

“Egypt and Israel: The Sequel”
Matthew 2:1-23 - April 18, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
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Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

Matt. 2:6 **“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”**

Matt. 2:7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Matt. 2:13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, 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 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, **“Out of Egypt I called my son.”**

Matt. 2:16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

Matt. 2:18 **“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”**

Matt. 2:19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. 23 And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene."

My junior year of college I went home with my friends for Thanksgiving break. With no money and not much to do, we ended up watching all three, three-hour movies in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy.

While I don't recommend doing this, watching all three movies over that break gave us a greater appreciation for the attention to the details presented in each story. We were able to see the connections in a way we hadn't before.

Now, for many, the second movie, *The Two Towers*, was better than the first. I think people say that because in the first movie you don't get as many battles and instead get a lot of character development.

And while it might not be as exciting to read about or watch, character development and backstories give depth, life and meaning to a story. They help the reader to gain a greater understanding of the issues the characters in a story are dealing with.

In a similar way, if we were to just read this account in Matthew, without learning of the first part of Israelite history, the beauty and meaning of Jesus' birth story could be missed and/or underappreciated.

You see, the backstory and the development of the events that Matthew draws into this account give us a much more complete picture of what God was doing.

And much like the chapter we have read this evening, one of the most important parts of Israel's history began with the murder of infants. In Exodus 1 and 2 we learn that the people of Israel were being enslaved and oppressed by the king of Egypt.

In that first chapter, we read that "the king of Egypt" (Ex. 1.15) ordered the execution of all male Hebrew babies. In God's providence, a Hebrew baby named Moses escaped the execution, and was brought up by one of Pharaoh's daughters in Egypt.

In the midst of difficulties and plagues, God called his people out of Egypt and used Moses to free Israel from the oppression of the evil king and to rule over his people.

Later Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea, and then into the wilderness where God gave Moses the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai.

If you are familiar with the book of Matthew, you already know why I would bring up those details. No doubt you have noticed that the similarities between the account of Israel and Jesus' life are everywhere. Matthew wrote his gospel in this particular way to highlight these connections.

Let's look closer:

In the same way God spared Moses from the murder of infants under the king of Egypt, God spared Jesus from the infanticide ordered by King Herod.

In the same way God brought Israel "out of Egypt", so also we read in Matthew that "out of Egypt" God called his Son, Jesus.

Paul writes that all of Israel was "**baptized** into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2) and in Jesus' birth story, we also read that he was **baptized** by John the Baptist.

We read of Israel wandering in the **wilderness for 40 years** and we see that Jesus went into the **wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights**.

Following Jesus' fasting and temptation in the **wilderness, he went up on the mountain and gave the people God's law** with the Sermon on the Mount. Much like Moses who **brought the law of God in the 10 commandments down from Mt. Sinai** for the people of God.

The connections between Matthew's account of Jesus' life and Israel's journey out of Egypt show us the deeply important connections God is laying out in this gospel.

God is letting us see his sovereignty and power throughout history. He is letting us have a clearer picture of his salvation story and allowing us to peek into his "script".

Jesus said that many prophets and righteous people longed to see [what we now see with clarity;] but did not see it; and longed to hear what we hear but did not hear it (Mt. 13:17). How could this be?

If you recall, in last Sunday evening's sermon, we learned and/or were reminded that the disciples who walked with Jesus often had no idea what was going on.

They were regularly frustrated, discouraged and confused. And the same was true with the religious leaders of their day.

In one instance Peter asked Jesus to explain a parable and Jesus responded, "Do you still not understand?"

Now we can stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and on the written accounts of what took place, and *we can look back* and see how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of old.

But it was not so easy for the Jews of Jesus' day. They had no idea what these prophecies meant or how they would be fulfilled.

And as we read through the gospels ourselves, perhaps many of us wonder, "how dull were these guys!" It seems pretty clear to me!

But think about the information they had.

The Israelites had been told to expect a Messiah. And the prophecies were like bits and pieces of a puzzle, but it seemed that nobody had the whole picture. No one had the top of the puzzle box. (McGee)

Here were some of the pieces of the prophecies:

1. A virgin would give birth, and his name would be Immanuel "God with us." (Is. 7:14)
2. A ruler would come out of Bethlehem, who is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic. 5:2)
3. Moses said that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you – it is to him you shall listen." (Deut. 18:15)
4. Out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11:1)
5. "He shall be called a Nazarene." (Mt. 2:23)
6. A ruler from David would be their shepherd, a prince among them. (Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 34:23-24)

No matter how good you are at solving riddles, it would be impossible to describe the Messiah from the pieces. It would be like guessing a full image from just a few corner pieces of the puzzle.

The Messiah was to come **from Bethlehem** but was also known to be **from Nazareth** (people also knew him as a Galilean). He was also to be **called out of Egypt** but also **be a prophet and a prince from among them**. He would be **God and also born from a virgin?!**

No matter how many different ways you tried to look at it, none of it would make sense.

