed by the more raucous Christmas Vacation. (Our family is big on satire.)

In the movie Christmas Vacation I'm particularly fond of the scene where the father (Clark who wants to have the mythical perfect Christmas gathering) is trapped in the attic.

There he runs across some old movies and begins to watch them. He sees the same characters that have come to visit his home at Christmas but at a younger age. A tear rolls down his cheek.

I'll bet that happened to you this Christmas. A familiar carol or an unexpected visit brought you an echo from the past. Perhaps you were overwhelmed for a moment with a wave of nostalgia.

The echoes from the past will continue to shape our lives.

Who we are and what we believe are shaped by those memories. That's why the holidays are so important to us. Those echoes from the past often guide us into the future.

This is not only true of our family traditions; it is true in a more profound way when it comes to interpretation of Scripture. Scripture is not just about what happened way back when. Scripture is also about what God is doing here and now.

The old, old story becomes our story. The drama of God's grace is told in new and exciting ways.

Through the power of the Spirit the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

We see this pattern in today's lesson. The Scripture is used in new and unexpected ways.

Matthew and the early Christian community believed that the birth of Christ was a fulfillment of prophecy, not directly but as a continuation of important biblical themes and principles.

These echoes of the past in Scripture were like the star that pointed the way to the Christ child. They were signs that illuminated the way to God's future.

And I think these signs still point the way for our future as well.

In today's lesson three specific echoes from the past point the way to God's future.

THE EXODUS

The first echo from the past recalls the Exodus from Egypt.

Most of us know that story. God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. With mighty works and wonders God led his people to the Promised Land.

And the most powerful Messiah figure in that story of course was Moses.

You may remember that when Moses was a baby, through the intervention of God, he escaped the threat of the Pharaoh. He had decreed that all the first-born male Hebrew children should be killed. And when God called Moses to come back to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery he reassured Moses that “all the men who were seeking your life are dead.” (Exodus 1:22; 4:19)

We see a parallel in our passage for today. Herod was seeking the death of the one born a king. And when the threat is over God tells Joseph in a dream, “Those who are seeking the child’s death are dead.” And so this enables Jesus and his family to come out of Egypt.

Matthew tells us that this was done to fulfill the prophecy that says, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Now specifically this is an echo of the prophet Hosea. But, the original quote from the prophet shows that this passage was not about the Messiah but about God’s people. Hosea 11:1 reads, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Israel refers not to one person but to a nation.

How could Matthew use the Scripture in this way? The key is found in the next verse, Hosea 11:2. That verse reads, “The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.”

In other words the first Exodus did not deliver the people completely. They still held on to their pagan ways. They worshipped other gods. God called them out of Egypt, but in some ways they never left.

And so it is necessary for another Messiah to come out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He will lead the people to true freedom. This Messiah will succeed where others have failed. Unlike his ancestors Jesus will be totally obedient to God’s will. And this Messiah comes not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The way Matthew uses this echo from the past to talk about God’s salvation in the future teaches us an important lesson about the interpretation of Scripture.

Proper interpretation of Scripture does not focus on a narrow set of texts in a very rigid way. Instead, we read the specific stories of Scripture with an eye toward the big picture.

What does the story of the Exodus tell us about how God saves and where might we see that salvation today? Can another Messiah come out of Egypt? Might we miss the coming of the Messiah because we look for salvation in all the wrong places?

Might we need another Exodus in our lives?
What do we have to leave in order to serve God?

Those are just some of the questions that we are led to ask by this passage. One thing is sure. A Savior did come out of Egypt, and God's hand was in it from beginning to end.

This passage teaches us that salvation is not a one and done kind of thing. Salvation is a continuing story. Deliverance comes in many and often unpredictable forms.

And in this case salvation comes in the form of a little toddler who comes out of Egypt with his beleaguered refugee parents.

THE EXILE

But, where is God when the evil powers that be do their worst? That question is explored in the next section of our lesson for today.

This passage refers to the Exile in Babylon.

King Herod was a master assassin. He had killed many members of his own family when they threatened his rule, and now he is more than happy to kill the one born King of the Jews.

But, the wise men had tricked him. They didn't go back and tell Herod where they found the baby, and so the murderous old King was very angry.

And in his anger the King does something horrible. He kills all the babies in Bethlehem two years and younger. He figures by doing this the one born King of the Jews would be included in the carnage.

Matthew responds to the carnage created by Herod by once again referring to Scripture. In this case he quotes a lament from the prophet Jeremiah.

When the Babylonians led God's children into captivity, they pass by the land where Rachel (the favorite wife of Jacob) was buried.

And in a figure of speech the prophet imagines Rachel weeping for her children who should be in the Promised Land but are not. Matthew uses this image to capture the pathos and the anguish the families felt when the innocents are slaughtered in Bethlehem.

This is not a part of God's will.

But, the sadness felt in Bethlehem is echoed in the experience of God's people during the Exile. God is witness to this atrocity. God weeps with His people.

Just before the third Sunday of Advent we got the sad news that there had been another school shooting in Colorado.

Laurie Kraus, the Coordinator of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, wrote a prayer that was posted on the Presbyterian Church website. She prayed,

“Once again, in this holiest of Advent seasons, our expectation is shattered by unbearable reality. Our inability to protect our children exposes our deepest fears.

