

The Light of Real Life

Matthew 2:13-15

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Today, we complete the series that we began in advent, the Light in Dark Places. We begin this new year finishing this series in looking at the light of real life. I encourage you to continue to join us as we will begin a new series next week called Renewal in the Wilderness. What does it look like for God's people and anyone who hears the word of God to live life now in the midst of this present challenge that feels like a desert? A desert in biblical language isn't a flourishing forest of trees, but it is oftentimes a very arid land, what we would think of as a desert. What does it look like for us to see renewal and experience renewal in the wilderness? How does God want us to live? I encourage you to return to visit with us next week as we begin that 12-week series.

This week, we finish the Light in Dark Places. As we finish this Christmas season just before epiphany, we look at the light of real life. This morning, our passage is from Matthew 2:13-15 as it recounts the drama after Jesus's birth, what happens to Him and to His family, and how that is instructive and helpful for us as we celebrate the word of God, Jesus Christ, become flesh.

Hear now the word of God for us in 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." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

If you're visiting with us for the first time, or even if you've been with us for years and wonder why we pray prior to the preaching of God's word, it's because first I need the power of God to speak through me so that what I say to you comes from the Lord and from His word, not merely from my study or from my opinions. But also, we want to pray for the fresh work of God's Holy Spirit for we believe that what makes us new is the renewing power of the Holy Spirit that does not work by Himself but always works in concert with the word of God.

As we come to pray, it's not just in a perfunctory manner, but it is to ask God to make a fresh work of His Holy Spirit in the hearts of His people to take the word of God to you wherever you are, and that He would apply it to your heart as He would apply it to mine. It is to ask that He would bring fruit, that He would bring a good work from His word. His word tells us the promise that the word of God never returns void, meaning when it goes out, it always produces something. And I would pray this morning that it would begin to work a new work of God's power, His renewing strength, His ever present grace in us at the beginning of this new year. Will you join me in prayer?

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning. We ask that you would now, according to the promises of your word, do a new work in us. By your Holy Spirit alone, may your word go forth, and may it produce new life. For those who are believers, I pray that you would encourage them. I pray that you would renew them. I pray you would strengthen their hope and give them a renewed vision according to your word for this new year. For those who do not know you, I pray for them, Father, as I know others prayed for me when I did not know you, that your word would change our hearts, that your Spirit would bring a life of grace and renewal, and that you would bring more than forgiveness of sins, but that you would bring a new life in Jesus Christ in relationship to Him that changes everything. Do this, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we turn together in this drama after Jesus's birth, it is for us a brief picture of what it looked like immediately after Jesus was born. I believe it is for us in this series to be reminded that the light that is Christ that has come into the world tells us something about this light, Jesus Himself, which we cannot hold apart from us at a distance because what this text demands of us is that we see the light of life that is Jesus. He had a life that was very much real. That is for us an encouragement and hope that I think brings encouragement to me and I hope to you as we look at this together.

In these brief verses, I want you to see that Jesus had a complete humanity that secondly was united to divinity that does invite a responding faith. Complete humanity united to divinity that requires a responding faith.

A complete humanity. In this brief drama, what we see is two parents with a brand new child whose name was given to Him because angels told them what to name Him. Now that He is born, now that He has received visitors, now that He has been born in a place that we would never have imagined that God would be made flesh, in a cattle cave in a stall, in a place where animals would have had life, the Son of God was born. And then the angels appeared and say that that's not enough because you need to know that this child now has a death threat on His head. For Herod has heard of His birth, and he wants no competitors.

Here, Herod isn't merely just Herod. Now Herod is all those who see Jesus, who see God, as a competitor for their power. But here in this drama, Herod wants this life and will go to the very ends of taking the youngest male child in all of the land so that he might remove this child from his competitive list.

What I want you to see in this story is the complete humanity of Jesus. It reminds us that Jesus's humiliation, meaning His humility, isn't just that the Son of God was made man to take on human nature and human flesh, but that even in His birth He was already suffering. He is one who was hunted. He was already hated. He was without luxury. He was a refugee.

I am reminded of the Warsan Shire poem called "Home." She writes this in the poem. "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." Everywhere Jesus would go would be the mouth of a shark. The Son of God made man was already suffering. That is that we might see in His complete humility, in His suffering, He is able to sympathize with you and with me in our suffering.

Consider the words of my friend Chuck DeGroat when he writes this.

"The humble one is born into an empire of tyranny, rage, confusion, control, and fear. And each Christmas season, there is an opportunity to invite Jesus to be born anew into our broken world amidst our own personal tyranny, rage, confusion, control, and fear."

Now, you and I might not be facing the same kind of mouth of a shark that Jesus is, but it requires that God not be far from our suffering. And He didn't just come to a Motel 6 where there was a vacancy sign flashing so that He might experience real life. No. He experienced real life to the point that Jesus was willing to be hunted as an infant. He was willing to become a refugee. Even before He would ever go to the cross, the Son of God was suffering so that He might sympathize with our suffering.

