

Where do you hang your hope? If all we have is what we find in this world, we are sunk. There is plenty to hope for, but not a lot of good news to build hope on for the future. Jesus is a place to build your hope. Jesus is a solid rock. Jesus, born on Christmas Day, is our hope and our salvation.

### MY HOPE IS BUILT • Matthew 2:13-23 • John Goodale • December 29, 2019

What a difference a week makes! Seven days ago, we were building toward Christmas, anticipating what our celebration would be like. Candlelight services here on Christmas Eve were still ahead, and much cooking was yet to be done. Gifts under the tree held a certain mystery, and some of us may still have had shopping to do. Now we're together on the other side of Christmas. Meals have been eaten, families have gathered, gifts have been opened and perhaps some already returned. Soon Christmas music will be replaced by the usual songs, and our decorations put away.

I don't know about you, but this post-Christmas period always feels like a bit of a letdown to me. Granted, this is a hard season for those of us experiencing pain and loss, surrounded by the joy of others. Still, December is the one month of the year when the ordinary is replaced with something different: different music, gatherings, food, decorations, traditions and even greetings. Soon we'll return to the ordinary, the trappings of Christmas behind us for another year. But as we do, there is something we take with us from our Christmas celebration: our hope in Jesus. God, who entered our world in the same form as each of us. Jesus came to save us. He came to give us life. He came to give us hope.

Don't underestimate the importance of hope for our lives. It's the proverbial carrot out in front that keeps us moving forward. Hope gives us strength when we face adversity; it adds meaning to our days and it propels us toward a better tomorrow. The author of Hebrews refers to hope as an anchor for the soul. Lew Smedes described the importance of hope for each of us: "Our spirits were made for hope the way our hearts were made to love and our brains were made to think and our hands were made to make things."

I want to ask where you place your hope? Upon what does it rest? Is it in day-to-day possibilities that offer excitement but can too often disappoint? Or do we draw from an unchanging hope foundation that keeps us going even when life turns sour? During this season of Advent, we're exploring hope that's built upon Jesus: hope that we're loved, hope that we're not alone, and hope that there's more to life than what the world has to offer. The manger reminds us that God came into our world to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Our lives are forever changed by this child who one day gave His life to give us life and a future.

Today's text covers a portion of Jesus' birth narrative that tends to get less attention. As we look at it, I want to offer three observations about our hope in Jesus. 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." 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" (Matthew 2:13–15). Joseph first experienced an angel when Mary's story of her pregnancy was confirmed in a dream. He probably awakened from that dream with relief; this time he awoke in terror. Author Ken Gire captures what that night must have been like: "Joseph bolts upright in bed, heart pounding, eyes wide. He shakes Mary awake and tells her the dream. The couple guickly tiptoes into the night, telling no one where they are going or why. But as they leave the stable, the baby cries. Joseph wheels around, his eyes intense. "By dawn, the holy family is long gone. For now they are safe. Jesus has escaped the sword."

Jesus wasn't yet old enough to change the world, but He was already feared by King Herod. Herod was the paranoid ruler of Judea, clutching tightly to power at the expense of others. Herod's fear that others were plotting to take his throne led him to kill three sons, a wife and two brothers-in-law. It also prompted Caesar Augustus to declare, "Better to be Herod's pig than his son." Jesus became Herod's newest threat, which forced yet another change of plans for Mary and Joseph.

This leads to our first observation: **Hope in Jesus sustains** us when life is hard. We enjoy reading the familiar Christmas story, but it was incredibly hard for Mary and Joseph to live out. This unexpected pregnancy from God disrupted their lives; the scandal caused them to be judged and isolated in their hometown. That may be why Mary made the difficult trip with Joseph during the final days of her pregnancy. Then a joyful moment of birth became a desperate moment when they couldn't find lodging for Jesus' arrival. Now they were forced to quickly flee to Egypt, which was outside of Herod's jurisdiction. As Mary and Joseph experienced challenge after challenge, hope sustained them, and helped them continue forward. How do we know this, when we don't read it in the text? They'd seen God do the impossible, with the birth of a baby they hadn't created together. Jesus became a constant reminder of God's initiative in their lives, and His power to do what they could not.

Jesus remains a source of hope for us today, even when our circumstances offer little reason for hope. While many hope to maintain a comfortable life, Jesus came to provide a meaningful life. While many hope for a rewarding today, Jesus came to bring a better tomorrow. While many hope to avoid disappointment, hurt and difficulties that make life hard, Jesus came to give us hope even when life is hard.

Though Joseph and Mary reached safety in Egypt, another drama was taking place behind them: 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 2-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." (Matthew 2:16–18)

Bethlehem was a small rural town and it's estimated that there may have been 20 to 30 boys age 2-and-under. Tim Keller wrote of this massacre: "While we find this shocking, such atrocities were so common there was no other historical mention of it." These deaths were a devastating loss to the people of Bethlehem, and they grieved God deeply. If there was any doubt that this world needed a savior, Herod's cruel actions underscored the need. Jesus willingly came to give his life to defeat sin, death and darkness, and to redeem God's creation. However, these children were caught in the crossfire of violent resistance to this initiative, and our hearts ache for them. How often do we have the same feeling when we look around at pain and suffering in the world today, and wonder where God is?

Here's our second observation: **Hope in Jesus sustains** us when it appears evil is winning. Any observer would conclude from this story that Herod was on top, and God was no match. After Jesus entered the world, His family was on the run, and innocent children were massacred. If we were keeping score at this point, it would be Evil 2, God 0. Fortunately, our hope in Jesus is fueled by a bigger story than we often see in the moment. Despite Herod's best efforts to rid himself of his rival, Jesus still lived. It also wasn't long until this earthly king died a horrible death, and the heavenly King outlasted him. But let's look even further down the road. When Jesus was crucified, it appeared evil had won and that God had experienced a devastating defeat. It took a few days, but eventually God's bigger story was revealed. This baby in a manger had conquered sin and death on the cross, and we have new life and eternal hope as a result.

