

FULFILLING THE PROPHETS

Matthew 2:13-23

First Sunday after Christmas (Series A)

January 1, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 2, verses 13 through 23.

This occurs immediately after the Magi, who are sometimes called “wise men,” had come to visit Jesus. You might be familiar with that story already, but we need to review it just a little in order to understand what’s going on in the reading for today. These Magi were from the east, most likely, Babylon. Among other things, Magi examined the stars for signs, and they somehow discerned from a star that the Christ had been born in Israel. So they went to Jerusalem and asked King Herod where the Christ had been born. Herod didn’t know, so he asked the priests and scribes, who told him the prophecy from Micah (5:2) that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod directed the Magi to Bethlehem. And he asked the Magi to return to him after they had found him, so that he could also go and worship the child. This was deceptive, because Herod had no desire to worship the child, but rather kill him instead in order to protect his throne. So the Magi left and found Jesus. They worshipped him and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they were warned in a dream to not return to Herod, so they went home by another route.

And that brings us to the reading for today. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 2, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus’ name.

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.”

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:

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.”

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

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Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We might wonder sometimes, *Why do we have four separate gospels to tell one story, especially when three of those gospels are quite similar?* Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the same big story of how Jesus, the Son of God, redeemed our lost and fallen race. They also share many of the same smaller stories. John is the most different. He has more unique content than the other three. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much of the same content. In some places, they are almost word-for-word identical. They have so much in common that it's quite obvious that they borrowed from each other. Whoever wrote second was obviously aware of the first and borrowed much material from him. And whoever wrote third was obviously aware of the first two, and borrowed material from both of them. And this was perfectly acceptable at the time as they didn't have the same standards regarding plagiarism.

But it might cause us to wonder, *Why? Why did Matthew, Mark, and Luke all decide to write their gospels when the later writers were obviously aware of the first?* Well, despite having much in common, they tell the story in different ways to teach different things. This gives us a fuller and deeper understanding of who Jesus is. It seems, perhaps, and this is just a guess, that Mark wrote first. That's simply because his gospel is the shortest. It's easier to see why Matthew and Luke would expand on his work. And then Matthew and Luke write from different backgrounds. Luke was a gentile Christian. He was also a travelling companion of Paul during much of his missionary work among the gentiles. So he writes from a gentile perspective, which would have connected more with other gentiles. Matthew, on the other hand, was a Jew, and he writes in such a way that would resonate more with a Jewish audience. So despite having much in common, each of the gospels have different nuances, and they give us a fuller understanding of Jesus.

This year, most of our gospel readings will come from *The Gospel of Matthew*. So we'll notice some of the special characteristics of his gospel. One of the ways we see the Jewishness of Matthew is in his many Old Testament citations. He quotes the Old Testament much more often than any of the other gospels. And he especially points out the ways that Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy.

In this passage alone, he points out three prophetic fulfillments. This is going to be a little bit more "Bible study-ish" than most sermons. The three prophetic fulfillments in this passage are probably not what we expect a fulfillment of prophecy to look like. Some Old Testament prophecies are clear and predictive, like the one from Micah (5:2) about how the promised ruler of Israel would come from Bethlehem. That was one where the Jews could look it and say, "Okay, the Christ will be born in Bethlehem." It also has some apologetic value to it. What I mean is, the fulfillment of certain prophecies is evidence that Jesus is the Christ. A Jew could look at Jesus' story and ask, "Did he come from Bethlehem? Yes he did. Okay; so that part checks out." Other prophecies have even stronger apologetic value. A good example of this would be the prophecy from Isaiah 35 (v. 5-6):

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

Then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”

Jesus performed these miracles. He healed the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute. A Jew could look at this and say, “Yeah, that’s exactly what the Christ is supposed to do.” It fulfills the prophecy and, by demonstrating great power, it proves that Jesus is truly the one the prophecy speaks of. So there’s an apologetic value to some of those prophecies.

But the three fulfillments in this passage are quite different. Instead of having a lot of apologetic value, they have more instructional value. What I mean is, they don’t prove so much that Jesus is the Christ, but they teach us what the Christ is like.

