

## **“Jesus, Our Comforter”**

**Giv 2020**

**Downtown & Lexington**

**December 13, 2020**

There are certain words and images you probably expect to hear at Christmastime. Phrases or ideas that are lifted up and sort of made to be the hallmark themes of this season. This is true for the believer and non-believer alike. They appear in our holiday TV specials, in our advertisements - they are used by our leaders - both inside and outside the church.

I made a list of some popular ones. Things like: Peace, giving, light, joy, love, cheer, merry and bright.

These words evoke something in us. They evoke feelings, often very strong feelings, and generally very positive feelings about the Christmas season.

On the other hand, there's also a list of words we don't expect to hear this time of year. Words like: pain, chaos, tyranny, injustice, slaughter, death. Some of you may even be thinking to yourself right now, “Bro, this is the |giv| series, what are you doing? Go back to the other list.”

Here's what's interesting, though. Though we don't talk about it often, the advent narratives in Scripture actually give us both - the first list of words *and* the second.

I'll show you what I mean in Matthew 2...

### **Matthew 2:13–15**

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.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 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.”

Little bit of context here, this taking place right after the wise men had visited Jesus. They had come to King Herod - who was the ruler in Israel at the time - and asked him where they could find a child who had been born who would be the true King of the Jews.

I don't know what you know about diplomacy, but it's a real bold move to go to the guy who thinks he's the king of the Jews and ask him where you can find the real one. That tends to not sit well with kings.

Herod, then, got the chief priests and the scribes together to ask them where the Christ - the Messiah - which is the Hebrew way of talking about the Promised Forever King of God's Kingdom - was supposed to be born and they told him, “in Bethlehem.” So, Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem and told them to be sure to come back and let him know when they found the child, so he could worship him, too.

Spoiler alert, Herod was lying. He didn't want to worship Jesus. In fact, he wanted to kill Jesus, to protect His own throne.

And so, the wise men get warned in a dream about Herod's plot, and they peel out without going back to him, and then the story picks up here. Joseph gets warned of the same and flees with the family to Egypt.

**Matthew 2:16-18**

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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

“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.”

Herod realizes he was tricked and then takes unthinkable horrible action and has all the male children under the age of two from that region slaughtered.

This may sound extreme, but for Herod this was on par with his normal behavior. If you know anything about Herod you should know he was the walking embodiment of a tyrant.

- The very first thing he did when he came to power was have everyone from the former dynasty executed to make sure none of them would give him any trouble.
- At one point, he executed half the Sanhedrin, which is the 70 priests and elders who were, basically, the religious supreme court of Israel, because they were giving him trouble.
- Once, in a fit of rage, he had 300 court nobles killed.
- One time because he really didn't trust her, he had his wife executed. Then he had her mother executed. And you think you have in-law problems.
- He had three of his own sons executed because he didn't trust them.
- Even on his deathbed, he had dozens of noblemen detained in a central building in Jerusalem and ordered that the minute he died, his death should be mourned and celebrated by killing everyone in that building. Fortunately, they didn't do it.

This is who Herod was. This is the type of stuff Herod did. If this was a small town with a few dozen kids in that age range, which historically it appears that it was, then these were children who likely known by everyone else in town, births people remember, children known by name at the market with their mothers... and Herod blots them out without as much of a second thought.

This a dark, dark story. And it is right here in the midst of the advent story.

Now, obviously, this is not one that you likely read to your children as you tuck them in on Christmas Eve, but the question for us is, “Why is it here?” Why did Matthew include this in his biography of Jesus' life?

The answer is more than simply that these events historically happened - though they did. There is something here he wants us to learn from the inclusion of these dark details. Something that this tells us about Jesus, something that this tells us about Christianity, something that this tells us about Christmas that is worth our thought and attention.

And since Advent, for the church, is a season of reflecting on these events - I just want to put before us a couple of things we glean from this piece of the story - ideas that I think are important for all of us - both in this season and every other one.

### **1. Advent is full of pain.**

There is a train of thought or this belief - both inside and outside of Christian circles - that goes a little something like this, "Life isn't supposed to be hard and things aren't supposed to go wrong for me... and if they do then God has somehow failed at his job."

And we may not say it that precisely or overtly. But when suffering or hardship hits, we have this response that "oh no, something has gone wrong and God must not be there or He's not who I thought He was..

One of the things that just jumps out from this narrative is that Jesus is born into conflict, mess, and pain. We paint the birth of Jesus as this story of a cute little baby being born on soft hay in a barn. And certainly, there are some beautiful, wonderful moments in Jesus' early life. But, from the jump, this child is a hunted child.

