



**LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Brian Mitchell**

**010123**

New Year's Day

**Matthew 2:13-23**

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Happy New year everyone. My prayer today is that 2023 is a happy and healthy one for you all. As we say in Scotland, Lang may yer lum reek. That literally means Long May Your Chimney Smoke or may you always have a home and plenty fuel to keep it warm, or I wish you long life and enough resources to enjoy it!

And well done, you made it to church the week after Christmas. I often comment that those who are at church the week after Christmas automatically get to go to heaven. Now I don't think there is any biblical support for that statement, but I stand by it! I am glad you are here for many reasons, but one reason is that we spend time today with a part of the Jesus birth narratives that does not always get a lot of attention. The lectionary provides two contrasting passages today. Psalm 148 which Beau and Virginia read for us is full of wonderful praise for God. We read this Psalm and those words written centuries before the birth of Jesus lead us to join the shepherds and the Magi in worshipping Him.

Our Gospel passage is taken from Matthew chapter 2: 13-23, this is the final section of Matthew's birth narrative and it follows the story of the Magi. We do not know exactly at what time the magi visited Jesus. During our family service last week, when the Magi were introduced, I heard a voice speak out from the congregation that they did not arrive until a week later, and it has been church tradition to celebrate this event on January 6<sup>th</sup> which is epiphany. However, early church historians claimed it was as much as two years after his birth. Others claim it may have been 2 months, or at least two weeks. What we can be sure of is that the Magi were not at the birth scene with the shepherds. But at this moment in the story, they have already arrived in Jerusalem, met with Herod, who sends them to Bethlehem after his people tell him that is where the ruler to shepherd the people would come from. The Magi visit the child, worship him and present gifts. Then they leave for home avoiding Herod and Jerusalem on the way as they had been warned in a dream to do so. And that is where the story picks up with our Gospel reading today.

Reading from Matthew 2: 13-23,

*Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, 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." 14 Then Joseph[h] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."*

*16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,[i] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.[j] 17 Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*

*18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,*

*wailing and loud lamentation,*

*Rachel weeping for her children;*

*she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”*

*19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”*

We have three prophecies fulfilled here. Remember Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience. It is important for him to share that Jesus was a fulfillment of scripture. We will look at the first two in a few moments, but I am interested in the third found at the end of the passage.

*There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”*

What is interesting is that this prophecy can be found nowhere in scripture. The other two in our passage can. But “He will be called a Nazarene” cannot. It is of course possible that Matthew and his readers were privy to prophecies that did not survive to make it to scripture, and it may be possible that this was an oral prophecy shared by multiple prophets of the time. Matthew uses a plural noun for the prophets, so either explanation is very possible. This is not an isolated incident of quoting extrabiblical writings. Paul does it a few times and Jesus himself in Luke chapter 4 quotes an unknown proverb when he says,

*No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’*

It is important to Matthew to end the birth narrative letting his readers know that Jesus was a Nazarene.

When we meet someone new, and become friends, one of the first things we ask is Where are you from? Where we are from is important. It tells you something about a person, or at least their history, their childhood, how they may think, do they fit the stereotypes of that place. Where we are from is part of our story. Some of us are from famous places that are familiar to all, and some from unknown small places that require explanation. I was born in Edinburgh. When I mention that there is always recognition and conversation, but I don’t really think I am from there. I only lived there for 3 weeks as an infant. I grew up in, and consider myself from, Tullibody. Now that requires explanation. Even most Scottish people are unfamiliar with Tullibody. I always have to explain where it is and what bigger place it is close to give folks an idea. It’s a great little town, I have mostly fond memories of growing up there. My mum and sister still live there, when I go home, that’s where I go. But not much happens there. To go to the mall, or the cinema, or concerts, you usually have to travel somewhere else. A few years ago, I was given this book of Scottish stories by a church member. As I browsed through, I found a little story about a man from Tullibody. I was pretty excited. I posted a picture of the story on a FB group I am in for people from Tullibody and it got some attention. It’s that kind of place.

This may be familiar to many of you who come from small places. Places that seem to be unimportant. Places that don’t get a lot of attention. And that was Nazareth. Today Nazareth is a large important city with a population of over 77,000. Yet in the time of Jesus it was a village. Recent scholars and archaeologists guess the population may have been less than 500. There is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament, or the

historians of the time. It is not until we meet Mary the mother of Jesus that we hear of Nazareth. It was nowhere. It was the sticks. In John chapter 1 when Jesus calls Philip, Philip, then tells Nathaniel that he has found the one Moses and the prophets wrote of, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathaniel responds, "Nazareth, can anything good come from there?" Jesus came from that kind of place, the kind of place that people doubted anything good could come from. Nazareth was a place of mockery. A place of rejection.