A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children and none of us are comforted, for we do not see an end, and in this valley of shadows we confess: we have almost lost our way.”

This is a good example of how Scripture not only gives us the language of salvation but also the language of lament. When we think about the children of Israel going into Exile, when we think about the slaughter of the innocents, we also think about our own fears.

There is no certainty in life. We cannot protect our children nor can we protect our own lives.

But this echo of a lament from the past can also point the way to hope.

Once again the context of this quote from Jeremiah is important. The scene at Ramah is indeed a scene of hopelessness. But, this woeful oracle is set in a chapter full of hope for the future. This lament is answered with a word of hope in the very next verse.

The prophet writes,

“Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.”

In other words when all is said and done the love of God will not be defeated. There is hope for Ramah, there is hope for Bethlehem, and there is hope for us as well. Herod’s henchmen did not kill all the children of Bethlehem.

God preserved the life of Jesus.

And His life, death and resurrection will redefine the possibility of hope ... for Ramah, for Bethlehem and for the whole world.

The world from the very beginning tried to kill Jesus. Herod tried first. Many others tried after Herod. And then at the end of his life Jesus stood with Pilate before the crowd.

They chanted, “Crucify him, crucify him. We have no King but Caesar.”

And they did it. They crucified Jesus.

But, even a crucifixion could not kill the hope that was unleashed in Christ Jesus. God was in Christ, and that echo from the past brings us a hope that lasts forever.

The tragedies of life cannot kill this hope. Rachel still cries for her lost children, but God hears our cry, and God in Christ comes to us.

We grieve. But, we do not grieve as those who have no hope because we know that a Savior comes out of Egypt. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

The final echo from the past in our lesson for today is so distant that we're not sure where it comes from.

Archelaus who was ruling in Judea was even crazier than his father Herod. So, in order to protect Jesus, Joseph decided not to go back to Bethlehem. Instead he took the holy family to Galilee and settled in a place called Nazareth.

Now that presented a problem.

Nazareth had a reputation, a bad reputation. In John's gospel, when Nathaniel's brother comes to talk about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Why does Jesus come out of Nazareth?

Matthew gives his answer, "...so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'" Unfortunately there is no text in the Hebrew Scriptures that say this.

Some have suggested possible solutions to this problem.

Perhaps Matthew is referring to Judges 13:5 that reads, "The child shall be a Nazirite." Those who took the vows of a Nazirite were pledged to live a holy life, a life dedicated to God. That certainly fit Jesus.

Or maybe this is a reference to Isaiah 11:1. That passage reads, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." In Hebrew the word for branch is similar to the word for Nazarene.

The "rules" for the interpretation of Scripture were quite different when Matthew wrote his gospel, and these two loose associations based on similar sounding words could be what Matthew meant.

But, we still have the question, "Why did Jesus grow up in Nazareth? Why did God let him end up in that place?"

Nazareth is in Galilee of the Gentiles. And having Jesus grow up here supports the main thesis of Matthew's gospel. The good news about Jesus is

not just for the Jews but also for the whole world. This theme runs throughout Matthew and culminates in the Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Nazareth was about six miles from the hometown of Jonah, that famous Old Testament prophet who was called to carry the gospel to those infamous Gentiles, the Ninevites. So Jesus’ hometown fit in with the plans of God to bring salvation not only to the Jews but also to the whole world.

Nazareth was on the main trade routes of the day, and Jesus as a boy would be exposed to many different cultures and philosophies. This would give him the ability to speak about God’s salvation in such a way that Jews and Gentiles alike could understand the message.

Bringing God’s message of salvation to the whole world was an important part of the prophetic message. And we see this theme advanced a little later in Matthew’s gospel.

Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah. He said, “The people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and to those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16, Isaiah 9:2)

In this sense the fact that Jesus grew up in Nazareth was a fulfillment of prophecy. Even in the Hebrew Scriptures we see remarkable stories about God reaching out to those outside the realm of his chosen people. Even enemies are given the chance to repent and receive God’s salvation.

Jesus of Nazareth focused on those stories. His birthplace gave him a global view of God’s salvation. Through the Providence of His Heavenly Father, he was given a message that became good news not only to the Jews but also to the whole world.

This passage teaches us that we too must live in Galilee of the Gentiles. In other words we must have a global outlook when it comes to God’s salvation. We cannot limit the power and hope of God to just our people or just our country or to people who look like us and act like us.

Jesus grew up in the crossroads of life. He was proud to be called a Nazarene. He was a light to those who sat in great darkness.

And so Jesus crossed borders all his life, bringing the Good News of God's salvation and God's comfort to all people.

It was surprising to many that God's Son could come out of a place like Nazareth. In every generation Christians have made the mistake of limiting the grace of God, suggesting that only those who thought like us and were a part of our clan could be saved.

But, if the birth of Jesus teaches us anything, it teaches us that God's grace is not limited. The light shines wherever there is darkness.

That echo from the past still brings hope for the future, the future of the whole world.

May God help us hear the echoes of the past that bring us the hope that is eternal. May God shine light in our darkness.

Amen.