

Sermon: Joseph of Nazareth Is a Single-Issue Evangelical: The Father of Jesus, the Cries of the Helpless, and Change You Can Believe In (Matt 2:13-23)¹

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I played a cow in my first grade Christmas pageant. And I had more lines than the kid who played Joseph. The cattle were lowing and the babies were awake, but Joseph never really had much to say. He seemed to be not much more than a prop for Mary and the doll in the

manger, the one who merely shrugged his shoulders and stood beside her when the innkeeper said there was no room in the inn. But the way in which Joseph was portrayed in this play was not altogether uncommon. For many of us think of Joseph as nothing more than a bit character in the biblical storyline. Matthew, however, portrays him as something vastly different than that in this text. He presents Joseph as a character in a story—a story that has played out before and is

essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Matthew informs us in the first chapter that Joseph was a just and righteous man; the Holy Spirit even commends his life and faith. We see this same walk of faith in the writing of one of Joseph's other sons, James, who was the pastor of the church at Jerusalem and writes about religion that is "pure and undefiled," that visits "orphans and widows in their affliction," (Jas 1:27) and speaks of faith as not merely agreeing to a set of facts but as something that lives and breathes and carries itself out into life. What I want to ask is, could it be that the kind of tumult around us as we carry out the mission of the church, as we seek to reclaim and expand upon the legacy that has been given before, could that same kind of tumult have surrounded this man Joseph? And could it be that the walk of faith that God commanded and commended in Joseph of Nazareth is the very walk of faith that he still calls us to today?

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THE WALK OF FAITH MEANS WRESTLING WITH DEMONS OF RAGE

From the very beginning of this story we read of Herod. He was the ruler, the one who had stargazers enter into his court and tell him of an ancient prophecy that was being fulfilled. The text tells us that Herod outsourced some Bible scholars to look through the ancient scrolls and tell him where this promised king was to be born, and they identified the location as Bethlehem. Matthew also tells us that when Herod received word of this coming Kingdom, he understood something of what that meant. He understood that these promises meant that this king who was to come would rule over a global, galactic empire and would have no rivals to his throne. Herod, then, is troubled—and all Jerusalem with him—and this trouble enacts itself in murderous rage. What Herod does not know, however, is that as he orders in these consultants and commands that all the male children be executed, he is actually playing a role that has already been played. Herod here is playing the role of Pharaoh, who reacted in exactly the same way.

When Pharaoh saw the people of Israel being fruitful and multiplying—experiencing exactly what God promised, “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring” (Gen 22:17)—he sees it as a curse. Why is this? Because Pharaoh seems himself as God and the expansion of the Israelites—the people of God—is a threat to his own kingship. This expansion threatens Pharaoh’s plans, and he murders infants to stop it. Herod does the same thing.

Though Herod had probably stood with others in his regal court praying, “Oh God, please send us the Messiah. Please keep your promises to Israel. Please send us the King that has been promised,” when news of the Promised One being born actually comes to him, Herod’s response is rage. Herod comes face to face with Jesus, and his response is murder. Yet the Scripture tells us that this is always the case. The Psalms speak of the nations that are in tumult, raging against the anointed One (Ps 2:1-3). The presence of Jesus brings about the kind

of rage among those who are threatened by Jesus’ kingship. Herod and Pharaoh rage against Jesus in particular and babies in general, and when it is Jesus vs. the self, throughout the whole storyline of Scripture babies are the ones who get caught in the crossfire. It is always this way. Moses warns against the giving of infants to Molech (Lev 18:21). The Prophets speak against those who come against the people with babies in their wombs (Hos 13:16). History is riddled with the corpses of babies, and it happens here again.

As Herod seeks to wipe out these infants to protect his throne, Scripture presents this as an act of horror. Why is this? Because at work here is not only Herod. John tells us in the book of Revelation that there is a great cosmic struggle that has been going on from the moment God said to the serpent that an offspring of Eve’s would crush his head (Gen 3:15). From that moment, John tells us, this dragon has been raging against the woman and her child. And isn’t it true that everywhere throughout Scripture and the history of the world there is present a hostility towards life and particularly towards children? This is because the serpent sees what many of us fail to see in the birth of children—blessing and life. The serpent sees in the birth of children the kind of dependent faith that Jesus says images the kingdom of God. Most of all, the serpent sees among “the least of these” the brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus.

Today is no different. There is, yet again, hostility coming towards human babies, and it is happening in exactly the same way—by the Prince of the Power of the Air exciting evil passions. Satan uses Pharaoh’s lust for military stability that says, “I don’t want another king,” in exactly the same way he uses a Southern Baptist deacon’s lust to maintain his reputation to load his teenage daughter into a car and drive her under the dark of night to a clinic in a nearby city so no one will ever know she is pregnant.

