

Herod and Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Alright, well we read from Matthew chapter 2 verse 13 to 23 as we work our way through the Matthew Christmas story.

And if you look closely at it with me, you'll probably have noticed already that this is not your average Christmas text. Herod the king of Judea under the Roman Empire asked the wise men to find this baby that he started prophecies about.

Because the prophecies say that he's to be the king and he's nervous about this rivalry between his kingship and whatever this baby might mean. And so he says to the wise men, go and find him so I can come to and worship him.

And of course what he really means is I'm going to kill the baby. I'm going to murder him if you tell me where he is. And the wise men catch on to that and they come back at the beginning of this passage and they don't tell Herod.

They flee. And Herod in response is enraged and he orders that all the little boys under the age of two, so Jesus must have been two or less at this time, under the age of two in the Bethlehemite region be murdered.

[1 : 1 1] Now we don't know how many that is but it was a great atrocity and a genocide, a genocide of sorts. And this text has been called throughout church history the massacre of the innocents.

And it has a parallel text to the massacre of the innocents in the Old Testament. We read that from Exodus chapter one when Pharaoh orders all the little boys to be killed, the Israelite boys to be murdered in Egypt.

Now in 2018 we had lived here before Heather and my wife and I and our kids. And in 2018 I preached my last sermon here at St. Columbus and the text at the time were chosen for me and the very last sermon that I preached here in 2018 was about circumcision.

And the first regular Sunday I returned in 2021 the text is chosen for me and it's the story of the massacre of the innocents.

And so something's up, something's going on with this and we'll have to talk to whoever issues the text every week about it. And now this passage is actually really rich.

[2 : 2 4] There's so much actually that we can't see today. We don't have time to see about the wealth of this passage. Really the whole story of the Bible is right here in this battle, this war between Herod and Jesus in this Christmas story.

And it's really a story actually about slavery and about freedom. And so let's see this morning first the liberator, the one who gives freedom, secondly why we need liberation and thirdly the nature of true freedom, of true liberation.

So first the liberator. We read two passages, Exodus 1 first from the Old Testament and the Christian church for centuries since the beginning has always recognized ever since the Bible was written that especially in the Gospels the writers go out of their way to write about how Jesus relives the story of the Old Testament.

And even the Christian church has seen over the generations that the Old Testament relives the story of the Old Testament over and over again. And we call this pattern that runs through the Bible of these stories that keep reappearing over and over again, typology, biblical typology.

And it's right here in the text we looked at the text we're looking at this morning. The commentators will say about Exodus 1, one commentator in particular calls Pharaoh the serpent king when he talks about Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 1.

[3 : 53] And he says, just listen to this, that the serpent king goes to the women of Israel. And he says to them, you're being too fruitful and you're multiplying too fast.

And so he tempts them to destroy God's people. And if you've read through the Bible much in your life, if you've been a Christian for a while, you'll pick up that actually that story is a redoing of Genesis chapter 3 when the original serpent king, the tempter came and said to Eve, I don't want you to be fruitful and multiply.

I don't want God's people to flourish. And he tempted her to sin against God. And here it's happening all over again at the beginning of Exodus 1. And even the women, I should say, these new eaves, they don't do it.

They push back these new eaves, say no to the serpent king to Pharaoh. And this teaches us a couple of things. First, there is in the Bible a sacred history where God works through patterns over and over again.

And we see them throughout all of the narratives. And secondly, part of this sacred history is that there are types of tempters and types of messiahs that appear throughout the story over and over again.

[5 : 11] And in Exodus chapter 1, that tempter is Pharaoh. We move from the serpent of Genesis 3 to the Pharaoh of Exodus 1. And then when these women, these new eaves, say no, they say, we will not destroy this new Garden of Eden all over again.

One little boy is born. In Exodus chapter 2, verse 1, Moses is born and he experiences his own Exodus story because at the very beginning of his life, this messianic figure, the one offspring of the women that would not kill the children.

When he's born, he's saved from Pharaoh by being put in an ark made of pitch just like Noah and sent down the waters of Egypt deeper into Egypt.

And that's his salvation. And he will then lead the Israelite people through the waters like an ark all over again at the end of his life, the great deliverer. And you see these patterns are weaving all over the place throughout Scripture.

And you come back to Matthew 2, to Matthew 2, 13 to 23, the text we read this morning. And the thread of that very story, that sacred history comes to its greatest stitch, its final weave, its climax.

