

Tears and smiles

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[0 : 00] Last year, on New Year's Eve, I took a funeral service for someone who was a member of the Church in Lansing. One of the kind of things that was still happening after I'd stopped being the pastor of the Church, you know, people still needed to have these services, the new pastor wasn't there.

One of our deacons was at the service, the head deacon, and he was dressed very smart for the occasion. My wife said, you look very well, and he put up a poster.

He put a poster up on the front of the Church with the message, New Year, New Life in Jesus, which is a great message to have for us.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, as he sat down to have a rest after doing some DIY, he was a master of DIY and helped many of us incompetents out on a number of occasions.

But he sat down, he never got out of the chair again, apart from to fall down on the floor. He didn't collapse and die. I found it very difficult last year to say Happy New Year for quite a while, actually, because it was a challenging time for Linda, his wife, and a challenging time for the fellowship.

[1 : 21] It sometimes happens like that, doesn't it? An event happens, and it seems to press in on everybody in the congregation. I suppose in the last year, unless you've been on Mars for a couple of years, everybody in some way or another has had their life squeezed in one way or another as a result of COVID.

It's something which is common to all. A loss in the church, or maybe better news, the gift of a child to the church, is always something which focuses people's attentions and help them to see together a common experience.

I received an email on Christmas Eve from Kiev. It was very nice, isn't it, to receive that? I don't know if Anya's family have also had this experience, but my friend, who's a principal of a seminary in Kiev, said, younger people don't seem to follow the news, but those of middle life and older are following the government's advice.

And the government's advice is to pack a suitcase. Pack a suitcase with their documents, three days of clothes, and three days of food, just in case.

Just in case. I kind of wrote back to say at this time of the year, and particularly in Ukraine, as they kind of celebrate Christmas later and longer than we do, we think it's all over by Boxing Day, but it's not.

[3 : 06] In fact, in the Christian year, up until the 6th of January, the Festival of Epiphany, where we remember the coming of the Magi to worship the newborn king.

So the events that we've read here today are well after the pace of Christmas proper. So here we are in the new year, and we're continuing to think of the gift and the implications of that gift for the world.

Tom Wright, Tom Wright, Tom Wright, when he was Bishop of Durham, was preaching at a very large carol service. And in the service, there was a distinguished historian from the university city. He was a skeptic concerning the Christian faith, that he'd been invited to the service by his family, thinking it might do him some good. After the service, he came up to Tom Wright, and he was beaming.

And he said, ah, now I understand the attraction of Christmas. There's no threat in a baby.

[4 : 18] No one can be threatened by a baby. It's such a lovely, harmless story. Tom Wright said I was dumbfounded.

Of course, we've seen in our reading that in fact, a baby can be a great threat. There may well be some poor families in the Brighton area who, given the news that they're about to have a child in the future, are not thrilled, but devastated.

Another mouth to feed. Another space. I don't know if you heard on the radio this last week about bed poverty. Hundreds and thousands of children around Britain who don't have a bed to sleep in. Some of them sleeping on a couch, or the floor, or the bath. Well, it can be a threat, can't it, to feel that there's going to be a baby born. And we read in our reading about this extreme threat experienced by Herod.

Herod the king, who hears the news that the new born king has come, and he is threatened by that. Earlier on in chapter 3, it speaks about, verse 3, when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

[5 : 46] See, at the heart of the Christmas story, there is this threat. And it's a threat that's common to every human being.

Because ultimately, there is only one person who can rule our lives. There's only one person who can rule the world. There can only be one person who bears the crown.

And here's the challenge. Jesus born King of the Jews, and the one who is King of the Jews, Herod, feels threatened by that.

By all accounts, historically, Herod was paranoid. He eliminated all threats to the throne, including those of his own family.

So it was said it was better to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son. There is threat and darkness in our reading.

[6 : 48] Verse 13, Before Jesus is born, he is a threat to human beings and human authority, human leadership.

