

Date of sermon: 12/19/2020  
Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke  
Bible passage or verse: Matthew 2:13-23  
Title of sermon: **Blood in Bethlehem**  
Series: Come Close - #3

**Matthew 2:13-23 - NIV:**

**13** When they 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." **14** So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, **15** 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." **16** 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. **17** Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

**18** "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."

**19** After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt **20** 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." **21** So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. **22** 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, **23** and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

This young lady went up to her chaplain, and she said, "I just can't believe that President Clinton has done what they said he did. I can't believe somebody would act that way." Just a week ago, a person came up to me, and she said, "I just wish we could find out the truth, the whole truth -- but I don't think we ever will." Those two individuals, both growing up in church, have discovered that sometimes the world is not the way we want. It's not. It's painful. Sometimes it's shocking. Sometimes -- we're conditioned. I grew up in the church. We're conditioned to think that people act a certain way, and that leaders are in a certain manner, and -- oh, I heard about Hitler, and I heard about Stalin, but -- that's somewhere else, not here. Surely. Not here. I grew up. And so, I can understand this lady coming to her college chaplain, who was a believer, and saying, "I can't believe --" and you can fill in the blank, "-- that he would -- do that." "I wish we could find out the truth." The reality is, sometimes we never do. And the truth sometimes is shocking. The truth even about Christmas sometimes is shocking. I like a bright, cheery Christmas just like you do. You want to come over and look at our lights? We have more lights this year than ever, and I will pay for it in January. Literally. But -- oh, man, I love the lights, and I love the brightness, and I love Joy to the World, and I love all of the songs. I do! But there's a sense in which that sets us up, if we're not careful, for an idealism that is never really fulfilled. And that's why, to be honest with you, we need texts like this. You say, "Man, you're gonna preach this text for Christmas?" Yah! Why? Because it's next! It's next, right?

In Matthew chapter 2, we're making our way as God has come close, and it comes to this gnarly little passage. It is! It's tough. Chapter 2, verse 13 -- "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother to Egypt.' He got up, and he took the child, and he left for Egypt." The poor kids, they'd been on the run ever since they got word that Mary's gonna have a baby! "He got up and he took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where they 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.'" Why did they need to go there? Because Herod had made the decision that he was threatened by this prophetic word, this angelic word, this astrological word, this word from the shepherds, this word from the wise men, that somehow there was a king. And let me tell you what -- after 40 years of leadership, he didn't want to give it over to anyone else. And when you look at Herod, who's in the story of Christ, it tells you that Christmas has a sad side. It does. And it's not that I love sad and grief-ridden stories. My daughter does -- she loves trauma and drama, and so, she just loves movies like that. But the reality is, it's in the text. And we need to look at it because it's part of the story. And it tells us that Christmas is only two days old, 12 verses, if you will, into Matthew 2, and the fun has stopped. "Joseph -- take your wife. Go to Egypt." "Egypt? That's not home." "I know." "Egypt? That's where we got delivered from!" "I know. Go back there. Because Herod is going to kill every little boy in town." "Really, God? You can't stop this?"

As the story goes on, it says in verse 17, "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, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'" Where does Matthew go? Why do you go back there? Well, it's important to go back there. Who's Rachel? Well, that's Jacob's wife. And she's on the way to Bethlehem, she's pregnant, and she gives birth. Tragically, she dies giving birth. She tells her husband Jacob, "I want you to name our son. I want you to give him the name Ben-oni." "Well -- Honey, that means 'son of my sorrow.' You want me, every time I see this little boy, to think of sorrow?" And she said, "Yes." She dies, and Jacob doesn't oblige her, and he names him Benjamin. After that story, Jeremiah picks that up -- 700 years prior he says a prophecy. Rachel will be weeping once again. "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Everyone wants Christmas to be light and bright and fun. But in Bethlehem it wasn't. There was blood in the streets in Bethlehem. Just imagine the tragedy of what Jeremiah had prophesied, that every little boy -- they whisked in, as mom was holding onto her son, and they grabbed the little boys, and they killed them, at Herod's command. Merry Christmas, right? No. See, Christmas does have a sad side. I don't want you to wallow in it -- I just want you to know it. I don't want you to allow it to define your Christmas -- I just don't want you to be caught off guard to maybe the cynic, or maybe the mourner, who looks at Christmas not like you do and understands Christmas has a sad side. It does. Christmas has a side that you don't always see. We didn't hear -- I mean, we know the story, you know, Mary and Joseph, and they make their way to Bethlehem, and they find there's no room in the guest house, and so they go out into the barn, and -- oh, it's pastoral! I mean, no wife would ever want to have their baby like that. I mean, we love reading the stories, but let's be honest. Epidurals are a beautiful thing. And they didn't deliver epidurals back then. At best, you got to, you know, chew on the cow's tail or something, I don't know. But here you go. And he orders all of these children to die.