[6 : 24] There were jokes this last week about me quoting C.S. Lewis maybe too often in sermons. And so I decided this week I was going to try so hard not to quote C.S. Lewis.

And I really don't quote C.S. Lewis as often as I think the jokes made out. But when it came to this point, so be it. Lewis says in the second chapter of mere Christianity that actually the point we're making right now is one of the great evidences, one of the great arguments for Christianity, for the existence of the Christian God.

And what he says is that when you read the Gospels, they don't have the nature of a conjured mythology. Nobody could make this up.

For one, Jesus is such an atypical hero. He's got this messianic character that's unlike anything we see in world history. The mythologies just don't tell stories like this. He wouldn't write about a Messiah that displays himself so weakly as Christ that dies at the hand of his enemy like Christ does.

But even more than that, and Lewis doesn't get into this as much. But when you look across the Bible at the multiplicity of authors and when they wrote and the languages they spoke and the different cultures they were a part of, what we find is this great pattern appearing throughout all of sacred history, biblical history, that no individual could weave together at different times and different places the repeat language, the stories, the figures, the characters, except unless God were actually the author.

[7 : 57] And so this great pattern is immediately recognizable when you come to Matthew chapter two. The pattern is really clear and this is the point. Jesus Christ came, the Christmas baby, and he is reliving in Matthew two, the Exodus story.

And Matthew goes out of his way to make that really clear for us. In verse 13, Herod declares war to destroy Jesus, this child, and a dream comes to Joseph.

And Joseph's dream from the angel is not just go down to Egypt to preserve Jesus. Yes, it's that, but it's about much more than it's about prophecy fulfillment.

And Matthew makes that clear because he quotes from Hosea 11 and he says, this is about the fact that God has already said, out of Egypt I called my son.

And Hosea 11 written centuries before Jesus would come into the world. Matthew is saying is about both looking backward and looking forward. Hosea 11 was written to look back at Israel being called out of Egypt, but also looking forward to the son who would be called out of Egypt in the future.

[9 : 10] And so there's two things here to note about this. Jesus Christ in this story was saved from the new pharaoh Herod, just like Moses was saved in the massacre of the innocents.

This is a repetition. Jesus is going through the exact same narrative that Moses went through at the beginning of his life. Jesus Christ is the new Moses. That's what Matthew wants us to see.

But it doesn't stop there because Jesus Christ also was called back up out of Egypt back into Israel. And that means not only does Jesus look like the new Moses, the deliverer himself at the beginning of his life, but he comes up out of Egypt looking like Israel coming out of Egypt in Exodus chapter 14.

Now let me close this point, the liberator. Jesus, what is he? Who is he? I'll close this point by saying this. If you're a Christian today and you've been in the church for any amount of time, it makes total sense probably to say, Matthew, I see why you would say Jesus Christ is the new Moses.

He is the great deliverer. He has come to bring me through the waters of judgment. He's come to remove and deliver me from the world, the flesh and from the sin.

[10 : 25] He's come to forgive me. I see why he's the deliverer. But in this story, it is not only that Jesus is the deliverer, the new Moses, but also that Jesus is the new Israel who actually is being symbolized as the one being delivered.

When he comes up out of Egypt, he's being delivered. You see Numbers chapter 12 says, who is there in the Old Testament like Moses who could see God face to face?

There's nobody. Moses was the great one of the Old Testament. And then you come to Hebrews 2 and Hebrews 2 says, but while Moses was great, he is not the Son.

He was a faithful servant, but Jesus Christ is the Son. Hebrews is saying, the preacher in Hebrews is saying, let me show you how Jesus is greater than Moses.

He's the new Moses. But what does it mean to say? Why is it that Jesus were being taught had to come up out of Egypt like Israel had to come up out of Egypt delivered?

[11 : 28] Israel had to be saved. Israel had to be saved from their imprisonment. And so does Jesus symbolically at the beginning of his life. Now why not the answer to that question comes in our second point and that's the answer to the question why we need liberation.

I mentioned them just a moment ago, but the Bible says that there are three great enemies of humanity and that's the world, the flesh and the devil.

And the world is the Bible's term for everything that is wrong outside of us. And the flesh is the Bible's term for everything that's wrong inside of me, my sinful desires.

And the devil is the one who wants everything to go wrong both outside of you and inside of you all the time. And there is liberation being metaphorically talked about in this passage through this new Moses in all of it, world flesh and devil, but particularly actually the focus of this passage and it's a little bit subtle is on liberation from Satan, from the devil.