Herod wanted him dead. From his earliest days, he became a refugee seeking safety from a tyrannical government. Which, by the way, should affect how we think and feel towards refugees - they aren't a sidenote or afterthought to the Christian story, we worship one. But, this is what he's born into - danger, chaos, pain, brokenness, mess.

Matthew's inclusion of the quote from Jeremiah is really telling here. He's referencing a passage from the prophet Jeremiah:

#### **Jeremiah 31:15**

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.

Here Jeremiah poetically captures a very specific moment when God's people are being conquered and taken into captivity.

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they did what conquering kingdoms do: slaughtered opponents and took for themselves prisoners of war. They readily began a process of mass deportation. Specifically ripping hundreds upon thousands of Jewish men and boys from their families and homelands

and geographically relocating them in Babylon. Daniel - of the lion's den fame - was likely one of these boys.

It's been said that many mothers and wives would gather at the edge of the city - which is where Ramah was located - to give tearful and final goodbyes as they watch their children being carried away as prisoners of war.

And you gotta think, the pain of this is not just the loss of a child, but taking the young men out of a society, especially one like this - you're taking away it's future. You take away the economic prospects. You doom its women to lives of solitude and struggle. No husbands, no fathers, no protectors or cultivators, no one to carry on a lineage.

And Jeremiah took this image and applied it to the exile as a whole -- Rachel, a symbol for the mother of all Israel, weeping over her lost people, her lost future, her lost hope.

It's truly one of the darkest moments of Israel's history. Their lives as they know it are now forever gone. The future forever changed. Pain, loss, and suffering taking up permanent residence in the hearts of many.

And Matthew makes this one-to-one connection that the experience of those lost children of the exile, the conflict of those mothers crying out against tyranny and, for an end to the brokenness before them, is the very same conflict Jesus is being born into in Bethlehem.

We can come to Jesus and think that pain, suffering, and hardship are supposed to be a thing of the past. But, what we see here is that pain, suffering, and hardship are right at the heart of the opening pages of Jesus' own story.

The Christ is a suffering savior, and even in his birth and childhood he's born into circumstances surrounded by chaos, pain and strife. And if this is the story for Jesus - who is God incarnate - how much more should we expect it to be a part of our story, as well.

You see, the greatest tyrant, the tyrant behind all of the other tyrants is still here in our world. Sin. Sin that dwells in each of us. Sin that manifests itself in hundreds of different ways including the extreme versions of all the Herods of history and modern life. Sin that fractures the world, that separates us from God, that breaks apart relationships and leaves all kinds of pain and destruction in its wake. The tyrant lives on.

And for many of us this reality is really acute in this season. Holidays can be a blessing and curse at times. They can be full of wonderful memory-making and reflecting on what's most important. And they can also be glaring reminders of all that is still not right in the world and in our lives, as well.

They can put a magnifying glass on something or someone we've lost. They can be a reminder that we are still not who want to be or have the life we wish we had. That life and family and everything in between is far more of a mess than we want it to be. They can bring back to the surface old wounds that have never quite fully healed.

For one reason or another, in this season or out of it, we can simply find ourselves in this life like Jesus' family and the mothers in Bethlehem. Feeling like things have just gone too wrong and there's no way out. Feeling captured to our sins and failures. Captured by grief and anxieties. Wishing things were different and praying for relief.

And for what it's worth, I think Advent tells us it is not wrong to feel that way.

Somewhere along the way, I fear American Christianity lost the biblical idea of lament. Yes, the Christian life is a life full of joy, but for the Christian, joy and lament coexist. It's joy not in the absence of pain, but in the midst of it.

The truth is there are very real times to cry - to cry tears that are not at the expense of joy, but tears that grieve the very real brokenness in and around us, the very real pain, and struggle and trial.

And if the Advent story tells us anything it's that pain, conflict, reality that is not lost on the God of the universe. He knows it. He's been there, too.

You see, the Christian story isn't a story absent of pain or conflict, but rather the story of a God who meets you in it. A God who didn't stand off away from the pain, but a God who enters into it. A God who doesn't keep his distance, but draws near. A God who weeps, a God who cares. A God who cares enough to have actually done something about it.

And, I think that is the primary reason Matthew includes these details because while the advent was full of pain, Advent is also full of promise.