It's much like a trip that Kerri and I took our family on. For 24 years, our vacations every year were drive from Colorado to here. One time when we moved here, we thought, "Well, before our kids ever move out, let's take them somewhere special." So we put all my frequent flyer miles and some poorly purchased time shares -- of which you can deliver me from and buy them -- and we made it to Hawaii. Hawaii -- it's beautiful, isn't it? I mean man, I had -- oh, I -- you know, kids had never been to Hawaii, this was gonna be glorious. Until I was talking to one of the locals. Oh, it is beautiful. You get off the airplane, they put a lei around your neck, and you go to all of the different parties. We went to a plantation, you know, where they were growing all the different fruits and everything else,

and -- oh, it was really beautiful. And then -- in a conversation, I got together with one of the locals, and -- all of a sudden, I found out a Hawaii that they never tell you about at the airport. It's kind of tragic to me. Because Hawaii had such a luster to it. And he said one of the things that mark the islands is a hatred and a racial tension that just affects every day that he lived. He said, "There are more working parents in this state than in any state, and therefore there is more child poverty and there is more delinquency and there are more challenges because the parents are all working and the kids are running around." He said, "Drug abuse here is far greater than most states, and alcoholism is plaguing the islands." You know -- it's interesting, I never heard that when I was flying into Hawaii. No one ever told me there's a sad part of Hawaii. And to be honest with you, no one when I was growing up ever told me that there's a sad part of Christmas. And what happens is, when you read it, it whips away our idealistic dreams. We sing the song, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." I really am not trying to ruin every Christmas song that you've ever sung, but to be quite honest with you -- this is two weeks in a row, and so, I will stop here. Agreed? No more. The rest of them you can sing. It's not still. There's blood in the streets. It's not still in Bethlehem -- there's threats. There's moms who are weeping and mourning. There are mothers who refuse to be comforted. There are fathers who are holding their wives, and they don't know what to do to stop the crying, and, strangely, it went from street to street to street all over the whole city. It was one of the most gruesome scenes that you could ever imagine. "Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." No -- sorry. Oh little town of Bethlehem, you weep and you mourn and your mothers are cursing God, and they're cursing Herod, and they're calling their husbands and saying, "Stand up to this tyrant! Stand up to this individual who's destroying our whole city!"

Like a lot of leaders, Herod solves his problems through brute force. He wasn't a nice guy. When he was close to death, Herod made a mandate. Get this -- when he's close to death, he knows he's gonna die, and historians tell us that he made a mandate that select individuals from every village in his region, select leading individuals were to be murdered on the day that he died. Why? Because he wanted to make sure that there were tears on the day that he died. What a sick individual. Now, if I were God -- it's a good thing that I'm not -- but if I were God, I'd give this guy about a week to repent and say, "If you don't -- Dude, you're toast." But God didn't. He didn't. He didn't destroy him, like I would want to. He didn't bring the guy's life to the end like I would want to. He executed every small boy. What do I make of that? It does, it rips away in a sense my idealistic distortions, but it also helps brace me, that when I hear a story of a leader, when I hear the story of Seattle, I should not be shocked. And if you are, you're living in your own idealistic distortion. I'm not saying I like it -- I'm just saying we shouldn't be shocked by it. Why? Because there's blood in the streets of Bethlehem. And it rips away my idealism. It rips away sometimes my expectations of what I think I should expect, and when people take hostile sections of Portland, I'm not suggesting for a moment that I support it. I'm just saying I'm not surprised by it. Why? Because I've read the Bible. I've read the Bible -- there's blood in the streets of Bethlehem. How still we see thee lie? No, not at all. Today it's not Bethlehem -- it's Seattle, it's Portland, it's Minneapolis, it's LA. Are there injustices? Absolutely. Do I just turn a blind eye and say, "Oh well. Horrible being you." No, not at all. If God cares about justice, then you and I should care about justice. But we should never be shocked. Why? Because Herod should rip that out of us. The Bible does.