The blood of children flows. And the text gives us an unlikely demon-wrestler: a day-laborer from the hick town of Galilee of Nazareth, some-

one who stands against the dark rage against life and rescues this child—Joseph. You see, Herod’s day is not much different than our own. Right now, as you and I gather in this place, there are babies without names labeled as “medical waste” just miles from where we sit. As we sit comfortably in this room, there are little girls across the world in Asia who are waiting on the knock of a door and an American businessman to whom they have just been sold. As these words are spoken, there are children in this very city who are looking at bruises all over their arms as they hear their mother or father explaining to the social worker why this “will never happen again.” Brothers and sisters, these things are not incidental. There is a rage against children that is bigger than sociology or history; it is about spiritual warfare. Joseph sees the darkness around him and is obedient to the word of the Lord, a word that draws him and drives him toward life.

At the same time, in the midst of all this tumult in the present day, there are churches and evangelical leaders who are saying to us, “We ought not to be single-issue evangelicals. We ought to be concerned about more than simply abortion.” Which means, of course, that we ought to be willing to support and vote for candidates who will support legalized abortion, who will deny the personhood of children who are still in the womb, because we resonate with them on other issues. “After all,” many of them say, “abortion has been going on so long, and it still hasn’t been stopped.” Many of the people saying this are pastors who are in a desperate quest to say to their congregations, “I’m not Jerry Falwell.” Many of them even believe it missional to speak to people while silencing or blunting a witness about the life of children so that they can reach them with the gospel and bring them in line with all these other issues later. Yet a pastor who will tell you something like that is simply repeating the same mantras as did some pastor in a powder blue leisure suit in the late 1960’s about divorce. And how did that work out? It certainly did not lead to a revival of the gospel. Instead,

that reasoning led to a generation of people who are now unable to understand what the Scripture means when it says the union between a husband and wife is like the union of Christ to his church.

Likewise, in our day, how are we to speak of Jesus who gives us “life abundantly” in a world that hates life when we act as if the sword given to the state in Romans 13 to be wielded against the wicked—one, bear in mind, that we the people of a democratic republic, bear responsibility for—is wielded instead against the innocent. Some people will tell us that there are many other issues—economics, global warming—issues I am very worried about too. But previous generations have used that same argument. Previous generations of preachers have stood in the pulpit and preached until they were red in the face about card-playing, movie-going, tobacco-smoking, and a thousand other issues, but would not speak to the fact that there were African-American brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ swinging in the trees. And the judgment of God lies upon that.

Joseph sees the work of the evil one through divine revelation, yet in faith he obediently carries out the mission given to him by his Lord, even in the midst of all this tumult. I wonder if we are willing to do the same in our own prayers, in our own tears when we know that aborted babies cannot cry, “Abba.” Indeed, one day we will stand in judgment and be told, “as you have done to one of the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). Joseph is an unlikely demon-fighter. He is not celebrated. He is simply told, “Take this child. Protect him from Herod’s sword. Go into Egypt,” and, in faith, Joseph walks.

THE WALK OF FAITH IMAGES A FATHER’S CARE

Part of the reason, it seems, that it is so difficult for us to see what the text is saying about Joseph is because we have spent so much time emphasizing what Joseph is not. We rightly believe in the virginal conception of Jesus. We know that Joseph is not Jesus’ biological father, that there is not a

strand of Joseph's DNA on Golgotha's cross. But too often we speak of Joseph in the way in which we might speak about a political scandal: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Yet there is so much more to Joseph.

Yes, Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus, but he takes Jesus into his life and home. He takes Mary as his wife and this child with him. Joseph is the one who names Jesus according to the instruction of the angel, says Matthew. Joseph is the first human face to which our Lord would have said, "Abba." Joseph would have taught Jesus Christ how to saw wood. Joseph would have taught Jesus how to recite Deuteronomy 8 in Hebrew, the very words which Jesus would later recite to the Evil One in his presence. Most importantly, it is through Joseph that Matthew traces Jesus' heritage all the way back to David and to Abraham. Joseph's faith and his righteousness is the way in which he takes this woman and protects this child.

Joseph provides for them, and Matthew says that as Joseph takes them to Egypt it is to fulfill the ancient word, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Matt 2:15; Hos 11:1). Of course, you look at the text in Hosea from which this comes and say that this is referencing something long past. It is speaking of Israel being brought to Egypt and then being delivered from there during the Exodus. And that's exactly right. This, too, is precisely Matthew's point—that Israel being delivered out of Egypt is a copy in advance of what God is doing with Jesus Christ. Israel—the one that has been promised to be the light of the nations—is in danger of starving to death. And God provides for Israel by putting them in a sojourn for a time in Egypt where they can be fed and provided for. God puts one of their brothers in a position where he is able to look out for his people, saying that he will care for them and their little ones (Gen 47:23-24). And this man's name is Joseph.

Hundreds of years later God uses another Joseph to take this child into Egypt until the threat of the sword is over. God then compares Joseph's protection to his own fatherly protection and

deliverance of Israel.