## **2. Advent is full of promise.**

Twice in this text, Matthew says, "this was to fulfill what was said." This is something he does over and over again throughout the entirety of his biography. He consistently makes these connections back to OT prophecies so he's readers know - "you remember what God said He was going to do? Look! He's doing it."

In fact, for Matthew's original audience, this would've even been a connection quickly made from his Jeremiah references. In the very next verses of chapter 31, he writes..

### **Jeremiah 31:16-17**

Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is reward for you work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the LORD and your children shall come back to their own country."

Immediately after recording some of their deepest pain, Jeremiah prophesies these promises from God: "This won't be the end. This won't be the final story. Hope and comfort are coming for you."

God tells Rachel who is weeping, to dry her tears because her children will return. As surely as she saw her them leave, one day she would see them come home because of His goodness and grace... the pain and brokenness that you feel will be reversed and become undone. The exile will not be forever. The tyranny will not last. I will restore what has been lost.

And this is actually the thread that runs throughout the entire library of Scripture - from the earliest pages in Genesis, through ups and downs of the story of Israel, to the closing words of Revelation where God declares:

**Revelation 21:4-5**

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

The overwhelming message of the Bible is that God is a God who sees our sin, who sees our pain, who sees our brokenness and mess and failure and cares. A God who loves us and intends to make right everything the tyranny of sin has made wrong. This is the very reason He sent Jesus into the world in the first place. That through his life, sacrificial death and victorious resurrection who would forever overthrow the power the guilt and power of sin.

God promises that what sin has made wrong, He is going to make right. Everything. Not just *some* things, but *all* things will be made new. And there is nothing that can be done to thwart God’s promises.

Herod said I will kill the Christ child so he hunted. But what did God say? Even this was done to fulfill what I said in my word.

Herod’s tyrannical attempt to stamp out the Christ-child, failed. God’s sovereign plan ultimately succeeded and there was nothing Herod could do about it.

And in the same way, while we still live in a world broken by the tyranny of sin, God’s sovereign plan through Christ will still succeed.

- There is nothing that sin can do about it.
- There is nothing that you or I can do about it.
- There is nothing that 2020 for all of it’s chaos and pain can do about it.
- There is nothing even the devil, himself, can do to stop what God has promised He will do.

He sent Jesus into our painful and sin-broken world - to save it. And the Advent story tells us that no one and no thing is gonna stop that from happening.

Herod can try if he wants. But, he can not take it!

Listen, we are never promised freedom from pain on this side of eternity... but what we are promised is that it will not be the final story.

I love the way Paul talks about it in Romans 8, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”

He’s saying the promise for you, believer, is that something better is coming.

He goes on, “For we know that the whole creation has been growing together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait...”

I love that. He’s saying, “Believer, if you are in Christ then these pains aren’t *death* pains, these are *birth* pains.”

Because the promise of God is that redemption is coming.

As followers of Jesus, **the promise is always greater than the pain.** No matter how bad the pain is - and the pain is bad - we don’t have to fake it or lie about it, but while the pain may be great, the promise is greater.

And, hear me, it’s not that the promise replaces the pain, it’s that the promise is always present in the midst of it. Yes, the Christian hurts, but yet the Christian hopes.

There are few things in my life that I can say with such confidence, but this is one of them - all that is wrong in this world, and all that is wrong within you... will one day be. Un. done.

As that old favorite Christmas hymn goes, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground, He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”

Because Jesus Christ - the suffering Messiah - came to painful earth and overcame the grave, loss will not be the final story in your life.

Because Jesus came to painful earth and overcame the grave, your struggle against sin will not be the final story of your life.

Because Jesus came to painful earth and overcame the grave, the sin committed against you is the final story for your life.

Because Jesus came to painful earth and overcame the grave disappointment, sadness, tears, sickness, injustice, oppression and even death itself will not be the final story of your life.

Because Jesus - who through God’s provision and plan not only thwarted the tyranny of Herod, but through His resurrection thwarted the tyranny of sin, death and the devil himself - you have a promise that is coming for you.

And this is why we need both lists, because this is the message of Christmas. A message of Promise in the midst of Pain.. As we look back to his painful first coming, it points us towards the promise of his second.

So listen, I hope all of your Christmases are merry and bright. I really do. I hope mine are, too. But if they aren't, remember that Christmas actually empowers us to deal with life precisely when it's not merry and bright.

Cry your tears. Lament your pain. But not as those without a Promise.

Turn to the One who knows. The One who cares. The One who has been there. Because a day is coming when every tear will dry up and death itself will be swallowed up forever.

The hunted and crucified but risen Messiah promises it will be so.