And as a tiny baby, in his early months, he's a threat. The shadow of threat and death hangs over him.

As we saw later on in the reading, in that description of the slaughter of the innocents, as those under two years old, the boys under two years old, were killed by Herod's soldiers. This is a ruthless attack upon the Lord Jesus Christ, an attempt to eliminate this threat from Herod's life and eliminate this threat from the world.

Before the Prince of Peace even learns to speak, there is hatred and there is opposition to him.

We read about Christian persecution and there is much of it around the world. And here we see the beginning of Christian persecution.

[8 : 15] wherever there is a revelation of the truth, there is a response to that revelation of the truth. Darkness hates the light.

And as we'll see, the shadow of the cross hangs over this story. But Joseph has a dream.

It's kind of interesting, isn't it, in this story. There is a Joseph who dreams. There is a violent ruler who kills babies. There is the feature of Egypt.

There is a special child who has been born. Does it remind you of another story? Does it remind you of another story in the Bible, the story of Moses and the story of Egypt and Pharaoh?

Another story about a special child who was born who is under threat and yet is remarkably protected. And Matthew seems to kind of take the motifs, the fragments of Old Testament stories and he weaves it into his gospel story.

[9 : 26] It's the language of the story that he uses. You sometimes see that with poets and novelists. They take language from previous books and poems and novels and they weave them into their own story.

Not because they're kind of stealing them but they're borrowing them in order to repurpose them in another time. Joseph has a disturbing dream and a disturbing dream leads to a detour.

a detour humanly speaking from the journey. They'd come from their hometown to Bethlehem and they didn't return to their hometown.

They go to Egypt. Of course Egypt has a long history doesn't it with the people of God. Abraham found sanctuary in Egypt. Moses and the people of Israel found sanctuary in Egypt.

Now says Matthew all of this is not an accident. All of this simply was not made up on the hoof. All of this is part of the fulfillment of God.

[10 : 44] Matthew loves the phrase all this took place to fulfill what the prophet had spoken. And there are three of those references in our reading. Three references to this idea that this is not a random happening.

This is something that's happening as a result of what God has said. Fulfilled prophecy. God declaring beforehand what would happen and how things would turn out.

You see although it appears that it's a precarious action for God to send his son into the world. For God to push out the boat as it were and the baby Jesus to be launched on the ocean of a hostile world.

What a precarious action. Yet all of the actions, all of the movements around the Lord Jesus Christ, they're not accidental.

They are determined. They're determined by the promise of God and fulfill God's promises. Joseph, he responds to the words, go to Egypt.

[12:01] Someone has said that there is in that word to Joseph both an order and a promise. There is the order, go, don't stay here.

But stay there in Egypt until I tell you. There is an order and there is a promise. You need to get out of here. You need to find a place of safety.

You need to leave because it's dangerous. But there will be a moment when the danger is over and I'll tell you to take the next step.

Isn't it the way God often guides us? It's kind of a little bit like a treasure hunt sometimes, isn't it? We have one message. It tells us to kind of go and find a large tree and on the large tree there's another sign that tells us we need to go and find a special sign by a big door on London Road. Sometimes it's a bit like that, isn't it? God gives us the Hansel and Gretel treatment, sprinkling the breadcrumbs for us to follow step by step.

[13:07] Not necessarily knowing what the next step will be, but knowing that the God who has spoken to us will guide us to the next step and beyond the next step and to the next step beyond that.

That's what God is like, isn't he? I certainly can testify to that in my life. Step by step, moment by moment, he knows what he's doing and he guides me by his hand.

So the first of those prophecies is a prophecy from Hosea chapter 11. Out of Egypt I have called my son.

And so we read there in verse 15. And so it was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son.

Now the odd thing is that Hosea wasn't talking about Egypt. He was talking about a different exile. And this is a reminder of what scripture does with scripture.