But this story doesn't end with an abysmal ending. It doesn't. It doesn't for Jeremiah, and it doesn't for Matthew. Because woven through this whole story, God enters the grief of Bethlehem, and He does it with hope. He does. Jeremiah, when he's prophesying this day. When Jeremiah is prophesying this day -- in fact, I think it would be worth you running to Jeremiah, the 31st chapter. It's after the Book of Psalms, go right. After Isaiah, go right. I think this would be really helpful for you to mark, because Matthew pulls the prophecy, and he also pulls the hope. Jeremiah, in the 31st chapter, he says, "This is what the Lord says." He just quotes the prophecy. He says, "'A voice is heard in Ramah" -- I'm in verse 15 -- "mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.'" Ah, but here's where Jeremiah starts to breathe life back into this story. It's so beautiful. He says, "This is what the Lord says: 'Restrain your voice from weeping.'" Really? Yeah. Stop mourning. How, God? Are you looking at the same

story I am? Yes. "‘Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,’ declares the Lord. ‘And they will return from the land of the enemy. For there is hope for your future,’ declares the Lord. ‘Your children will return to their own land.’"

See, the reason why we needed a story is, yes, to have the reality to know that Bethlehem existed, and it wasn't a quiet little town, it was a city of blood. But it was also the city of hope. Because Jeremiah prophesies, and he tells them, "Something is going to be fulfilled." I want you to look at three verses with me. They're right here in Matthew. Let's look at verse 15. "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" What's God doing? He's establishing the credibility of His Son. Let's look at another verse, verse 17. "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled." What's He doing? He's using the credibility of the prophet Jeremiah whom the Nation of Israel respected and loved and adored, and then they're reading His word and saying what he prophesied is being fulfilled. Trust him. Something that he said 700 years ago is coming to reality today. One more -- verse 23. "So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets -- he will be called a Nazarene." Why does Matthew give us this? Because he wants you know in the midst of this craziness it's all fitting together. It's not out of control. God hasn't taken His hand off of the driving, you know, force of life. Jeremiah prophesied it. It's fulfilled exactly like he prophesied, and the hope that he prophesies is also to be held onto. What is it? It's the gospel. God will come into the midst of our grief, and He will take on flesh, and He will dwell among us.

I find it utterly fascinating that there's this cosmic war. How do we know? It's in Revelation chapter 12. There's this cosmic war over the woman, over the infant, over the husband. And Satan is scheming in Hell, and he's doing everything -- and, you see, Herod is Satan's pawn, because Herod had allowed Satan to enter fully into his heart, and so, he was nothing more than a servant of hell. And he was fulfilling everything that Hell was orchestrating, and, as this whole thing is unfolding -- it's a beautiful passage -- as it's all unfolding, Matthew is saying, "God fulfilled this. God fulfilled this. God orchestrated this. God saw to it that this" -- all of the grief that is happening, it is real. And in the midst of that grief God comes, and He brings the gospel, and He says there's hope. There's hope for us. There's hope because God can come into the most irredeemable situation, the most painful situation, and bring hope. He does here.

God is not moved by the glitter, He's not moved by the glamour of things. He's moved by our brokenness. And in the city of Bethlehem that night, it was broken. There was a madman who was being ran by the gates of Hell. There was a madman who was trying to fulfill the desires of Satan to once again destroy God. And I actually believe Satan thought, "I got it! I'm gonna kill every two-year-old boy in town and surely I'm gonna get Jesus." But just as God fulfilled, just as He had promised, and so was fulfilled what the Lord had said, "I'm gonna send you to Egypt." Why? "Because I'm gonna save you." And there will be weeping in Ramah. But moms, when you understand what God has done, it will dry your eyes. Revelation -- God promises this. He will wipe and dry the eyes of those whom He loves. And even in the midst of their sorrow, He will bring such promise of hope that He will say to them, "No need to weep anymore. Let me dry the tears from your eyes, because there's hope in the midst of this grief." That's God's promise. God enters our grief with hope, and so, what can we conclude? Two things. Number one -- there's much more to every story than what you see on the surface. It's true. It's true back in Bethlehem and it's true today. If you read the story, it's horrific, it's gross, it's terrible. But if you read Revelation 12 and you realize all that's going on, there's this massive cosmic battle, and -- you don't read it, you don't see it there, but it's happening. Just like in Hawaii, when we landed it was beautiful, and all of the weather was great, and the beaches were beautiful. Until you talk to one of the local guys and he tells you, "This is not such a pretty place. There's a lot of pain on this island. We won't let you see it, because we've contracted with the commerce and we need your money. But if we were to really disclose what's happening on this island, it's a wreck."

