

December 31, 2006

**Series:** Advent 2006  
**Sermon:** *Out of Egypt*  
**Scripture:** Matthew 2:13-23  
**Speaker:** Pastor Dick High

### Introduction:

As we begin today I invite you to join me in a time of reflection encompassing the last 6 months of 2006. My specific interest is on the trips that you took within that timeframe. Here are five questions that I have in mind:

- What was your destination?
- What was the distance you traveled?
- What was your mode of transportation?
- How long did you stay?
- Why did you go?

Each of these questions is relevant to today's sermon. The eleven verses in Matthew 2:13-23 relate details about a trip taken by Joseph, Mary, and their young child, Jesus. Here is how we can answer the five questions in relation their trip:

- Their destination was Egypt (so they actually travel to another country).
- They traveled a minimum of 75 mile. That distance would take them from the area of Bethlehem to the border of Egypt. It is reasonable to estimate that they more likely could have traveled up to 200 miles, a journey of at least 10 days.
- Their mode of transportation would have been riding a donkey or walking (perhaps both); with someone always carrying the child.
- Regarding the length of their stay, it is estimated to be approximately 6 months.
- Why did they go? They went, and returned, at the direction of an angel which Joseph received in dreams!

These answers do provide an initial summary of the passage. However, there is additional investigation that is certainly warranted. So I invite you to join me in probing further.

This passage naturally unfolds in three primary scenes. I intend to follow those in our investigation.

### General Overview

- Departure to Egypt – verses 13-15

*When they (the Magi) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

These verses tell us a number of things! First, they make a connection with the previous verses. Second, they make us aware of what the angel tells Joseph. That message is brief, yet specific. It promises later communication. And it states the reason for the request. Third, we learn that Joseph complies with both requests – to leave and to stay. Finally, we are told that there is a relevant prophetic statement (from the Old Testament) that applies to what occurred!

Even if we were not familiar with the verses that follow we can conclude that we're looking at a very serious situation. A king named Herod is intent on killing the child Jesus! The commanded relocation to Egypt is the specified means of escape. Information that we will consider later will reveal that sadly, Herod's actions are not surprising. In fact, they are both incredibly and horrifically consistent with what we know about him! Yet, it is beyond a reasonable expectation to think that either Joseph or Mary would know of his specific intent in this situation. Jesus was in danger, and God intervenes. He does so through an angel speaking to Joseph in a dream. The word "appeared" in verse 13 conveys the sense of manifesting oneself or becoming visible. I believe God is emphasizing both by sight and sound the importance of the message being given to Joseph. Joseph's response, both its implied quickness and their nighttime departure, reveals that he understands the urgency of this message.

John MacArthur, commenting on these verses makes this observation: "...God could have protected His Son in many other ways and in many other places... But God chose to protect Him by the very ordinary and unmiraculous means of flight to a foreign country. The commands to go to Egypt and then to leave were given supernaturally, but the trip itself and the stay there were, as far as we are told, marked by no special divine intervention or provision. The family was not transported to Egypt, but had to make the long, tiresome journey on their own."

It is ironic that a place associated with bondage in the history of Israel is now presented as a place of escape. Joseph is literally instructed to flee to Egypt, seeking safety there. Abraham had gone to Egypt during a time of famine, but in time he left. Later, the family of Jacob, preceded by one of his sons – an earlier Joseph – had also gone to Egypt during a time of severe famine. However, what initially was a place of refuge for them in time became a place of bondage. It was God's intervention that led to their exodus from that country. Now Egypt is again a place of refuge, a place to preserve life. But it is for reasons entirely different than famine. And the time to be spent there is only until the angel directs otherwise.

It is Christ's presence in Egypt that provides the setting for a comparison with God bringing His own (first His people, and now His Son) out of Egypt. With Christ in Egypt the stage is set for God to fulfill a prophecy He gave over seven centuries earlier through the words of Hosea. This reality gives even additional significance to this trip to Egypt.

Let's turn our attention now to the second scene in our Scripture passage, verses 16-18. Here we are given details regarding Herod's actions that explain the urgency of the angel's message to Joseph in verses 13-15.