[14:10] Scripture sometimes takes scripture and repurposes it for another time, another place, another occasion. Out of Egypt I have called my son.

Hosea is thinking back to the time when Israel, called God's son in Exodus chapter 4, was called out.

And brought into freedom in the promised land. And Hosea is speaking words of promise to the exiled people in his day to say that they would have a fresh hope and a fresh beginning.

They would be brought out of exile. Out of Egypt I have called my son. It's almost as if Jesus is Israel.

Being born, born in exile, going to Egypt, coming out of exile, that he is the new Moses under threat from the wicked king, escaping to fight another day.

[15:20] that Jesus has come in order to bring his people out of the exile of their sin and their condemnation and to bring them into a glorious new future.

Out of Egypt I have called my son. Egypt has got a bad press in the Bible, hasn't it? It's a place of oppression and slavery, but it's also a place of protection.

It was for Abraham, it was for Israel for that long period of time for those four centuries. It kind of works both ways, Egypt. It's both a threat, but also it's something which can be reassuring.

Life can be like that too, can't it? We look at something and we think, my, this is the most threatening thing in my experience so far, only to find when we pass through it it's one of the greatest opportunities that we've ever had.

Sometimes the threat becomes an opportunity, sometimes what seems to be the end of the story becomes the beginning of the story for us. Out of Egypt I will call my son.

[16:28] It's a strategic withdrawal, like Dunkirk, ready for a fresh invasion on the beach head of human sinfulness.

Live to fight another day. Out of Egypt I have called my son. Egypt at this time had more than a million Jews living in Alexandria.

It was a place where there would have been a community, probably even a family network. The possibility of work for Joseph and maybe even a place to live in a spare room.

Out of Egypt I have called my son. It is a fulfilled prophecy and it's a fulfilled prophecy that points forward into the future.

This is not the end, this is a beginning, beginning of God's purposes. And then there is a second prophecy prophecy and this prophecy is a darker prophecy that speaks about tears.

[17 : 49] 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 the vicinity who were two years and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. The voice is heard in Ramah, weeping in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

A dark prophecy. When people hate God, they begin to hate people. When people hate God, they begin to hurt people.

When people are ungodly, they become inhuman. it's the way human life works. Herod refuses the clear revelation.

Herod knew where to find the answer to the Magi's question about where the king would be born. He was able to point the Magi to those who were able to quickly turn up the reference in Micah to confirm the birthplace of the coming king.

[19 : 05] king. Herod knew how to consult scripture that prophesied the coming king, but he didn't want to hear the revelation of the coming king.

It's possible, isn't it, for us to receive the revelation of God, but not to embrace it, to receive the revelation of God, but not be transformed by it, and that was the case here.

Herod is the evidence of someone blind to the revelation of God, and blind to the vulnerability of human beings.

Sometimes we look at history and we say, how could they? How could they kill tiny babies and toddlers? how could Herod do that?

How could Pharaoh do that? How could Hitler do that? How could they? Well, when there's a refusal to listen to God, well, then we refuse to listen to him concerning everything.

[20 : 21] when we rip away the top story of human life, the lower story of human life is left vulnerable, exposed to the elements, and all hell can be let loose.

Rachel, mourning for her children. Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, mourning for her children that have been snatched away, that are dying.

Of course, they were not Rachel's physical children, but they were her children. They were her children because she stood in the line of God's working in the people of Israel.

She weeps. Now, what's interesting is that this prophecy comes from Jeremiah 31. and Jeremiah 31 not only speaks about Rachel weeping, but also speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit, the abundance of the Holy Spirit, and a new covenant.

It's remarkable, isn't it, that the prophecy comes from a chapter that marks a dark moment in the history of God's revelation, but also marks the brightest moment in revelation.

[21 : 45] tears and smiles like us he knew. There are tears here, there are tears here at the loss of life, this brutality, but the Jeremiah context reminds us that those who sow in tears will reap with joy, that there is another day, this is not it.