That's actually the focus. And let me show you that because of course this is a passage about Herod and Jesus, but in Revelation chapter 12 verse four, the writer John, the apostle, he picks up on this passage, this story of Herod and Jesus, this Christmas war and uses Herod as the great symbol of what we know as the beast in Revelation.

[12 : 57] Let me read it to you. This is what he says, the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth. It's Mary so that when she gave birth, he might devour the child.

And she gave birth to a son, the male child who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. And you see in Revelation 12, John is saying actually Matthew two and the antithesis between Herod and Jesus is the great story, the symbol of all dragon like actions of human history.

It's the great symbol of evil incarnate of evil in itself and he uses this story, the story of Herod to say that Herod is like the great beast.

And we've already seen that you have Satan and Genesis three, come as the great tempter and then Pharaoh as a type of the great tempter. And now Herod and the dragon itself and Revelation chapter 12, these are all woven together into one fabric.

In other words, Herod's role in the gospel stories was to stop the prophecy of Genesis three, 15. You remember in the middle of the garden, Genesis three, 15 says one day, the one offspring of Eve will crush the serpent.

[14 : 15] And at the beginning of Jesus life, Herod comes to stop it. He's the dragon who will crush the child before the child can crush the serpent. And this is exactly what Herod was doing his entire life.

Josephus is a Jewish historian from the first century and we have all sorts of texts about Herod from Josephus. And let me just tell you a couple of the things that Herod was known for.

Herod murdered half of the Sanhedrin, the religious Jewish council at one time in his life. And then later Herod would murder 300 of his own nobility that he suspected to be potentially trying to overthrow him in a rivalry.

And later Herod at the end of his life murdered three of his own sons who he suspected were trying to kill him. And then at the end of his life, Herod murdered his own wife.

Herod was beastly. From the beginning of his life to the end of his life. And he stood as the great antithesis to Jesus Christ here. He's the great symbol that John picks up on in Revelation 12 of what it looks like to be evil, to be beastly.

[15 : 25] In other words, Herod was successful in stopping all of his rivals. You see that the original Jewish writer and reader knows that Herod, nobody could stop Herod.

Herod was successful, but Herod could not stop the Christmas child. He went after him and he couldn't catch him. He went after him and he couldn't kill him because he is the one prophesied in Genesis 3.15 from the very beginning.

And this is why I think Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31. You know, in the middle of this passage, there's this very sad quote from Jeremiah 31 about Rachel, one of the great mothers of Israel.

And it says that Rachel sees the massacre of the innocents. Herod murdered these children. And she weeps because the children of Israel have died.

Now originally, when Jeremiah used that phrase, he was using Rachel as a metaphor for a different tragedy. And that's when Nebuchadnezzar, the king, came from Babylon to Jerusalem to murder so many, to take Israel into captivity.

[16 : 31] And Rachel and Jeremiah is weeping for the children that were murdered in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Now another reason that Matthew uses that text is not only because of its reality of Rachel's tears shed throughout history for the children of Israel, but because that is the only sad verse in the entirety of Jeremiah 31.

You know, when you read the Jeremiah 31, it is nothing but verse after verse of great hope and then that one sad moment. And God responds to Rachel and Jeremiah 31 and says, all of a sudden, weep no more, for I will not leave you.

I will come for you. I will comfort you, Israel. I will come for you. And you see the great antithesis? In the midst of Jeremiah 31, there is an evil one, a king, a serpent king who comes and causes God's people to weep over the massacre of the innocents.

But surrounded by that is the fact of the Christmas child. It's the promise. Jeremiah 31, what's it famous for? The new covenant promise that one day there will come a child that one day there would come a son.

He quotes Jeremiah 31 because this Christmas story is Jeremiah 31. It's the coming of the new covenant. Herod is all that is wrong with the world and Jesus Christ is all that can be put back to right with the world.

[17 : 56] Now this brings us back as we close this second point and move to the final point. This brings us back to the question that I asked to lead into point two. And that's why does Jesus, why does Jesus Christ relive the Exodus story as the one being delivered in this passage?

It makes sense to me that he's the new Moses, that he would be called the deliverer. But why is he coming up out of Egypt, fulfilling the prophecy of Israel itself as the one being delivered?

Why is that? And this is our answer. We've gotten it in this antithesis. Why was he delivered? Why was he baptized? Why was a person who had no sin baptized?

Why did he go under the waters of judgment symbolically? And it's because of this. For the Christian today, if you're a believer today, and this is the promise, and this is what's on offer in Christianity, because on day one, Jesus Christ, the Christmas child, came to take my place.