- Herod's Reaction – verses 16-18

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

First I want us to look at two key words that are used in these verses. "outwitted" = may leave the impression that the Magi were deceptive, sneaky, or sly. I believe the word really presents more the perspective of Herod than the motive of the Magi. They had been directed by God to avoid of Herod. It is likely that his perception, once he concludes that the Magi are not reporting back to him, is that he is the one who has been duped and will be the object of ridicule. (It is interesting to note that this same word is used by Christ during His public ministry when He predicts how He will be treated during His passion. He will be mocked, made the object of ridicule, and treated with contempt. In that situation His response will be extraordinarily

different from that of Herod which we observe here!) The second word that I draw to our attention is “furious.” It conveys the concept of something boiling up or going up in smoke. The intensity of its meaning is strengthened by the addition of an adverb that describes height. An appropriate understanding is that Herod’s response is one of extreme rage! That rage fuels his order to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and younger. As stated earlier the life of the child Jesus would clearly be in danger apart from God’s intervention.

I think it is important to take additional time here to expand our acquaintance with Herod. He was a Roman “client-king” over Judea. He occupied that position for over 30 years. He was in that position when Christ was born, albeit in the very last months of his life. He was a master builder. He oversaw the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in a splendor unsurpassed in the ancient world. He built the fortress at Masada. He built the city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast into one of the most spectacular seaports of the ancient world. And those examples are just some of the highlights.

An article from a website for the organization known as “That the World May Know Ministries” describes him in this way: “King Herod is known as Herod the Great, with good reason. He was ‘great’ in everything he did, whether it was good or bad.”

(Here is some of the ‘bad.’) “Herod saw threats in every comer and was cruel in suppressing any resistance, real or imagined, among his Jewish subjects and even within his own family. The slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem, so central to the Bible story, was so small in comparison to his other crimes that it is not even mentioned by Josephus...”

Here are some phrases used to describe him and his actions:

“Herod showed no mercy in stamping out the opposition.”

“Herod’s paranoid nature...”

“Antony saw Herod as... a fiercely loyal king whose brutal tactics could keep the peace in Judea.”

“Herod’s reign began in blood.”

“Herod also executed his brother-in-law for a supposed affair with Miriamne, with whom he was passionately in love.” (She was the second of nine or ten wives!)

“Herod, fearing a plot, executed his old friend Hyrcanus, who had given him his start.”

“...his mother convinced him that Miriamne had been unfaithful, so he had Miriamne executed. Miriamne’s mother plotted revenge, so Herod had her killed as well. Hundreds of friends and family members, along with supporters of these last of the Hasmonaeans, were slaughtered on the slightest of accusations.”

One final quote about Herod”

“To compound matters, the Pharisees spread the belief that Herod was king of the Jews only by Roman decree and that he was not of the house of David. Therefore, he and his family were unfit for the throne. Messianic “prophets” predicted a bizarre list of upcoming events that would occur as the kingdom was taken from Herod and given to God’s anointed. This stirred even more paranoia in Herod, and many more lost their lives as a result.

Into this web of hatred and suspicion, ‘Magi from the east came...’ Their inquiry about one who had been born king of the Jews disturbs Herod. Never learning the exact location of this child, he draws a large enough murderous circle with the intent of eliminating another rival. Sadly, this action is no more than a single blip on the radar screen of Herod’s life

Perhaps no more than six months later Herod himself dies. The implications of this for Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus, are related in the third scene in this passage, beginning at verse 19.

- Return from Egypt – verses 19-23

*After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”*

Here we are told of the follow up communication promised by the angel in verse 13. It releases Joseph to take Jesus and his mother and return to Israel. The angel’s message states that the danger to Jesus’ life that led to the flight to Egypt was past. (It is interesting to note the use of a plural word in verse 20 – “those who were trying to take the child’s life” – although I do not find a fully plausible explanation.) Regardless, the specific threat that Herod posed is past. Joseph follows the angel’s direction and returns to Judea. However, within a relatively short time he learns of another potential danger; the rule of Archelaus in place of Herod. While Archelaus did not pose the same direct threat that his father had, he nevertheless ruled with similar methods. Within his first year he executed 3,000 Jews in attendance at a Passover. Joseph had reason to fear; and now receives even further divine direction. We are not told the specifics of that communication, but we are given the result. The family ultimately settles in Nazareth.

