

The Suffering Servant

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0:00] Good morning, church. Our sermon text is Matthew chapter 2, verses 13 through 23.

That's page 758 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there with us. We're taking these Sundays leading up to Christmas to follow the story of Jesus' birth from the gospel of Matthew.

Last week we saw how the wise men came and worshipped Jesus as their king. And today, we'll see what happens next. Let's pray as we come to God's word together.

Oh, Father, we thank you that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have run this race before us. Father, we thank you that your word has spoken to generation after generation after generation of your church.

So, Lord, it is with confidence and with expectation that we come again to your word this morning, trusting that you will make good on your promise, that where two or three are gathered, there you are in the midst.

[1:21] Father, that is our desire.

Father, we pray that you would meet with us, open our minds and our hearts to understand your word, to repent and believe you and your word, and to go forth today living life shaped by it.

In Jesus' name, amen. Matthew chapter 2, verses 13 through 23. Now, when they, that is the wise men, had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Rise, 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.

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Out of Egypt, I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

[2:53] Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation. Rachel, weeping for her children.

She refused to be comforted because they are no more. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.

And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Well, on the surface, our text today seems to be answering a very straightforward question. The question is this, if God foretold that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, how can Christians call Jesus the Messiah when he so clearly came from Nazareth?

[4:13] Well, what we see here is that God providentially protected his son Jesus from the hatred and violence of wicked rulers. Though born in Bethlehem, as God foretold, Jesus was forced to be raised in Nazareth.

Because of the threat of violence against him as a child. But there's an even deeper question that our text addresses. And it is the question of whether God, the almighty, holy creator of all things, the one true God of the Bible, whether God actually really cares for us.

And cares for us not in some distant general way, but whether God actually cares for us in a real intimate way, deep down in the nitty gritty of our broken lives, even down into our suffering, even down into our shame.

Does God know what that's like? Does God care for us with real compassion? And the surprising answer of Matthew chapter 2, verses 13 through 23, is yes.

In ways even deeper than you or I had ever imagined, our suffering and even our shame are not foreign to God.

[5:52] Look again at our text. First, we see here that Jesus, the Messiah, who we learned in chapter 1, was God with us, incarnate.

The first thing we see is that Jesus, the Messiah, enters into our suffering and shame. He enters into it. In verses 13 through 15, we're told that after the wise men depart, an angel of the Lord warns Joseph that King Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.

Herod, history tells us, was a violent man. And the actions here are completely in keeping with what we know of his character. Not willing to have any threats to his power, he seeks to destroy this would-be child king.

And so, Joseph takes the child and Mary and they flee to Egypt, a place where Jewish refugees would often go when escaping political turmoil or when avoiding famine or drought.

Now, the UN currently has estimated that there are over 70 million people today who are displaced because of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.

[7:06] 70 million. And what we see here is that the earliest years of Jesus' life were spent in the shoes of the displaced.

Our Savior came to earth and lived as a political refugee, seeking asylum and protection in a foreign land.

Now, it's likely that Joseph found fellow Jews to live with in Egypt. There was a sizable Jewish community there. But the fact still remains. Our Lord entered into human suffering.

On the flight to Egypt, there was fear. There was escape. There was a long journey. And there was the uncertainty of not knowing what or who they would find.

Many people come here to New Haven having been displaced. Many of you know about the work of IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services.

[8:11] They help people every year from Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, helping them to get the support and services they need to become self-sufficient and resettled here in their new home.

I wonder, has it ever struck you that when you learn the stories of these families, when you serve families like these, you are catching a glimpse of your Savior's earliest experiences on earth?

But the truth that's here in this part of Matthew 2 applies to all of us, not just to those of us who've been displaced. We all face many trials, many unforeseen sorrows.

I wonder what part of your life are you tempted to think that God just doesn't seem to understand? Where does his knowing care seem absent?

Conflict with family members? The experience of poverty or homelessness? Sadness at the loss of a friend? Betrayal? Fatigue? But then we come to the Gospels and we read them for ourselves.

[9:33] And there we find that not just in Jesus' birth, but throughout his life, Jesus entered into our suffering and our shame. He identified fully with his people.

His people went down to Egypt, so did he. His people experienced fierce temptation in the wilderness, so did he. His people were oppressed and persecuted by the world powers that be, so was he.

This identification with his people was so complete that in verse 15, Matthew quotes the Old Testament prophet Hosea, chapter 11, verse 1. And there Hosea is retelling the story of Israel's sojourn in Exodus from Egypt.

And Israel in the Old Testament is often metaphorically called God's son. And here Hosea says, God brought them out of Egypt in the Exodus. And now Jesus, Israel's Messiah, God's true son, so deeply represents and identifies with his people that he can now fulfill that text, going down into Egypt himself and coming back again.

I wonder when you are hurting, when you are sorrowful, yes, there are times when you call out for answers to the question why, but deep down, isn't what your heart longs for, isn't what we really want, is for someone to be present with us, to walk with us through the valley, to know that we are not alone, to know that perhaps in our own Egypts, when we are running and when we are afraid, someone might be there with us.