This is the power of the incarnation. Our God is not far off. He has come close. So I might say to you this morning there is no tyranny, there is no fear, there is no desire for control, there is no area of confusion or experience of rage that we can say our Savior has not experienced. Some believe that Jesus's suffering was particularly at the cross. But I say to you His suffering began here. And this is why in His complete humanity He sympathizes with us.

But more than that, when you hear the words, "'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," you hear the story. I encourage you to go back and read this. And then as you read it and you finish, stop for a moment. Breathe in. Close your eyes and imagine in your mind what that was like. The Son of God was made flesh in human nature with a human body, was born of a woman, nursed at His mother's chest in the midst of a cattle stall, was yanked from there and then precariously taken to a foreign country.

What I want you to see is there is more than just suffering. More than our Savior's ability to sympathize with us, I want you to see that even there in His mother's pregnancy, in His mother's birth, in His being formed as an infant like you and me, there is something deep here about this. That is the redemption of our bodies.

At every moment, Jesus's body experienced the same vulnerabilities as you and I face. He didn't have a magic Star Wars wall around Him protecting Him from the forces of evil. He was vulnerable. God made man in the arms of His parents, taken to a foreign country, not able to return home. And I believe this says something about the humanity of what Jesus did for us that tells us something that is deep and deeply human, and that is our very bodies vulnerable to sickness, vulnerable to death, vulnerable. And yet what we see here is the redemption of our bodies. Although we are broken, God became flesh because we are still beautiful. He had a mind. He had a body. He had a face. He had arms and fingers all exposed to the fear of death and danger. And yet He did not sin.

He had to face all of these things even at the earliest stages of His life, and I believe that says something about our very existence as in fleshed humans. And I was reminded of this from the great brief words of the great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck when he says, "For what is un-assumable is incurable." Jesus in His complete humanity assumed every part of being human, of being vulnerable so that in His life and in His death, He might bring a cure as far as the curse is found. Thanks be to God.

Not only do these verses declare to us His complete humanity, but they also point to the fact that He was also God. It was united to divinity. For when it says here, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son,'" even here, Matthew is pointing to the fact of the declaration of the New Testament that this was God made man, fully God, fully man. And in so doing, God was announcing His power. Even in the midst of the Herods of the age trying to destroy what God has set in motion, it demonstrates His power, even His power in the flesh of an infant child.

To see Him as an infant child, God made man, reminds us that even in His infancy, He was united to divinity. When he says, "Out of Egypt I called my son" brings to bear and foreshadows all of the things that the New Testament will declare about this child, Jesus Christ the Son of the living God. He would be called Lord, Son of man, God, Son of God. He would have the attributes of God, grace, truth, and glory as we studied in John 1. He would have eternity as said in Colossians. He would be without change or shadow, that is His immutability, always faithful.

And what would be ascribed to this one in John, in Colossians, in Hebrews, we hear that He would be accredited with the work of creation, the work of God's providential hand upholding all things by the word of His power, that in His hands would be the work of redemption, and that He would bring all things for the sake of His Father to a close for the glory of the Father. Angels would worship Him, and all would be bowed down to Him in His final glory as we learn in Philippians.

What is being declared here about this child, "I called my son," is a declaration that this isn't just a human child, but this is the God made man, the power of God in bodily form. This is the truth and power of God's word. This is in fact what Luther would say, "I have no other God but thee, born in a manger and

died on a tree." Martin Luther would declare that this is our God, not just a martyr who is human. This is the Godman.

"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son,'" here, what is being declared is the victory of God. Herod and all of his rage and wrath and desire for control would not have victory over God's plan. This means no one in power, no one in authority no matter what they claim, no matter what nation, no matter what flag, no matter what army, nothing can prevail against the work of our God. This is a declaration of the victory of God for Jesus to be born foreshadows His victory not only over Herod at His birth, but it foreshadows the victory that He would have at Golgotha.

What bookends Jesus's life is the death threat He would have at His birth and the death He would give Himself to outside of Jerusalem for our sin. In both, we would see that He would be victorious. Here, He flees to Egypt but to return. There, He would be raised on the third day victorious over sin and death. This is the victory of God.

What we see here is from the human perspective. What Matthew is writing is what could be seen and witnessed. But there is another drama of which we learn about this very work, the victory of God, how Jesus as the Godman was also doing something far greater than what we can see from witness by human testimony. What we have in Revelation 12 is the story from the divine perspective through the witness and dream that was given to John. Listen to what John says about the birth of the Godman.

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. [ESV]

On the first reading of that great story from the divine perspective given to John as a vision, it seems as though the woman is Mary. On one level, it is. The child being Jesus referenced there, what we see is that the birth of God made man is about the war between what God is going to do against the forces of darkness that is Satan himself. What we read of there is what we read of here, that God is victorious over Satan himself, and He vanquishes the dominion of darkness from His birth to His death ultimately declared in His resurrection. The power of God in bodily form, the victory of God united in this child of God made man, Son of God, fully God, fully man, what it is pointing us to is the victory of God.