That having been stated, Matthew connects this result with the fulfillment of prophecy. *So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”* If you look for that specific phrase in the Old Testament you will not find it. Here’s what we need to observe. First, notice that this statement is referenced as having been stated by more than one prophet. It is only here that Matthew uses the plural term. Further, the structure of the sentence suggests an indirect quotation. To understand the scope of Matthew’s statement here, we need to focus on the intimation that the word Nazareth conveyed at that time. The town itself was inhabited largely by people noted for their crude and violent ways. The term “Nazarene” had long been a term of derision, used to describe any person who was rough and rude. It was a despised place, even to other Galileans. (Recall the question raised by Nathanael in John 1:46 – *Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?*) Here is D. A. Carson’s perspective: “First-century Christian readers of Matthew, who had tasted their share of scorn, would have quickly caught Matthew’s point. He is not saying that a particular OT prophet foretold that the Messiah would live in Nazareth; he is saying that the OT prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised (cf. Pss 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21; Isa 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan 9:26). The theme is repeatedly picked up by Matthew (e.g., 8:20; 11:16-19; 15:7-8).

We could continue to investigate additional details found within this portion of Scripture, but at this time I want us to step back and refocus on points that draw us more toward personal application.

## **Points For Emphasis**

- First: Each portion of this passage is connected to Biblical prophecy

We have already examined in some detail the context and background of two Old Testament prophecies connected to this passage. The other prophecy, recorded in verse 18 references a statement found in Jeremiah 31:15. Its historical context is the occasion when captives of the southern kingdom of Israel are gathered together in the vicinity of Jerusalem, in approximately 587-586 B.C. prior to their deportation to Babylon. People had experienced military defeat, death and loss of family members, and were facing forced relocation. The depth of grief is indicated in the phrase that tells us that there is a refusal to be comforted.

When this passage is presented in Matthew as prophetically fulfilled in the grief that results following the death of young boys in and around Bethlehem, the Greek word used tells us that there is no wish, desire, inclination, or will to receive comfort! We must acknowledge that we are at a safe, even sterile distance from this incident. Artists have tried to give form to the grief experienced by those families. Even if we try to downplay the numbers – as some suggest that no more than 6 boys would have been killed – surely the grief of every family involved would have been inconsolable.

How do we respond to the reality of this grief when it occurs in the midst of prophetic fulfillment of an Old Testament promise? Do those two factors appear to be incongruent? I believe we need to bear in mind a number of things. First, we must not interpret Scripture through the filter of grief. Rather we are to interpret grief through the filter of Scripture. Second, it is Herod that is responsible for the death of these children, not the prophecy. Third, the fulfillment of prophecy tells us that God has a plan to accomplish salvation. He has known it from all eternity. He also knows the opposition that His plan will receive. Fourth, the reality of sin and disobedience, reasons for which God was sending His Son as Savior, impacts even the innocent.

If we step back and encompass the other two prophetic statements that Matthew highlights as being fulfilled, there are even additional factors to note. Not unlike a crime scene investigator meticulously building their case, Matthew here draws together accumulated evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. This is true, and to be considered, even when the contexts in which all three fulfillments occur involve difficult circumstances. Finally, if you go to the Old Testament passages that are either quoted or referenced by Matthew, in each instance the broader context speaks words of hope. That is possible because of who God is, not because of the circumstances.

- A second point of emphasis: Joseph's example of obedience

Pastor Mike highlighted Joseph's implicit obedience to God in last week's sermon. Today's passage of Scripture records three additional incidents of obedience to direct instructions from God.