[11:26] Be with us and sit by our hospital bed as we battle illness or give us a shoulder to lean on as we miss our loved ones or to hold our hand when we are afraid.

This is what Matthew is showing us here, friends. God, incarnate in his son Jesus, is present with us even in suffering, even in shame.

And this should open up for us great permission and invitation in our prayer and our communion with God to go to him corporately and personally in our sorrows, knowing that he cares and that he knows.

There's an old song that we don't sing a lot here at Trinity, but I think it captures this well. It says, what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

[12:45] Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Are we weak and heavy laden, encumbered with a load of care?

Precious Savior, still our refuge. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer.

In his arms, he'll take and shield you. You will find a solace there. Jesus has entered into our suffering and our shame that we might find a solace in him.

Christian, take advantage of that solace. Go to him in prayer. But there's more. Jesus hasn't just entered into our suffering and shame.

[13:59] The second thing we see here in Matthew 2 is that he will also one day put an end to our suffering and shame. In Matthew 16 through 18, we have here recounted perhaps the darkest moment in the Christmas story.

Herod infuriated that the wise men refused to go back and tell him where he might find the child lashes out in rage. Not willing to risk any threat to his power, he orders the death of every male child two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding region.

Now, it's hard to estimate how many children died in Bethlehem at the hands of this wicked ruler on that night. Some speculate that it could have been a dozen or more given estimates of the population in first century Bethlehem.

But what sense are we supposed to make of this account? Psalm 2 says, why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain against the Lord and against his anointed?

The Bible is honest with the fact that there is evil in the world and that in this fallen world there will be violence and injustice and the church will often be subject to that violence and injustice.

[15:25] The book of Acts shows us time and again how the church faces persecution and even martyrdom for Christ's sake. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, was written to the persecuted churches at the end of the first century to remind them that the powers of this world will revolt against the growth of the gospel the history of the church shows the same whether it be the martyrs of the first, second, and third centuries or the martyrs of the 20 and 21st centuries.

Let us not be ignorant of the fact that identification with Christ like these first martyrs in Bethlehem will often bring the hatred of the world and its rulers.

And yet this hatred is not the last word. Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah, Rachel weeping for her children.

And while this text from Jeremiah 31 written in the heartbreak of the Babylonian exile, while it seems simply to give voice to the tears of God's people throughout the centuries, it does that but there's more.

Because if we go back and we read Jeremiah 13, there's also a message of hope. The verses surrounding the one that Matthew quotes here in this chapter of Jeremiah 31 tell of how God would bring his people home from exile and how he would make a new covenant and cover all their sins in forgiveness.

[17:14] What Matthew seems to be saying then is that the tears of the mothers and fathers in Bethlehem are the tears of exile.

The final tears before the Messiah would come and make for us a new covenant and bring us home. And Jesus did just that.

You see, the death of Jesus wasn't completely avoided in Matthew 2. It was simply postponed. At the still young age of 33, Jesus would be killed at the hands of jealous political and religious authorities.

the full rage of the world against the Lord and his anointed would come thrashing down on Jesus.

But his death would not be that of a mere martyr dying for a good cause. No, the death of Jesus would be utterly and completely unique.

[18:30] his death would be the one true sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. Being truly human, Jesus could take our place.

Being truly God, Jesus could pay the penalty of our sin in full. Such that when all of our anger and hatred and jealousy came crashing down on Jesus at the cross, Christ was able to swallow up that in himself and extinguish it.

But more than that, it was the wrath of God against sin that could come down on him in our place so that we could be forgiven.

And to demonstrate that this sacrifice was acceptable, Jesus was raised on the third day, breaking the power of death and offering forgiveness and new life to all who trust in him, that finally the last tears of exile could be shed at the cross and the exile could end.

And with his death and resurrection comes the promise that though tears will come in this age, one day all tears will be wiped away for good.

[19:53] You see, God doesn't just know our suffering and shame. He's done something about it. He's put in motion a plan accomplished through his son that will gather up our broken humanity and raise it to new everlasting life where death and sorrow are no more.

When Christ returns in glory, death will be destroyed, injustice will be ended, and creation will be released from its bondage to decay because Christ has gone down into the tears of Rachel weeping for her children.

He can come up again and bring life. Now, that doesn't mean, church, that we should not weep now.

Most definitely we should. There will still be occasions that are right for tears and weeping in this age. the remnants of death and sin still abound.

Rachel is still weeping for her children. But as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, we do not weep as those who have no hope.

[21:10] I wonder, friend, do you have that kind of hope? Perhaps you're here this morning and you're not a Christian. I wonder, in your spiritual searching, have you found the kind of hope that allows you to neither deny the reality and the awfulness of death, but also not to despair in the face of it?

Many spiritual paths will tell you that death is simply an illusion or that death is simply natural, and yet, doesn't our heart sort of revolt against that? have you found a hope that allows you to neither deny the reality of death nor despair in the face of it?

Let me suggest to you that only Christianity, only faith in the risen Lord Jesus who went through death and rose bodily in defeat of death can give you that sort of hope.

hope. And that sort of hope is yours for the taking if you will take him.