Much of what we see in the world today suggests that evil is winning, and God is either powerless or uninterested. When this baby grew up, Jesus acknowledged, "In this world you will have trouble." But then this one in whom we hope went on to declare, "But take heart, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). Our hope in Jesus sustains us even when we don't yet see God's final victory.

Let's look at the final portion of our passage: 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, that he would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:19–23).

Mary and Joseph may have only been in Egypt a year when Herod died and they learned they could return. Our text suggests that they may have considered re-establishing previous roots in Bethlehem. But when Herod's territory was divided among his sons, Bethlehem fell under the rule of a son known to be as ruthless as his dad. After another warning, the couple returned to their previous home of Nazareth which a milder son ruled.

This leads to our final observation: **Hope in Jesus sustains us when our way is uncertain.** Mary and Joseph's lives were filled with uncertainty. They didn't know how long they'd have to live in Egypt, or where they could safely return. They also didn't know if they'd have to flee again in later years, or whether they'd always be looking over their shoulders. Throughout their uncertainty, this child whom they held reminded them that they were held by God. They found hope in His direction and provision when the next steps were unclear to them.

We experience our own uncertainties. More times than we'd prefer, we're knocked off balance by surprises and setbacks. In such moments, when we're unsure of what lies ahead, we can hope in the one who leads us through it.

When we think of the central characters of the Christmas story, Mary immediately comes to mind; Joseph, not so much. Tim mentioned in last week's sermon that Joseph was known as Joseph the Silent because there are no recorded words spoken by him. Joseph seems to be in shadows, more along for the ride than a key player in this story. I wonder if it would surprise you to understand how central his role was? For example, read our text again, and notice how many times the word "he" is used.

Or consider that we have one recorded instance of Mary directly receiving a message from the Lord, but God directly communicated with Joseph four times, three of which occur in today's text. Each time, we see the obedient response of a solid, steady man who was working hard to keep his family safe. When Joseph was told to marry Mary, he did; he also refused to consummate the marriage before Jesus' birth, so that there'd be no questions about who His father was. When Joseph was told to flee, he didn't hesitate to leave the very night he was warned.

When told to return, Joseph brought his family back to Israel. When warned about returning to Judea, he took his family to his hometown of Nazareth.

Michael Wilkins writes of Joseph: We might comprehend more readily the sacrifice that Joseph made if this child were his own blood, but it causes us to honor his obedience even more when we recognize that this is his adopted son. The bond between them did not derive from the deep emotional and spiritual tie of father and genetic son. It derived from the deep bond of obedience to the true Father of this Son.

I want to linger on the word "obedience," for it's how Joseph remained connected to his source of hope. Obedience is important because there are moments, even seasons, when our hope in Jesus may be shaken. Perhaps we're unable to sense God's presence, or see His activity. There were surely times when Mary and Joseph wondered why God wasn't making things a bit easier for them. When our hope in Christ feels fragile, obedience keeps us connected to this eternal source of hope.

Let me illustrate with an image that may feel jarring during our cold winter months. It doesn't matter how good or experienced a water skier is, she's not going anywhere without holding onto the rope. Similarly, it doesn't matter how great the hope is that God holds out to us; we're unable to experience it without an obedience that keeps us in sync with our source of hope.

Centuries ago, a Portuguese ship was sailing around South America when it ran out of fresh water. The crew and passengers suffered for days until another ship eventually appeared on the horizon. The Portuguese ship signaled their predicament and requested help. The other ship simply replied, "Lower your buckets." The Portuguese ship was sailing at the mouth of the Amazon River, where the water is fresh.

Christ's coming offers hope of new life, meaningful life, and eternal life. But this hope isn't something that we automatically experience. We must lower our bucket into the hope-filled waters of our Lord's assurances. We do so thru obedience, which keeps us connected to our source of hope.

Do you want a hope that sustains you even when life is hard? A hope that sustains you even when it seems evil is winning? A hope that sustains you even when your way is uncertain? Jesus came to provide just such a hope. Joseph becomes our example of experiencing it by faithfully taking steps of obedience that keep us in step with Jesus, our lasting source of hope.

# STUDY GUIDE MY HOPE IS BUILT • "Obedient In Hope" Matthew 2:13–23

### UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Matthew 2:13-23.

- 1) Mary and Joseph have received several messages from God through dreams at this point. How do you think they were able to discern that these were instructive dreams rather than run-of-the-mill dreams? How do you typically hear from God?
- 2) When do you find it easy to follow God's leading in your life? When is it difficult?
- 3) What can we learn about faith and obedience from Joseph's actions here?
- 4) How might this passage encourage you to live more fully into the reality that Jesus is your hope and salvation?

## Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Pray for things that have caught your attention in the news lately. Pray that God would make Himself known in these situations

#### IN: Connect with Each Other

Prayerfully select a word that represents what God might have in mind for you this coming year. As the year progresses you can reflect on this word, pray for God to bring this to fruition, and even read a book that enables you to consider this theme further. You may also want to find a partner with whom you can walk through this exercise.

- **Step 1:** Prayerfully consider what kind of person you want to be at the end of this year. What about the condition of your heart? What about the person that God has created you to be?
- **Step 2:** Get a picture of that person and then identify their major characteristics. Is that person gentle? Generous? Strong? Kind?
- **Step 3:** Pick a word. This will provide you with a lens through which to pray and reflect on the coming year.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Pick Your Word," My One Word, accessed Dec. 26, 2019, at http://myoneword.org/pick-your-word/