But Matthew had seen the whole picture and that is the result of what he presents to his readers here.

What can we take away from this information? Why are we given the full picture?

We and the Jewish readers of Matthew's day were given this whole picture so that *we and they* could have hope.

If we were to imagine what it would be like to live in Jesus' day - to be a Jew whose only real experience with God had been through old scrolls and oral tradition, and no real sense of who the Messiah was to be, it would be a discouraging, disappointing and confusing existence.

It is true that Moses had freed the people from Egypt, but here they were under the oppression of King Herod now. Not much had changed. Throughout Israelite history it was common to see leaders come and go. Even the greatest kings and prophets were not enough.

And the people of Israel just kept falling into the same rut over and over again. They likely felt like they were stuck in the same bad story line. Something out of the movie "Groundhog Day"- living the same story over and over again.

Israel needed a better leader. While God had brought up Moses, David and other leaders to deliver his people, they were all inadequate and were not the Messiah. They could not save the people from their situation and sins. Moses himself knew that and told the people that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you - it is to him you shall listen." (Deut. 18.15)

The Sequel

So, Matthew narrates a new story for his readers. Different than the Groundhog Day Version, but fully established in its history. He has the script of the sequel. And contrary to what some people feel about sequels - *this sequel* is far better than the original.

In this account, Matthew highlights a change in the story line. He takes us back to Israel's past and takes us back to the well-known themes of Egypt and Israel. But this time, there is something interesting. The players are different.

This time we are not just reading about another king with another inadequate savior who dies while trying to deliver Israel. In this **sequel of Israel's story, "Part II"** (if you will), we will see a better story.

Just as prophesied, a better Moses and better deliverer comes.

Matthew tells us that Jesus fulfills the OT prophecies of the Messiah in ways no one expected. Jesus "is the true Israel, the faithful Israel who succeeds where old covenant Israel failed..."

"...Like ancient Israel, He came up out of Egypt, passed through the waters, and was tested in the wilderness (2:13-15; 3:13-4:11; see Ex. 12:40-42; 14:1-31; 16:4). Unlike old covenant Israel, however, Jesus passed the test. [And] He is therefore worthy to be called

God's Son because of who He is in His deity and because of what He accomplished in His humanity." [R.C. Sproul]

In other words, what Matthew is communicating here is that this was the plan for Israel all along. Jesus was the long-awaited savior who came not only to temporarily save his people from an earthly king, but that Jesus came to defeat all our foes and save us from our sins.

Jesus lived the perfectly obedient life that we could never live and died the death that we should have died. He received our guilt, shame and condemnation.

To continue the example of prophetic puzzle pieces, Israel likely thought that they had two puzzle sets that had been mixed together. It was far too confusing.

But Matthew shows us this complete picture of God's overall theme throughout the thousands of years of OT history. What seemed like random pieces of prophecy no longer appeared so random. What didn't make sense before was now as clear as day.

It was as if they were looking through a camera lens that was unfocused. They saw things, but they were shadows and blurry. Even if they were looking at the right objects. And Matthew comes and adjusts the focus and lets them see how it all came together. They can finally see clearly.

We love to see things clearly. To understand things. Even so, many people like to surprise one another. To keep things hidden until the last minute. I admit that I am one of those people.

Whenever we get a chance to do something special with our kids we like to present it to them as a surprise. When our kids were smaller, we would tell them that there was a surprise and that was enough to excite them.

As they have grown older, they want more details, they want to find out what the surprise is before they get the surprise. They can't stand the uncertainty of not knowing what it is!

I think that the older you get, the less you like surprises. The less you want someone to surprise you with a gift (*that you might not want*) or a party (*that you might actually dread*).

As we grow older, we prefer to be more and more in control of what is happening to us. I think this is in part why Jesus elevates the faith of a child.

The child-like faith doesn't need to know everything. A small child is content to know that his or her parents have something good in store for them.

And I think that one of the benefits of really understanding a chapter like this, is that God is being merciful with us. He knows we are weak, he knows we struggle to trust, and so he reveals to us his greater Script. He shows us how all those moments when the Israelites felt

alone, or discouraged or impatient, that God was at work. He lets them peer back into history and how he cared for them.

Imagine the agony Joseph must have felt when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. How Israel must have wondered if God had abandoned them when they were suffering in Egypt. How they must have wondered if God would provide when they were up against the Red Sea with nowhere to go.

But these events weren't random, it wasn't that God had forgotten them. It was just that they didn't know what God's plan was. They could not *see into the future* and know God's plan. They didn't have access to the script. They would have never guessed selling a brother into Egyptian slavery would have saved them from a famine. Nor that God would open up the Red Sea to save them from Pharaoh.