The first one is the flight to Egypt. King Herod wanted to kill Jesus. The reason is pretty obvious, especially when we consider the evil and insane character of Herod. He feared that the birth of another king would threaten his hold on the throne. And this is really interesting. Herod sought to kill Jesus, not because he disbelieved that Jesus is the Christ, but because he feared he might be. Herod’s faith, although we really should not call it “faith,” was much like that of the demons. They knew who Jesus was, and they hated him for it. We see that true faith is not merely acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God, but it also includes trusting that Jesus is for you. But Herod loved his throne, and he was so paranoid about losing it, that he attempted to murder the Son of God. He preferred a dead Christ over a saving Christ.

But God protected his Son. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the child and his mother to Egypt until the time is safe for their return (2:13). And Matthew says, “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (2:15). That passage comes from the prophet Hosea (11:1).

Now here’s the interesting thing: If you read Hosea without knowing about this fulfillment, you would read right through that verse and never even know it’s a prophecy. That’s because, in the context of Hosea, the LORD is talking about the people of Israel and how, when they were slaves in the land of Egypt, he called them out of Egypt. He sent Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, and into the land of Canaan. This deliverance was God’s adoption of Israel as his son. But in the following verse in Hosea (11:2), the LORD complains about how rebellious this son of his was. But Matthew says Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. That’s seems kind of strange.

This is what we refer to as a “type-prophecy.” Or a good way to think of it is as a shadow or a pattern. And there are quite a few of these “type-prophecies” in the Old Testament. Instead of being the predictive kind of prophecy that we might expect, God sets these patterns in the Old Testament. There are certain characters or events that have parallels to Jesus or the events that occur in his life. The general point of these patterns is that God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He knew that he would send his Son into the world to suffer, and die, and rise again in order to forgive and save sinners. So he left some patterns along the way. It’s kind of like what a good novelist will do with foreshadowing. A good novelist writes with an end in mind, and along the way he might leave little clues, but you don’t notice them until you get to the end, and then you say, “Ah, I see what you did there.” That’s kind of what we mean when we talk about type-prophecies. The patterns were there all along, but we don’t see them until the fulfillment comes.

Some of these patterns are a comparison between something and Jesus, like when Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac. Others are more of a contrast. That’s the way it is with Israel and Jesus. Israel is a type or a pattern for Jesus to follow, but much of the pattern is reversed in Jesus.

He is obedient where the people of Israel disobeyed. Matthew starts this comparison between Israel and Jesus here with the flight to Egypt. It picks up some steam in next week's gospel lesson, which is the Baptism of Jesus. That corresponds to Israel crossing the Red Sea. And it hits full stride in the passage that follows that, where Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the devil. This corresponds to the forty years that Israel spent in the wilderness after leaving Egypt but before God brought them into the Promised Land. The three temptations Jesus endured from the devil all correspond to temptations Israel faced in the wilderness. The key difference, though, is that they failed every single one of those temptations, but Jesus succeeded. By revealing this pattern, Matthew teaches that Jesus came to stand in the place of Israel and succeed where they failed. He stands in their place and does it for them. And so he is also the light to the nations that Israel was said to be, but which they never really lived up to. By succeeding where they had failed, he becomes their Savior, and he becomes the Savior of the entire world.

The second fulfillment in the gospel lesson for today is the one concerning Rachel weeping for her children. It's another type-prophecy. It comes from Jeremiah 31 (v. 15). One of the interesting things in that chapter is that it is filled, almost completely, with pure comfort. There's hardly a sad thought in it. But right in the middle, there's this heartbreaking verse about Rachel weeping for her children, and she refuses to be comforted, because her children are no more. The comfort, though, that the LORD offers is that he promises to bring them back, raise them up, and restore them.

Matthew applies this to the slaughter of the holy innocents, the horrific act of the insane and evil King Herod. He was so jealous to protect his throne that when he learned he had been tricked by the Magi, "He sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and under" (2:16).