In each situation there is no hint of anything but complete obedience. Together, these four incidents cover a minimum of one year. We have an observable pattern of obedience. In that light I find it interesting to note that the unquestioned obedience that Christ Himself demonstrated in relationship to God was something that is clearly modeled in the life of Joseph, who was entrusted with fulfilling a father's role for Christ as He grew up.

While I would never suggest that Joseph was perfect in his obedience, it is appropriate to challenge ourselves to follow his example. Because we have God's word we have His instructions and guidance for us. Whether that be regarding marriage, purity, values, priorities, or decisions we know what He desires. A plausible personal application today would be to restate our commitment to God to be obedient to Him at each point of His word to us.

- Let's move now to a third point of emphasis: Early rejection of Christ

This passage in Matthew reveals both active and passive rejection of, and resistance to, Christ. It is unlikely that Herod ever knew the real identity of Jesus. Nevertheless, his reaction is very aggressive rejection. Although he was unsuccessful in his plans, his actions do mirror actions taken by Jewish leaders some 33 years later. At that time they will accomplish what Herod sought, the death of Christ.

The more passive rejection is what is associated with the labeling of Christ as a Nazarene. In concept it is more broad and generic. We are not told of how early this began. We can assume that there would have been opportunity to despise Christ and His family even upon their initial arrival in Nazareth, just due to the

misunderstood circumstances surrounding His conception (a child born out of wedlock) and Joseph's and Mary's marriage. Once His public ministry begins, this rejection will become increasingly active.

Friends, this is our Savior. He endured a lifetime of resistance, rejection, and opposition. Not surprisingly, this reality is clearly predicted in Isaiah 53:3 – *He was despised and rejected by men...* We have so much for which to praise Him because He did that for us! If you are particularly new in your relationship with Christ I want you to know that the reaction of some within your circle of acquaintance that ridicules the new direction you seek in your life because of that relationship with Christ is not surprising at all. It is likely not pleasant, but it does not need to catch us off guard for very long. It is the road Christ traveled in accomplishing salvation for us. It is the road we may walk as we embrace a personal relationship with Him.

- Fourth: The exaltation of Christ

These verses of Scripture exalt Christ. They do so by connecting Old Testament prophecies to actions and events that involve Him, even as a young child. They detail the obvious direct care, protection, guidance, and provision that God gives for His Son! They repeat a phrase four times that tells us He the ultimate focus of what occurs here. That repeated phrase is found in verse 13, 14, 20, and 21 – *the child and his mother*. It is not an overwhelming discovery but it certainly reinforces the fact that Christ is first, and to be exalted about all!

- Fifth: Immanuel – “God with us”

In Matthew 1:23 the angel tells Joseph that Mary is pregnant and *will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means ‘God with us.’* I find that particularly relevant in a specific way that is highlighted twice in Matthew 2:13-23. John 1:14 states that *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. At a point in history that God Himself calls the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), Immanuel comes! That was a time of political turmoil and instability. That was a time when you would fear for your life and the life of your child. It is in that exact environment that God “joined us”

As a grandparent I am troubled about the times in which we live primarily out of concern for my grandchildren. But when I compare our time in history with that of when Christ was born, I hear God inviting me to trust Him. At a time in history that was His chosen time, and certainly a time far more challenging than today, at least in contrast to my area of the world, He willingly came among us. And further, even after Christ has been spared Herod's jealous wrath, God leads Joseph and Mary to settle in Nazareth. He didn't seek out the best neighborhood. He was willing to move in and settle down where the effects of sin were obvious. So great is His love for us, and His willingness to identify with us; Immanuel is far more than just a title – it is a description of a fulfilled prophecy, a statement of commitment, and an expression of the indescribable love of God. It is a profound expression of the incarnation of Christ that is powerfully demonstrated even during His childhood!

## A Concluding Reflection

My most immediate response today is two “wows!” Here's what I mean.

The passage of Scripture presented today is only a small segment in God's unfolding revelation of His plan of salvation through Christ alone. If reflection on what transpires here leads one to respond with a sense of awe (**wow!**), how much more can the entire story of salvation lead us to awe and worship (**WOW!!**).