It adds to the picture painted of God using the humble, using the unexpected, using a place that is a place of mockery, to bring forward the one who will save God's people. We see over and over in scripture, God by design take the weak things of this world to so wonderful things. God takes the ordinary to do the extraordinary. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1, we read that God deliberately uses the things the world considers foolish to shame those who think they are wise. We learn this in the birth narratives, we learn this by Jesus' choice of disciples, then and now. Story after story in scripture of God using the unexpected to bring God's kingdom.

Our story tells us that an angel tells Joseph to flee to Egypt with his young family, as Herod will seek the child. This fulfills the first prophecy in our passage. *Out of Egypt I have called my son.*" That is found in Hosea 11. Hosea is writing specifically about the nation of Israel. Hosea is an interesting book. We read of Israel's unfaithfulness to God in relation to the unfaithfulness of Hosea's wife Gomer. Hosea is looking back to when the people were under the bondage of Egypt, and just as Hosea is reconciled to Gomer, God is reconciled to Israel. It is a story of God's love for God's people. Hosea is looking back, but also forward. Matthew transforms the words to a Messianic text. Remember Matthew is writing to Jewish people. The people have equated the exodus of Israel, the firstborn out of Egypt as messianic. They would have recognized what Matthew was saying, which was, as God was faithful in restoring the unfaithfulness of his people in Egypt. God is faithful in restoring the people in the time of Matthew through this child.

So, Jesus and his parents are essentially on the run at this point. There would have been a Jewish community in Egypt, but it was certainly not the safest place for them. There is no doubt that they were refugees. The problem with a statement like that is we politicize it, and we are influenced by our current worldviews and lose the reality of Jesus' situation at that time. They were refugees, fugitives, homeless on the run from this jealous crazy King. We read that Herod, angry at the deception of the Magi has all the children in the area under the age of two killed. Scholars today claim this would have been around 20 children. Bethlehem was not a huge place. Now we can agree, killing 20 children to make sure one particular child does not grow up is horrific. It is tough to find a silver lining in such a tragedy and it cheapens it to do so.

Matthew sees further prophecy fulfilled in this horror. Jeremiah wrote about in Chapter 31 v 15.

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

Interestingly, surrounding this statement of grief are words of hope that the people will be returned from exile. This is another section of the scripture that is recognized as Messianic. Scholars tell us that there were different places called Ramah, one of which is a place north of Jerusalem, that was used as a staging area for deportation into exile. Rachel, a wife of Jacob was long dead by the time this was written but was considered a matriarch of Israel, so it is appropriate that her name is mentioned by Jeremiah. This is a kind of dual prophecy that we find here. Jeremiah is speaking of the grief attached to the exile of God's people while reminding the people there is still hope, there will be a return from exile, God knows the suffering of the people and God knows beyond the grief lies hope and restoration of life free from imperial persecution. This is another prophecy that also looks forward. Matthew sees Jeremiah's words as fulfilled here. Here too God knows that beyond the unfathomable grief and suffering over this act of Herod, there is hope. Jesus is preserved so that

he may bring hope and restoration to all peoples through the cross and empty tomb. Matthew tells the story to this Jewish audience in terms that leave no doubt this child is the Messiah.

When Herod dies, Joseph returns his family to Israel, avoiding Judea and moving to Nazareth in Galilee, to fulfill the third prophecy that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene.

So we see this ongoing story of God's love and faithfulness toward God's people unfolding in these texts. As Hosea and Jeremiah share the restorative nature of God in relationship to the people of Israel, Matthew takes these words as applicable to the people of his time. God was still in the business of restoring the people to good relationship despite their unfaithfulness. And that is still the business of God today. Despite our wandering, despite our sin, despite our unfaithfulness, God is still in the business of restoring us to a right relationship. And it is done through this child we celebrate this Christmas season.

Nathaniel asked, what good can come from Nazareth? How about the most important person who ever lived, how about salvation?

And God is still looking for people from ordinary places to bring God's kingdom. Places like Nazareth, places like Tullibody, places like Jacksonville, places like... where are you from?

Amen.