We might, in a rather loose way, call these children Christian martyrs. A martyr, technically speaking, is someone who testifies of Jesus Christ and is persecuted unto death because of their testimony. These children did not testify of Christ in words; but they were killed on account of him. So we might think of them as martyrs in a loose way.

In my devotional reading this week, I came across a passage from Martin Luther talking about how persecution like this, though it is meant to harm us, actually benefits us. And he references a couple earlier high-profile theologians, so he's not the first to say something so audacious. He says,

There is ... a celebrated dictum of Gregory: "The ungodly do good to us by doing evil." And Augustine says of the infants slain by Herod that an enemy with his whole strength and all the resources of his kingdom could not have benefited the children more than by killing them.

Accordingly, God humbles those who are His to exalt them; He kills them to make them alive; He confounds them to glorify them; He makes them subject to raise them up. This is the art of arts and science of sciences which is not usually learned or discovered except with great toil and by a few; but it is nevertheless sure and certain ...

In the same manner, when I am about to depart from this life, I support myself with this consolation that I believe in God's Son. And yet I am buried; I am eaten by worms; I am consumed by the most foul rotteness, as Job says (Job 17:14): "I said to the rotteness, 'You are my father,' and to the worms, 'My mother,' or 'My sister.'" Here I do not

discern God's plan, that although I die and rot away, I must at some time be revived. But God has promised and said (cf. John 14:19): "You will live, for I live, and you will live. I am the Lord your God!" How? In eternal life and with a more beautiful and brighter body than the body of the sun. (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 6, Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37*, p. 400-401).

This is a troubling meditation to accept, especially the part about Herod benefiting those children by killing them. We do not say that Herod's actions were good. That would be to lie and call evil good. But this is the mystery of good and evil: when something evil is done to an innocent person, and especially to Christians, it benefits them. God looks upon his children who suffer in this life, and he vindicates them. Even if someone comes to you with swords or guns, they cannot take anything from you that God cannot give back, with greater glory, in the resurrection of the dead. What others mean for evil, God intends for good (Gen. 50:20). When the devil does evil, God uses it to bring good to his people. This is the whole point of what God was doing in Jesus Christ. The priests and scribes were inspired by the devil to murder the Son of God. And they got exactly what they wanted. This was the greatest evil. But God brought the greatest good out of it. He played the devil right into his hand, and he saved the world through the death of his Son. And despite Rachel weeping for her children, God used their deaths to preserve his Son, so that his Son could die for them and for the entire world.

The third fulfillment might be the most difficult. But it has the simplest explanation. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus settle in Nazareth. And Matthew says this occurred "so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (2:23). The difficult part is that there is no prophecy about the Christ being from Nazareth. But Matthew doesn't actually say there is.

In every other instance of his book, where Matthew identifies a fulfillment of prophecy, he says something like, "This fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet." Sometimes he also names the prophet. But here he says, "So that what was spoken by the *prophets* [plural] might be fulfilled." He's not pointing to a specific prophecy, but to a general theme of all the prophets. And the thing about Nazareth is that it was despised. We even see this sentiment from one of Jesus' own disciples. Nathanael, when he hears about Jesus for the first time, says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). And one of the general themes of the prophets was that the Christ would be despised. For example, Isaiah says, "He was despised and rejected by men" (53:3). So Jesus' upbringing in Nazareth fulfills this general theme of the prophets.

And so many things about Jesus are humble. This is the thing that ties all three of these fulfillments together. The Christ did not come in radiant glory, but in great humility. On Christmas Eve we considered the humility of his birth. And that humility continued for his entire life, all the way to his death. He was in danger all the time. The king wanted to kill him. When he became a man he was dismissed and despised because he came from a backwater little town in Galilee. More people wanted to kill him. And he eventually surrendered himself to it.

All of this humility fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets. And the pinnacle of his humility, his death on a cross, fulfilled the Law for our sake. Bearing the curse for our sin was his greatest humility. And by this humility, he saved us. That's the whole point of his humility. He humbled himself in order to serve us by his death. And so he fulfills everything written by the prophets. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.