I love the stories about the responses of Martin Luther King during the civil rights era. If a church was burnt down, he would go or send people to preach and pray there, because he said, we don't want the violence to be the last word at this spot.

And of course the wonderful thing is, the violence is never the last word, is it? The violence against these boys in Bethlehem, the violence against the Son of God, the violence of the cross is not the last word.

There is a resurrection, there is a day of Pentecost, there is a gift of the Spirit, there is the birth of the church. What do they say? That the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

When wicked rulers shed the blood of the innocent, sometimes they seed the growth of the church unwittingly by God's grace and kindness.

[23 : 17] There are many tears, aren't there, in what was the era, the arena rather, of the biblical story. Iranian tears, Iraqi tears, Syrian tears, refugee children, children running from violence,

running from fear.

Rachel continues to weep. Rachel continues to weep for her children. And it reminds us, doesn't it, that this prophecy is cited because God is aware of our tears.

He notes them. The psalmist says he collects them in his book or bottle. You know, sometimes we feel that we're weeping in secret. Sometimes we think that our deepest pain is seen by no one. But that's never the case, is it? The God who promises one day to wipe away our tears is able to do so because he notices them. He recognizes that the world is not full of wall to wall sunshine. The world is not full of cloudless days. A little bit of rain falls into the life of every human being. [24 : 39] And sometimes it seems to pour into our life in buckets fulls. Rachel weeping for her children.

But we need to recognize that God's promises are not wrecked by the plans of evil people. Jesus is at the heart of the veil of tears.

Carol says, tears and smiles like us he knew. And we know the famous statement in John chapter 11, Jesus wept. Jesus shed tears. He's the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. We sing about Bethlehem. God identifies with us in our pain.

We need to believe that don't we? We need to believe that in Bethlehem. We need to believe that in Brighton. We need to believe that in Lansing. In Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, China.

[25 : 51] We need to believe that. Believers meeting today in Hong Kong. We need to believe that. I love this statement. The Son of God pitched his tent in the darkness of our valley.

It's like a bridgement of John chapter 1 verse 14. But it's important to remember that Jesus was born into our world.

Jesus was not born in a BMI hospital. He was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth with his name down for a place at Eton. Jesus was born in the muck and mire of our world.

And before he was even conscious of it as a baby boy, a toddler, he is the object of a death threat. He has a frenzied rush to the border to become a refugee in a foreign land.

the word of God pitched his tent in the darkness of our valley. And of course, he did that in order that he might bring light and hope and meaning and purpose.

[27 : 15] Christmas stands under the shadow of the Easter cross God because Jesus came to meet the darkness head on by his grace.

So this is not the end, says Matthew in his gospel. This threat, the tears, the blood, the pain, this is not the end.

So Joseph, verse 21, got up, took the child and his mother and came into the land of Israel. There came the moment when Joseph realizes that the threat is gone.

The threatening king who tried to kill Jesus is gone and he needs now to return to Israel. This is not the end of the story.

There's another chapter in the story. Hold on, God says to Joseph, because God knows best. Someone preaching on this said that we have a God who has an excellent GPS or sat nav.

[28 : 34] God has an excellent GPS. He knows where we are. I find it amazing. I often get lost in my car and having a phone which allows you to track where you are and search for where you're going.

It's just a godsend to me. It's saved me so much time, money, petrol. It's probably made the environment better. It's astonishing.

You look at your phone and you put in the destination and they say your location. You put your location and the map comes up and there you are and there you're going and the direction is clear. Remarkable. God's GPS is pinpoint perfect. He knows where we are. He knows where we need to get and he's able to get us there.

There's a final fulfilled prophecy which is a kind of strange one. If you notice that the language of the fulfilled prophecy is quite different.

[29 : 44] In verse 15 it says that which is fulfilled through the prophet without naming anyone. In verse 17 that which was said through the prophet Jeremiah something very specific.

