

**Hopes and Fears**  
**Matthew 2:13-23**  
**January 1, 2023**

Have you noticed in life that joy is often mixed with fear, or that hope is often mixed with pain? The birth of a child comes through great physical pain, but joy quickly follows. When I talk to families after a loved one has died, and as they talk about that person, there can be much laughter as they relate funny stories, but it is quickly followed by tears.

I remember when a pastor was interviewed the Sunday following the Boston Marathon bombing. When the reporter asked the pastor what she told her congregation that morning, she replied, "I don't know why this evil happened, but I do know that hope rises up."

Pain and joy. Grief and laughter. Fear and hope. All mixed together in life. This is shown so clearly in the birth narrative of Jesus. Consider, again, the angels. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was terrified and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.'" (Luke 1:11-13)

That prayer was to have a child. This child brought joy into his parents' lives, but this child as he grew up caused great heartache and fear. This child, who later was called John the Baptist, rebelled by leaving home and living in the wilderness. He didn't take up the family business. He dressed funny, and ate weird things. He yelled a lot. He was arrested, and eventually beheaded. Oh, the heartache and fear his parents must have experienced, but John the Baptist was given a great task of joy...to prepare the way for Jesus. Hope and fear mixed together.

When the angel approached Mary, the first words out of the angel's mouth were: "The Lord is with you...Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.'" (Luke 1:28, 30)

This favor included having to face her fiancé who knew the baby was not his. The fear of facing her community. The fear of having her fiancé disown her, even put her to death (which was common in that culture). Yet, she was given a task of great joy...to give birth to the Son of God. Hope and fear mixed together.

When the angel approached Joseph in a dream, the angel said those familiar words, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20)

Joseph was asked to believe that this child was God’s. He was asked to take Mary as his wife. Talk about fear and uncertainty, but the joy of knowing you have been given a great task. Hope and fear mixed together.

A week ago, we gathered in this place to celebrate the Savior’s birth, and we did it with great joy. But in today’s scripture reading, everything is different. Evil and fear enter into the birth narrative. Hope and fear mixed together.

Before we hear this story, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Read Matthew 2:13-23

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,<sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”

<sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

<sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, <sup>23</sup> and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God.**

Who is this Herod? Herod was appointed by Rome as King over the Jews. A few facts about Herod. This was the Herod who murdered his wife and three of his sons. This is the Herod, in order to ensure a grief-stricken mood over the whole country when he would finally die, left orders that one member of every single family would be killed when the news of his death was announced. What is this man doing in the Christmas story?

Herod enters into the birth narrative when the Magi stop to ask for directions to find Jesus. Word gets back to Herod that they are looking for the King of the Jews. He thought he was King of the Jews! Fear enters into his heart that there is another King out there somewhere. This paranoia causes him to try and murder the Hope of the world by killing all children under the age of two in the town of Bethlehem.

This story is coming just too soon. Too soon after Christmas. Matthew put this story in his birth narrative because he is writing to Jews and showing that the prophecies for the Messiah are coming true through Jesus. Matthew is showing how Jesus ends up in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem as the prophets of old foretold. Matthew is showing why women are weeping for their children as foretold by another prophet.

This story is so jarring, abrupt, harrowing, yet at times it fits in our world far better than the other parts of the birth narrative. Just like the joy of the birth narrative of last week was for us, this story is for us today as well. Jesus was not exempt from the tension, fear, violence and horror of our world.

Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is not with us only during tender moments and celebrations, the Christmas Eves of our lives. God is also with us in times of grief, loss and fear. Hope and fear all mixed together.

The Gospel of John has a completely different birth narrative than Matthew or Luke. Matthew and Luke give an earthly perspective of Jesus' birth. The Gospel of John gives a heavenly perspective: "In the beginning was the Word...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The Message translation says it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

As I listened to the news of the world the week of Christmas, as I heard of suicides and victims of mass shootings and a war that continues to rage half way around the world, I think of those who lost loved ones in a season of joy. This Christmas story is for them.

I think of the babies in Bethlehem who were killed on the orders of Herod and the families who lost a child. Our scripture passage cries out with these families as there is "weeping and great mourning," and they refuse to be comforted.

Some people ask why didn't God save those babies like God saved Jesus? One man (Francie Spufford) said, we Christians "don't have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story." The story is one of God moving into the neighborhood.

This story tells us the truth of unjust rulers and violence and grief and pain. But it also tells us the truth that God does not stand at a distance, but in Jesus, God has joined us in all of life.

Life is beautiful and wonderful and filled with goodness and grace. God is part of that, blessing us. And there are times when life is hard and disappointing and filled with heartache. God is part of that, too. God comforts, holds on to us, blesses us with the promise of staying with us through the good and bad. I think of Romans 8 that says nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Emmanuel, God with us in our hopes and fears mixed together.

Not a bad message to hear on this first day of the New Year.

So, we hear the words of the angels: do not fear. The phrase “Do not fear” is one of most frequent phrases in scripture. The Hebrew language (the language of the Jewish people and the Old Testament) has 27 different words for joy – more than any other language. The Jewish people have probably gone through more suffering than any other culture, and yet they have 27 different words for joy. Many of these words associated with serving God.

In your presence there is fullness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psalm 16:11)

“This is the day the Lord has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24).

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

The joy of the Lord is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10)

Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:4,7,11).

“Whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.” (James 1:2).

As it says in one Christmas carol at the birth of Jesus: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” Hopes and fears can be all mingled together. Joy and pain all at once. We bring them to the One where hopes and fears are met in Christ.

As you enter the new year, may you experience the joy of it all. You may be facing something fearful, but look for the moments of hope and hear the words of the angels once again:

Do not be afraid for I am with you.

Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God.

Do not be afraid for God is in it.

Do not be afraid for through it all, I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people. For God has moved into the neighborhood. Amen.