And he came to take your place. And Gregory of Nazianza is one of the great early church fathers. He says it like this, that which is not assumed, taken on, cannot be healed.

[19 : 10] And from the very beginning of Christ's life, he assumed me, and he assumed you. He took on everything that you are, even your Herodian qualities, the beastliness in our hearts.

The heinous deeds and the misdeeds dark Christ took them on from the very beginning of his life. Why is it that Christ must go through the waters of judgment like the Red Sea, like the Exodus story, like Israel?

Why must he symbolically relive the Israelite story? And it's because he came to take the place of humanity. And Israel had to be taken up out of bondage.

Israel had to be delivered from slavery. And so Jesus Christ came himself to be delivered from slavery. Now it's so important as we wrap up this point to say this, that in Luke chapter 9, at the mount of transfiguration, Jesus turns to the disciples that were there.

And he says to them, it says, Luke says that after he was transfigured, he told them about his Exodus. Jesus uses the word Exodus in Luke chapter 9 to describe what was going to happen to him.

[20 : 20] And what is Jesus Christ's Exodus? Exodus is his Exodus story. And you know what he's talking about? It's the same word that John uses for the hour, the same meaning. It's the cross.

In other words, Jesus is saying, I've got to go through the waters of judgment. I've got to go through the Red Sea. I've got to live the Exodus. And why does he come up out of Egypt?

Because at the very beginning of his life as a little baby, God was showing us what the very end of his life was going to be like. He had to be delivered through the judgment waters just like Israel.

He had to come out of slavery just like Israel, or we would never be able to come out of slavery like Israel. The beginning of his life was the sign of the end of his life. But let me just mark one difference for you.

One difference, and that's this, that you remember how the Israelites came out of Egypt. You know, they were grumbling the whole way, shaking their fists at God, hating God saying, I wish I was still back there in slavery, and yet the waters parted for them and they stayed dry.

[21 : 28] And when Jesus underwent his exodus, he drowned. The waters of judgment did not part for him. And as the great song says, he did it without mumbling a word.

He did not grumble. He did not comply. He did not sin at any point. But he was drowned. He was more like the Egyptians who were completely covered under the waters of judgment.

And yet by his power, he came up again because he deserved it. How is it, this is the great weave of the Bible. How is it that Israel could be delivered from the waters of judgment so many thousands of years ago because Jesus Christ would undergo his exodus?

And how is it that you today can be delivered from the world and the flesh and the devil because Jesus Christ underwent his exodus, the Christmas child in the beginning of history, and this story about Herod and Jesus is just the first sign of it.

This is the power of the Christmas deliverer. You know, it is not, you know what that means? It means this. It is not the quality of your faith today that saves you.

[22 : 38] That brings you through the waters of judgment. Your faith may be all over the place. And today, Sunday, it may be better today than it's going to be on Monday morning. It's not the quality of your faith that gets you through.

The Israelites came through the waters of judgment and they were shaking their fists at God the whole way. It is the object of your faith. And the object of your faith is the power of the one who went through the exodus waters and they could not hold him down.

And that's the gospel. That's the Christmas story. I'm going to close briefly by asking them, what does it mean to have true freedom finally? And you know, we could stop right there because we've gotten to the gospel and we've talked about the deliverer and we've seen how God's written this amazing story throughout Redemptive History and that's enough.

The gospel has been seen. But I think it's important actually to say one more thing and that's the nature of true freedom because today, freedom and liberation is such an important concept.

And the Bible offers a robust idea and concept of what freedom means that is in antithesis to modern ideas of freedom.

[23 : 54] You know, Christ's freedom is to the modern world like it is to Herod. They're at war with one another. So let me just briefly say something about how we actually need liberation from the world's definition of liberation today.

And this is what it is. Freedom today, we hear about it all the time even in language like rights and liberty and freedom which always need to be defined very well.

We need to always ask, will freedom from what and freedom to do what? That's the question to answer. What kind of freedom are we talking about? Freedom today is like what Alexander Solzhenitsyn said about Soviet communism.

Men have forgotten God and that's why all of this has happened. And Carl Truman in his recent, very good book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, he talks about a crisis enveloping the Western world and he says all the ways in which humans have forgotten God have produced the current cultural order that we live in.

And one of those ways is that we now conceive of freedom as the expression, the ability to express our personal desires at any time. And that's called expressive individualism, the freedom to express the self, to define the self by way of our own desires and to express that self, that desire from within to without.