In verse 23 he went and lived in a town called Nazareth so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets very unspecific. He will be called the Nazarene and it's kind of unspecific because it's really difficult to pinpoint where this comes from in the Old Testament.

And maybe Matthew was saying this is the gist of Old Testament teaching. Some of the candidates for this would be the phrase in Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 about a shoot will come up from the stem of Jesse.

a branch from his root shall bear fruit and there's air a shoot coming up from the roots. David's roots David's town goes to Nazareth because he is a Nazarene.

He is the Nazarene. Others say that the Nazarene was someone who was particularly set apart for God and God's activity. and it's a reference not only to the promise of someone from David's line coming to be a fresh hope for God's people but also the set apart one, the one who is particularly set apart to fulfill his work as saviour in our world.

[31 : 26] What a remarkable thing. God can speak hundreds of years before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and speak with such detail about the trajectory of his early life and his purposes in his life.

Hold on. God knows what he is doing. A friend of mine said that sometimes it appears when we look at our life that our life is being scribbled!

at random! You know like someone doing a plan on the back of a cigarette packet! But when we read scripture we recognize that our history is not scribbled at random!

It's firmly written by the hand of God! God knows what he is doing! God knows what he is about! In your life!

The lonely life! The deserted life! The pressured life! The puzzled life! The broken life!

[32 : 43] The tear filled life! He knows what he is doing! So, the church here, you think about the coming year, it's kind of both old and new, isn't it?

you've got something quite new, you've got a new administrator, you've got someone new working as a church worker, but you've got someone coming back half time who's quite familiar to the church.

I think you know his name, his name is Phil. people. Now, I guess that would be a good and interesting arrangement for the coming year, but, hey, you can't keep renewing that Passover year, can you?

Presumably something else needs to happen. You know, what's going to happen? Well, at this stage, we don't know all the details, do we? We're at this stage of the guidance, but we believe that the next stage will become plain, and the next stage too.

We're going to be thinking a bit about that next week, about how God helps us to identify a leader. It's kind of a pretty decisive question, isn't it? Pretty important question.

[34 : 04] But what we're seeing today is that God knows what he's doing. He's able to navigate even through the most choppy waters and bring about his purposes.

He does that in the story that we've just read, and he can do that in your story too, individually and as a church.

And this story says to us, particularly those who are in pain, that Emmanuel, God with us, is with us, even where the pain is most severe.

Praise his name. Amen. Let's pray together. I trace out my memory, oh God, stories that have been fashioned on this old road between Egypt and Israel, stories of Abraham and of Joseph and Moses, stories of faith and blessing and salvation.

Thank you for including me in these stories. Jesus, you are shepherd, you are advocate, you are mediator, you are bridegroom, you are conqueror, you are lion, you are lamb, you are sacrifice, you are manna, you are smitten rock, you are living water, you are food, you are drink, you are good and abundant land, you are Sabbath, you are new moon, you are jubilee, you are new wine, you are feast, you are aroma, you are anchor, you are wisdom, you are peace, you are comfort, you are healer, you are joy, you are glory, you are power, you are strength, you are wealth, you are victory, you are redemption, you are prophet, you are priest, you are king, you are kinsman redeemer, you are teacher, you are guide, you are liberator, you are deliverer, you are redeemer, you are teacher you are guide you are liberator you are deliverer you are prince you are captain you are vision you are sight you are beloved you are way you are truth and you are life you are author you are finisher you are beginning and you are end you are age and you are eternity you are all in all Jesus you are the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief your tears bring us joy you wept in order that our tears could be wiped away we pray for those who weep today in loss bereavement pain frustrating circumstances persecution comfort those who mourn praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles so that we

can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from god but just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of christ so also our comfort abounds through christ our times are in your hands and we believe that your gps is reliable underneath are the everlasting arms we commit ourselves to them we commit ourselves individually as a church as a nation in the world to the everlasting arms and the tender heart that is behind them in jesus name amen