You can have the kind of hope that gives you courage in the face of death and also allows you to say that it is wrong and it is an enemy that will one day be defeated.

[22:38] Now Christians, I know many of us are facing sorrows of many kinds. Don't lose heart.

Remember that your Savior has entered into your deepest sorrows and promises one day to bring them to an end. Though weeping may last for the night, the psalmist says, joy comes in the morning.

How can it not be so for us who know the risen Jesus that joy will come in the morning? And so Matthew shows us that Christ enters into our suffering and shame and will one day end our suffering and shame.

But third, he shows us that Jesus can even redeem our suffering and shame. In verses 19 through 23, Matthew tells us how God led Joseph to settle in Nazareth.

Now, in the first century, Nazareth wasn't known for anything. It was insignificant. It was marginal.

[23:52] It was obscure. In fact, it was so insignificant that it was ridiculed. In the Gospel of John, when Nathaniel, who eventually comes to follow Jesus, first hears that Jesus is from Nazareth, he responds, can anything good come from Nazareth?

Fill in the blank from your own experience of nowhere's bills that you have either come from or been familiar with. I won't say them from the pulpit because I'll get in trouble afterwards. You can fill them in, in your own mind.

Can anything good come from that place? And when the early Christians were called that Nazarene sect, it was not a compliment.

So you see, Jesus grew up in a forgotten town, far away from the halls of power and prestige and success in a place despised in the eyes of the world.

God. But friends, that was God's plan. Matthew says that Jesus lived in Nazareth so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

[25 : 15] Now you can scour the Old Testament and you will never find a verse that says he will be called a Nazarene. But it's clear, isn't it, when you compare this verse to the other verses in chapter 2 where Matthew's quoting a prophet, that Matthew isn't trying to quote a particular prophet.

Rather, it's pretty clear he's giving a summary statement of what, as you see there, the prophets, plural, foretold. Matthew's giving a synthesis statement of a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament, throughout the Psalms and the prophets.

What is this thing that the prophets foretold about the Messiah? Well, the theme that Matthew is pulling on here is that the Messiah, despite the expectations of many, would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief, that he would be despised and rejected, that he would be forsaken, that he would be a servant, even a suffering servant.

The passage that we read early in our service, Isaiah 53, is perhaps the best-known example of this, where the one who would come to be our king would also know our griefs and be rejected by men.

Or in the language of the first century, he would be a Nazarene, forgotten and despised. But here is the mystery.

[26 : 55] The mystery is that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. At first, small and seemingly insignificant.

You see, friends, God delights to use the marginal places. He delights to use the places that are despised in the eyes of the world to make his glory known.

It's not the strong or the powerful or the wise or the successful that God needs to advance his kingdom. Just the opposite. Paul says to the church in Corinth, you know, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, and not many were powerful, and not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

And God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. And God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

God delights to take those places in our life that are weak and that are shameful and that are broken and through those things to bring about his greatest work.

[28 : 24] The Messiah lived in Nazareth in forgotten obscurity for 30 years so that we might know that when we are weak, weak, then we are strong.

Those things that we consider our greatest liability, our greatest weakness, the things that we would never dream to put on a resume, the things in our lives that we don't put on social media, all of our Nazareth's, so to say, so often those are the things that God will use and those are the places where his grace will pour forth.

Friends, let us not judge with earthly judgment. Nazareth was politically insignificant, but it was theologically very significant.

You wonder, don't you, can God use me? Can he work through me? But I'm too broken and I'm too insignificant and I'm too weak, but here God says, my grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in your weakness.

God didn't launch his kingdom from Jerusalem or from Rome, but from Nazareth. perhaps you're in a season of trial right now, a particularly trying moment in your marriage or in your work or in your family or in your health or just in your inner emotional state and you think, what good could come of this?

[30 : 25] and yet there, in your weakness, God is present, caring for you, knowing you, drawing himself to you, revealing himself to you.

He is present redeeming this time, redeeming this period of suffering, of shame, of trial for your good and for your glory so that you can know him.

And so we ask the question, does God care for us in our suffering, in our shame, is God there? Oh, friends, what good news we have.

That Jesus has borne our sorrows, he's acquainted with our griefs and losses, he knows our every weakness, but more than that, he's redeeming them, and he's bringing us to the day when our tears will be no more.

Let's pray. Oh, Jesus, we think about this morning, all the places in our lives where we feel weak, where we feel embarrassed, and Lord, in these silent moments before you, we confess that it is ultimately our sin that brings us our deepest sense of shame before you, that we've willingly sought other gods and other goods in your place, and yet, Lord, mystery of mysteries, you, the perfect one, would come and take on our imperfection and be crushed so that we might be healed.

[32 : 43] Lord, that you would be willing to have the iniquity of us all laid upon you so that we could know the lightness of your righteousness and light and life.

Oh, Lord, if you can take care of our sin, if you can redeem us even there, what can you not redeem? What can you not know, and what can you not handle?

So, Lord, we entrust all these things into your hands praying that you would grant us courage and that you would grant us your dignity for the facing of these hours.

In your mighty name we pray. Amen.