Isn't that interesting though? That God waited until that point in history to reveal himself plainly to them? To open their eyes? Or that Jesus opened the eyes of his disciples *after* his death and resurrection so they could see?

Hebrews 11 is a chapter full of people who hoped for things they could not see and died in faith, not having received the things promised, but seeing them from afar....(Heb 11:13).

Why doesn't God reveal his whole plan to us? Why don't we fully understand why he permits certain things to happen in life? Why don't we get to see the full picture?

Deut. 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Too often we want the whole picture of life, but God has chosen to keep certain things to himself. Here in Matthew 2, we are reminded that God is the Master Storyteller. He is the creator and sustainer. He is sovereign over all.

He wants us to know that all those pieces that didn't make sense actually make perfect sense. All the "random" things in our lives are part of God's unfolding story.

And that is ok. God wants us to trust him and rest in him. To not be anxious about tomorrow, or the things that come our way. He has a plan – a perfect plan.

Part III

And while in some ways Matthew 2 directly comforts Jews living in Matthew's day, it also brings us great comfort as well.

Because we, like OT Israel waited for the Messiah, we now wait for Part III of the trilogy. "*The Return of the King.*"

Jesus has told us that he will come again. We don't know when, we don't know how, we just know it will be soon.

And...we also know that “with the Lord one day is the same as a thousand years and a thousand years are no more than one day.” (2 Pet. 3:8). The secret things of God are hidden from us, but what is revealed to us is revealed that we may do all the words of the law.

Back in 2005, I sat down with Pastor Rayburn because I was trying to figure out which seminary I should go to. I was hesitant to go to him for this advice, because I thought he would say, well Covenant Seminary, OBVIOUSLY. But I decided to ask anyway.

And as a good Pastor, Pastor Rayburn saw through my question. I wasn't asking his advice on which seminary to go to. I was trying to do my best to “*figure out where God wanted me to go to seminary.*” He perceived that I was trying to determine God's hidden will or take a peek into God's script for my life.

Pastor Rayburn kindly explained that we are not called to “figure out God's will.” He said God has already revealed his will. What we have in Scripture is enough.

He asked me if the seminaries I was considering were known to be faithful in teaching God's word. I said yes. Then he asked if going to one over the other would be a better financial decision, that answer was clear. He said, if they are all reputable seminaries that teach you to understand and preach God's word, then just pick the one that makes the most financial sense!

It was such a straightforward way of thinking that I couldn't get over it. You see all this time I was trying to get God to nudge me the right way, or open doors, or have someone randomly call me and say, “Nathaniel you need to go to THIS seminary.” I didn't want to mess up and make the wrong decision. I wanted to know what God wanted me to do. I wanted him to confirm my decision with a special feeling in my gut.

But that is not what we are called to do. Our life is not about finding out what God's hidden will is. It is about obeying and trusting in his revealed will.

And as we live our lives in this world, there are a lot of puzzle pieces that won't make sense.

We will often be uncertain about what to do. We will feel anxious about making important decisions like which jobs to take, where to live, what to study, who to marry, where to serve, or who to help. We will face uncertainties throughout our lives when we will think that God is not with us.

But we should be careful to depend more on this “perceived hidden knowledge” that many of us sometimes feel we have access to. That is not what God has called us to. He has called us to read his word, obey it, trust it and rest in Jesus and his accomplished work.

That means that while we might not always be able to make sense of the events of our lives, or the difficulties we face, we can still trust that God's sovereign plan will always prevail.

His script is already written, and it is perfect just as it is, and there is nothing you can do to mess it up.

Brothers and sisters, I don't know if you realize how much of a freedom there is in trusting in God's sovereignty. In trusting that he is the Master Storyteller and that he who has created this History of Redemption, will continue to sustain it until Jesus comes again and beyond.

We are not too different from the Jews in Matthew 2. We still don't understand everything that is happening in this world and in our lives. Part III of this trilogy is still "Coming Soon". There are still puzzle pieces on the table and while we cannot make sense of where they go or why they are there, of this we can be certain: God's plan for us is perfect and we can rest in it securely.

Let me close with this gentle reminder from our Father himself, taken from Is. 46:9:

Is. 46:9 Remember the former things, those of long ago;
 I am God, and there is no other;
 I am God, and there is none like me.
10 I make known the end from the beginning,
 from ancient times, what is still to come.
 I say, 'My purpose will stand,
 and I will do all that I please.'
11 From the east I summon a bird of prey;
 from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.
 What I have said, that I will bring about;
 what I have planned, that I will do.
12 Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted,
 you who are now far from my righteousness.
13 I am bringing my righteousness near,
 it is not far away;
 and my salvation will not be delayed.
 I will grant salvation to Zion,
 my splendor to Israel.

Our God is an awesome God and his plan for us is secured in the salvation of Israel already accomplished in Jesus. In this we have great hope!

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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