Brothers and sisters, with the tumult and rage that is all around us, we must insist that a just government recognize the personhood of unborn children. We must not flinch in insisting that this is the case, but that itself is not enough. The protection that Joseph images here is a personal and familial kind of provision. It is like the kind of fatherhood our heavenly Father displays—a fighting fatherhood. This kind of fatherhood rips open seas, drowns armies, and fights for the vulnerable and the orphans. Please do not miss how counter-cultural Joseph's act is here. His betrothed comes to him and says, "I am pregnant." And Joseph's response isn't, "Well, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." Rather, Joseph responds like any good country song: "I've been cheated on/She did me wrong." And when Joseph moves to Egypt he is doing something extremely significant. That's because you don't just move to Egypt like someone today might move to London or Little Rock. When Joseph moves to Egypt he is foregoing all of his economic security. He is walking away from the carpentry business that has been handed down, perhaps from generations back. He is walking away from all his relationships. And had he simply done what he initially wanted to do—quietly divorce this woman and allow the child to be slaughtered by Herod—he could have lived to ripe old age as a father of that city, revered by everyone. Instead, Joseph ended his life with his neighbors saying, "Joseph, he's the one who got into trouble with that young woman way back when. What a shame." But instead of seeking praise at his funeral, Joseph does something unusual: he protects the orphans and the widows; he sees the task of fatherhood as more important than the self. That is immensely difficult for all of us to see.

I once actually heard myself saying these words to my children, "Would you please leave me alone so I can finish this book on adoption!?" This message, though, is not just those who are parents, for Scripture speaks of a fatherhood within the church. If we are going to walk

in the walk of faith imaged in this man, then we are going to need pastors who see themselves as fathers of a flock and do not simply leave when trouble comes. We are going to need older generations who are less concerned with protecting their own prerogatives and more concerned with pouring their lives into the children of the congregation. There must be evident in the people of God a demonstration of the same thing that Joseph is asked to do—to walk in the kind of faith that protects and provides, that nourishes and cherishes as does God.

THE WALK OF FAITH HERALDS A KINGDOM'S DAWN

Notice, finally, that when Joseph leaves and takes the child the text says that this fulfills what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, “a voice was heard in Ramah” (Matt 2:18; Jer 31:15). In speaking of this city Ramah that was the weigh station for the people of Israel as they were being taken out into captivity in Babylon, the text calls forward the sound of the wails of women who have lost their children. The text is fulfilled here in Matthew, for she (Israel) is refusing to be comforted because her children are no more. But this is not a text of despair. Even the text from Jeremiah comes from a passage that says, “There is hope for your future,” for “the time is coming ... when I will make a new covenant ... not like the covenant I made with your forefathers” (Jer 31:17, 31-32).

Yet even in the midst of all this tragedy and murderous rage, in the midst of all these corpses, there is a light that is coming out of Galilee. Joseph returns home, and God directs him toward Nazareth so that it will be fulfilled that he, Jesus, will be a Nazarene. There is life coming out of Galilee to draw the nations to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, what is probably the saddest part about the embarrassment that people feel about speaking against hostility to children is that we are losing the opportunity to preach the gospel to those who are despairing. There are women in our congregations who have faced the

guilt and agony of abortion. The Scriptures do not allow us to remain silent. Indeed, they tell us to say to that woman, or to the man who has paid for the abortion, or to the parents or friends that have encouraged it: “If you are in Christ, if you are crucified and raised with him, there is now no condemnation for you.” The moaning and anguish present in Ramah is comforted in Nazareth. The question for us, then, of whether we are truly pro-life or not, has very little to do with how many signs are in our yards or what bumper stickers we put on our cars. Indeed, it may be the case that after this election the abortion debate will be over in this country politically.

But even if that's the case, it's not over. Our churches are to follow in the walk of faith, which means that—like Joseph walking away from stability and comfort—our churches must be different, they must be counter-cultural, the kind of place where the teenage mother is welcomed and loved, where abandoned children are received, and where a culture that is in love with death can come and hear a message saying that life is better than death because there is a man, an ex-corpse, a former-fetus, who is standing as the ruler over all the nations and the universe. And he is not dead anymore. What we must have is a church in which the gospel we give is the kind of gospel that leads people out of death and despair and toward the kind of life that is found in confessing a name—a name that was first spoken by human lips by a day-laborer in Nazareth, “Jesus is Lord.”

If we follow this kind of pure and undefiled religion, it doesn't mean we will be shrill. It doesn't mean we will be culture-warriors. It doesn't mean we'll be belligerent. It will mean that we will have churches that are so strikingly different, that maybe in ten or fifteen years the most odd and counter-cultural thing a lost person may hear in your church is not, “Amen,” but is instead the sounds of babies crying in the nursery. And hearing the oddness of that sound, when they look around at the place in which all of the Lord Jesus' brothers and sisters are welcomed,

protected, and loved, the place in which the lies of a murderous and appetite-driven dragon are denied, the lost person might say, “What is the sound of all these cries?” And maybe we’ll be able to say with our forefather Joseph, “that’s the sound of life. That’s the sound of hope. That’s the sound of change.”

You might even say, it’s “change you can believe in.”

ENDNOTES

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