

THE NIGHTMARE AFTER CHRISTMAS

Scriptures: Matthew 2:13-23; 2:1-12

On December 13, 2003, soldiers from the Ethiopian military along with civilian militias launched a campaign to wipe out the Anuak, an ethnic group living on the border between Ethiopia and Sudan. Hand grenades were thrown into the homes occupied by Anuak women and children. Huts were set a blaze and the occupants shot as they tried to flee. In four days over 400 Anuak people were killed, 200 wounded, and 85 unaccounted for. All of which was accompanied by shouts from the soldiers who said, "From today forward there will be no more Anuak" (reported on the website genocidewatch.org).

If you have seen the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, you know this is not a unique event. For centuries there have been spasms of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Africa and in many other parts of the world. It is not an unheard of idea for a powerful ruler like Herod to slaughter an entire population of children just to get rid of one perceived threat.

You seldom hear this part of the Christmas story. You will notice I did not try to act it out in the Junior Sermon. The horror of this part of the story is enough to spoil anyone's Christmas. But maybe that is the point. This scripture reading is a warning against false hopes about Christmas. The coming of Jesus did not bring an immediate end to all violence and suffering. The first Christmas did not instantly produce peace on earth and goodwill to all people. There are still children today dying in Bethlehem, in Ethiopia, in Iraq, and in families of our own church. In the last twelve months there have been seven families in our church who lost a child: five lost sons and two lost daughters. The scripture quoted in verse 18: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, ... because they are no more"—that is us. Welcoming Jesus into our world at Christmas does not make us immune to disease, car accidents, family conflict, unemployment, or the death of someone in your family.

But that does not mean God is absent or powerless. If Christmas does not solve all our problems, it does at least introduce a new power into the equation.

Take out the insert and look again with me at our second scripture lesson from Matthew 2:13-23. I have arranged the verses in an outline to show a kind of pattern. Each of the three scenes in this scripture begins with a command and ends with a fulfillment of scripture. Let's begin with scene 1. Joseph has a dream, which could just as easily be called a nightmare. In his dream an angel tells him to uproot his family, flee to Egypt and become refugees in a foreign country. Many of the Anuak people of Ethiopia have fled and now live across the border in Sudan, living as refugees without adequate water or sanitation.

In this scene Joseph obeys God's command and his child is saved. In fact we are told that because of Joseph's actions, the scripture is fulfilled, meaning that God's ultimate purposes are worked out thanks to Joseph and in spite of Herod.

By the way, there are striking parallels between the Joseph we meet here in the New Testament and the Old Testament Joseph, the Joseph of the “Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat,” we have been reading about this week in our church-wide Bible reading guide. Both the Old Testament Joseph and the New Testament Joseph were guided by dreams. Both were forced to go to Egypt by the cruel, unjust actions of others. Both ended up saving God’s chosen people through their actions. Both the Old Testament Joseph and the New Testament Joseph are case studies in God’s providence. If you are faithful to God’s commands, God can bring something unexpectedly good out of your life, even when your world is turned upside down.

Let me skip scene 2 for a moment and go to scene 3. Scene 3 is a lot like scene 1. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take his family back to the land of Israel, and once again Joseph obeys. But this time there is a little wrinkle in the story—a last minute change of plans. Joseph calls an audible.

For those of you who don’t watch football on Sunday afternoon, let me explain what I’m talking about, but in case you don’t let me explain. In football an audible is when the quarterback comes up to the line of scrimmage to start a play and sees the defense lined up in such a way that they will stop the play sent in the coach. At that point, he can alter the play right there on the field by calling a series of numbers that tells his teammates that he is going to run a different play. That new play is called an audible.

In scene 3 Joseph calls an audible. He gets the basic play from God, which is to return to the land of Israel. But he sees something in the circumstances that require a little adjustment. He discovers that even though Herod has died, Herod’s son has taken his place, and Herod’s son wasn’t much better than Herod. So after he I warned about this in a dream, Joseph decides at the last minute to head for Nazareth instead of going back to Bethlehem.

Now here is the irony in the story. Even Joseph’s audible ends up fulfilling the scriptures, fulfilling God’s purposes in an unexpected way. Because Jesus grows up in Nazareth, he is called a Nazorean. In Hebrew a Nazor is someone set apart and consecrated by God for a special purpose. Because of Joseph’s audible, Joseph’s last minute decision that he had to make on his own without clear instructions from God, Jesus grows up being called a Nazorean, which in an ironic way reminds people of who Jesus is. Jesus is a Nazor, a person set apart and consecrated by God for a special purpose.

Sometimes you fulfill God’s purposes by simple obedience to God’s commands. That is what Joseph does in scene 1. But sometimes in order to obey God’s will for your life, you have to do some thinking, you have to use your best judgment, you have to seek out advice from trusted Christian people. In other words, in some situations you have to call an audible. But here is the good news: God can use even your audibles—even your thoughtful and prayerful guesses about what to do in certain situations—God can use even those in unexpected ways to fulfill God’s purpose for your life.

Now let’s go back to scene 2. Scene 2 begins not with a command from God but a command from a cruel and vicious tyrant. Herod orders the slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem two years-old and under.

But here is the irony: even the wicked policies of a godless king will not thwart God's purposes. Take out a pew Bible and turn to Jeremiah 31:15 (OT, p. 734). Jeremiah 31:15 is the verse quoted in Matthew, chapter 2: "Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Originally that verse in Jeremiah referred to the massacres committed by the Babylonians against the people of Israel back in 587 B. C. But it could just as easily describe the massacre of the children of Bethlehem, or the Jews in Nazi Germany, or the Anuak in Ethiopia, or people in Cambodia or Rwanda. There are plenty of places in the world, including our own church, where mothers are weeping for their children.

But that is not the end of the story. Now look at the next two verses—Jeremiah 31:16-17: "Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord; they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord; your children shall come back to their own country."

By slaughtering the children in Bethlehem, Herod tries to establish that he is the king—he is the man! But when Matthew looks at this situation, he sees the Bible. He sees that God is still in control. Just as God had a future for the children of Israel even after the massacre by the Babylonians, so God has a future for the children of Bethlehem even after the massacre by Herod, and for the children of the Anuak even after the massacre by the Ethiopians, and for our children despite any tragedy that might try to take them away from us.

The point is this: God's purposes are going to be fulfilled one way or another. That point is made in all three scenes of our scripture reading. The scriptures are going to be fulfilled one way or another. One way or another God's intends to make his Son the Savior of the world, through his Son to bring peace on earth and good will to all people.

The question is this: Do you want to be part of the problem or part of the solution? Do you want to be one of the barriers, like Herod, that God has to sweep aside in order to fulfill God's purpose? Or do you want to be one of the participants, one of the Josephs whom God uses to accomplish God's purpose?

Interestingly, there is a small group of people in our own church who have begun working with others in Spokane to help the Anuak people. They are raising funds for a well that will provide water for Anuak refugees in Sudan. You will hear more about that in this new year. It is like other stories of people in our church helping the homeless in Spokane, the poor in Guatemala, or the youth of our church helping people rebuild their lives on the Gulf Coast. Basically we are trying to be like Joseph: an instrument God uses to save people, not a party to their destruction.

And here is the good news: When you do that, when you give your life to serving God and obeying God's commands, God can use you in surprising ways, even when you cannot see ahead of time how it will all turn out.

- Ken Onstot