But thanks be to God what is being referenced in Revelation 12 is far more than the birth of Jesus. Notice in John's vision that the child goes up to God, looking at Jesus's ascension, but the woman remains. The woman isn't merely Mary. The woman stands for far more than that. That is the church of Jesus Christ. The church continues forward, and the church will be victorious. To speak of the power of God in bodily form, that Jesus is humanity united to His divinity, isn't just power for Jesus or victory for God, but it is the power of Jesus for His people. It is the victory of God for the church of God. This is an announcement that the birth of Christ is the light of God in real life for power and for victory in Christ alone.

And I believe what is called for here is a responding faith. What I mean is this. N. T. Wright, theologian, wrote it this way.

"The real objection to virginal conception is not primarily scientific. It is deeper than that. It is the notion that a new world really might be starting up in the midst of the old, leaving us with the stark choice of birth or death, leaving us like the Magi, no longer at ease, leaving us, in other words, as a Christmas people faced with the Herods of the world."

What we see in the birth of Christ, the light of God made flesh, fully God and fully man in the midst of real suffering, yet victorious, it asks of us not whether we believe the virginal conception and birth, but whether we name Him as Lord. Who do you say this Jesus is? What is your response to what God has done in the birth of His Son?

Another writer Eugene Peterson calls us to respond to the nativity. He says, "But our response to the nativity cannot be reduced to shutting the door against the wintry world, drinking hot chocolate, and singing carols." We can celebrate, and we should. But what is called for is a response of faith.

I encourage you to consider this. I think that there is a personal and a corporate response. The personal response is this. Have you received this God made man as a gift for you? You can receive Him today, and you can cast on Him your entire life. You can experience new life from the one who knows life and knows it really. I can say to you with all authority from God's word that this Jesus knows you, He loves you, and He knows your life better than even you know it. He knows your heart better than you know your own heart. He knows your motivations. He knows your desires. And He knows every single one of your sins. And yet He came for you. He loves you. Your broken body and mind and soul is beautiful to Him because our God was made man, and He knows you. Will you cast everything on Him?

And I say to you if you are a Christian, you can be renewed in your faith this day. Every day is an opportunity for us to be renewed and to call Him anew and say, Lord, be the Lord in the midst of my broken world. Be the Lord in the midst of my rage, my confusion, my desire for control, and my fear. You can be renewed in that today.

But secondly there is not just a personal response. I believe there is also a corporate response of faith. If you are a Christian who belongs to a church, if you are a member and a regular attender of Columbia Presbyterian Church, I encourage you to think beyond just yourself. I encourage us to think together. If we believe what God has declared here that the Son of God was made man who lived real life united to a divine nature and has come to redeem all things, then when we minister to one another, when we minister to others in the love of Christ with prayer, with service, with generosity of giving, we are pushing back the dominion of darkness.

When we work hard for our employers, when we work to use our gifts in this world, we are pushing back the dominion of darkness because when we work, we do so depending on Christ alone. When we offer someone in need a glass of water or something to eat, we do so as unto the Lord, and we are pushing back the dominion of darkness. When we visit, when we pray, when we care for those who are vulnerable in our midst whether they are in nursing homes or they are in prisons, or whether we care for those who do not have, we are showing the love of God in Christ in real life, and we are pushing against the dominion of darkness.

When we in humility name the name of Jesus as our hope for life and testimony of our salvation, we are announcing that we through Jesus have conquered and vanquished the darkness. And we are able to rejoice in the Lord of real life who has vanquished the dominion of darkness. When we gather together

via this medium or we gather together in person, when we gather together to name the name of Jesus in all humility, love, and mercy, we are declaring His dominion over darkness. And the light of God comes into the world.

And so I say to you, church of Jesus Christ, we have nothing else to name. We cannot name ourselves. We cannot name our wisdom. We cannot name our ingenuity. We have no other name to name under heaven than Jesus Christ born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that He would be victorious over sin and death and call to Himself a people who can rejoice that the light of real life has come. This year and this day let us rejoice for our God has come. Let's pray.

Lord, I pray that you would breathe life into your church that you would renew her that as we name the name of Jesus that we would all rejoice and name the one who is above all, Jesus Christ our Lord. Lord, I ask that in the midst of our suffering, that in the midst of our brokenness, we would remember that Jesus the light of the world has come into real life. And you have brought redemption and renewal that the light of the world has come into the darkness. And although the darkness has not understood it, it has not been victorious. Father, it is in the darkest places that we see the beauty of your light. And so I pray in the power of the Holy Spirit that the light of the grace of Jesus would go into the darkest places of our hearts, of our lives, and of our world and bring light and renewal. Do this, O Lord, as we name the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.