[25 : 20] That's the modern idea of freedom. And what it means is that we're free actually from the moral order, God's authority, historical authorities, history, and it we're free to the proliferation of choice, the facade of an unlimited identity, the expression, the fulfillment of any desire to be whatever we want to be.

And Truman says that for today, my inward life, my inward life is decisive for who I am, what I want to be, and how I want to live. That's the concept of freedom today.

Richard Lovelace in his great book in the middle of the 20th century, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal* says that even as us Christians, even if you're a Christian today, we can be inculturated to this idea of freedom.

And we need disinculturation to be disinculturated from the world's definition of freedom. And so let me just close by offering you three, and I'm just going to rattle these off, three Christmas freedoms that Jesus Christ gives that are so different from the world's definition of freedom.

And these are really what humanity needs. And the first one is this, Jesus Christ offers you freedom from Egypt, from bondage. And all of us have bondage in our lives to little gods, little masters, little creatures that we come back to and worship more than we love God.

[26 : 45] But let me just say this, even as a Christian, you may struggle with little gods in your life, all throughout your life. But what the Christmas Child means is that if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are definitively and finally freed from all false masters forever.

The Christmas Child says, I have brought you by the power of the object of your faith, he has brought you across the waters of judgment. And justification means that you are definitively sanctified.

The bondage to sin is broken. You are freed from the power of the world, the flesh and the devil. That's what the kind of freedom that Christianity offers today. Now secondly, that leads them to the second Christmas freedom.

And that's that Jesus Christ does not only offer you freedom from the bondage of Egypt, slavery, but freedom also secondly to go to the mountain. Freedom from and freedom to, you see, remember Israel, they went through the waters and then they came to Sinai to hear the law of God.

And that order is so important. And in this passage, Joseph hears the command, get up and go, get out of Egypt. And he gets up and he goes out of Egypt.

[28 : 00] And that means if you believe in Jesus Christ today and you've been definitively, the power of sin has been broken in your life, you now for the first time have the freedom to go to the mountain, to go to Sinai, to go to the sermon on the mount.

In other words, to be holy. You see, freedom, real freedom is not just the freedom to do whatever you want. Real freedom, the Bible says is actually to be holy, to be conformed to the law of God, to walk in the order of creation as God made things.

That's real freedom, the Bible says. And it's so different from the modern world. It's actually freedom from the slavery of personal desire. Because if you live life completely according to your desires and you determine your own identity all the time by the way you feel, then if you're honest with yourself, we all know that our wants don't add up.

We want and then we don't want. And we're a mess inside and we change all the time. And that's not real freedom. That's bondage. But being defined by the true master unto holiness, that's true freedom.

And finally, lastly, the Christmas child frees us to go to the promised land. And we don't have any time to spend on this. But at the very end of the passage, Jesus moves from Egypt back to the promised land.

[29 : 15] And actually when he gets to the promised land, Israel, he goes to the south and then the north and becomes a Nazarene. And then if you read through the gospels carefully, you see that he moves back south again until he dies in Jerusalem.

And we lost power, but I'm going to finish. That's actually the narrative of conquest in Joshua, that they go into the south of the promised land, they move north and then they move back south again.

And Jesus Christ we're learning is the new Joshua too, not only the new Moses and the better Israel, but the new Joshua. His name's saying Yeshua, he saves. What this means is that Jesus Christ has come not only to deliver you, but to take you all the way home.

To the place where you belong, to the place without the world of flesh and the devil, to the place without disease, disaster and death. And if I could say this last thing, at Christmas time, it's always a season where all of us can remember those moments in our lives where it was Christmas day and we were right where we needed to be.

We were home and we were well loved and well taken care of. And your favorite moment of that is probably from when you were a child and you got everything you asked for and all those things.

[30 : 34] That's not kitsch, that's not cheesy. Christmas day is a sign of true home. And Jesus Christ has come to free you to true home. Your heart will never be satisfied until you rest in him because we were made for him.

And so here's the real freedom that the world cannot offer. If you have home with Jesus Christ, the true liberator today, then no matter what tsunami hits your life this week and no matter what wave crashes into you in the coming year in 2022, you can be okay because you have real freedom.

Let's pray together. Father, we ask now that you would wake us up and shake us up to the freedom that Jesus Christ offers that the world can never give.

And so break through the bondage of our idolatry, break through the scales that are on our eyes of our heart, Lord. But for Christians and people who are exploring the claims of faith today and give us new hearts today as we go forth into the world, we ask in Christ's name.

Amen.