You see, behind every story is the real story. I don't care what city you go to, I don't care what situation you go to -- there is much more to every story than what you see on the surface. There's the fingerprints of God, there's the things that He's doing. We see death, God sees salvation. We see crucifixion, defeat. God sees victory. We see chaos, God sees order. And the person of faith, the person of faith trusts that. You do. You go to bed at night, you believe deep in your heart, and you understand that though I yearn for the truth to be declared, God knows the truth and He will reveal it in His due time.

When there's injustice in a marriage, and when somebody is being destroyed and somebody is getting away with murder, as we call it -- and you think, "God, when are you gonna pull back the curtain?" And He says, "I will. In my time." When we talk to a person and they tell us they're fine, and they're really not, we know that there is more to every story. But it's not just that we don't know the story -- it's that God knows the story. And He's working something. And He's purposely doing something. You can trust that.

There's blood in the streets of Bethlehem. But my friends, that's why God came. There's immorality in our leadership, and that's why God came. Don't be dismayed by it. Don't be shocked by it. Don't be overwhelmed by it. Herod was a madman, and God got his Savior into the earth. On the earth to grow, protect it. It's the most beautiful thing in the world. Satan thought, "I've got him right where I want him!" And God maneuvered Him to Egypt, the most unlikely place, and saved Him. There's much more to every story than what you see on the surface, and in the darkest moments, including today, God can fulfill His desire to save us. I believe that with all my heart. I do. I don't really worry too much. Don't think I don't have any faults. I've got plenty of them -- talk to my wife. But I don't really worry too much. Because, in the darkest of moments, God can fulfill His purpose and His plan. He can rescue something that seems completely lost, He can save something that seems beyond fragile, and He can redeem somebody that seems far beyond redemption.

In the midst of the darkest night, when literally Revelation 12 says, "Hell is exploding" -- and there's this cosmic war going on, and the angels are holding their breath -- oh, they enjoyed that announcement to the shepherds. But I wonder if a few of them were looking out of the corner of their eye, if you can give me that kind of language, and wondering, because they knew about the cosmic battle that Revelation 12 describes. And I wonder if any of them said, "Lord, this is really great -- but what about -- Lord, the wise men are coming. That's beautiful! The star has brought them. But let me tell you what -- it's also rose up this fury in Hell, and they've got Herod right where they want him. Lord, what are you gonna do, God?" And in the darkest moments of life, God says, "I will fulfill my vision." I believe that with every person in this room. God will fulfill His plans for you -- wait for Him. God will fulfill His plans for you -- trust Him. God will fulfill the things that He envisions for you -- look forward to them. Doesn't matter how dark, it doesn't matter how difficult. In the darkest moments of life, God can fulfill His promises. Why? Because within every story is the sovereign hand of God fulfilling His purposes. He's doing that today, my friends. He is. It's not out of control. Our country is not. Oh, it's in trouble. We've lost some moral rudders, yes. But do you think for a moment God is sleepless in Heaven in the sense that He's worried? No. You see, if He can get His Savior past a madman orchestrated by all of Hell, then the sovereign purpose of God will be fulfilled in your life. Trust Him. Look for it. But as Jeremiah says, "No more weeping. No more gnashing. No more worry." You don't take the difficulty of 2020 into 2021 and just worry yourself to death. Stop that. Why? Because within every story is the sovereign hand of God. And He says to you, "There is hope. Let me dry your eyes." Stop your weeping, because God is in your future, and there's hope.

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