

The Second Sunday after the Nativity of our Lord
Matthew 2:13-23

Merry Christmas! We still have four or five days to go, depending on how you count the days. Epiphany on Thursday officially ends the Christmas holiday.

Anyway, one of the questions I struggle with is when people ask me where I'm from. It's not that I mind someone asking to know more about me. That's nice, actually. But my struggle comes with how to answer that question. I could give a simple answer and it won't entirely be the truth. I could say I'm from Indiana or Wyoming and it wouldn't be a lie, but it wouldn't be the entire truth. After all, I was born in Texas, and grew up in Japan, England, Florida, and Indiana. I went into the Navy and lived in Florida, New York, Connecticut, and California. After that I went to college in Wyoming. After a two year stint in Memphis, Tennessee, I spent most of my married life in Wyoming. After dragging my wife to the hinterlands from Memphis, I drug her to Indiana for seminary and finally here with you! So, where am I from? That's not an easy question to answer.

Where is Jesus from? That's not necessarily an easy question to answer either! First, He's God. He's always been and always will be. St. Paul says Jesus "fills all in all." (Ephesians 1:23) He also says that "we live and move and have our being" in Him. (Acts 17:28) Jesus was without a body before His incarnation, but now He has a body and we can still say that He "fills all in all" and that in Him "we live and move and have our being." But Jesus was incarnated in Nazareth, born and lived in Bethlehem. As we learn in our text today, He grew up in Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth. We also know He had a house in Capernaum. So, where is Jesus from? That's not necessarily an easy question to answer.

And, to be clear, I am in no way implying that I'm like Jesus. He's the Son of God. I'm the son of hillbillies! But thanks be to God, I am a son of God through faith by the power of Spirit, water, and Word. Jesus is my Brother just like He's your brother. Through faith and Spirit and water and Word. We'll talk more about that for the Baptism of Jesus next week.

We see today God orchestrating events in order to fulfill all His promises in Jesus. Many times we see this kind of orchestrating talk misused when people claim that God has a plan for your life. First, get over yourself. You're not that special. Second, it's a total misinterpretation of Jeremiah 29:11. The ESV says,

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

The NKJV translates it this way:

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

The word, מַחְשְׁבָה, is first translated as “thought” and second as “plan” by the two major Biblical Hebrew dictionaries. It makes sense in a way, as thoughts do lead to plans, especially when God is doing the thinking. But what is Jeremiah actually saying?

The people of Israel were stuck in captivity in Babylon. God had destroyed both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. Even more alarmingly, He destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. God had warned and warned the people of Israel that He would visit His wrath upon them. Finally, it was upon them. God even told them to settle, marry, and have kids in Babylon. Does that mean the temple and holy city of Jerusalem would be no more? Were the Israelites doomed to always be a foreign people in a foreign land? Jeremiah is comforting the people of God that they are in His thoughts. He will give them peace, a future, and a hope. God has not abandoned them. They will move back to the land and rebuild the temple. But they will not have the peace that God promises unless they find it in Jesus.

And this brings up the third point about God orchestrating events. God's plans always revolve around Jesus. We see that directly three times in today's reading.

First, we see an angel warn Jesus in a dream about Herod's horrendous plan to kill the innocent babies in Bethlehem. So Joseph has to flee to Egypt to protect his young wife and child. As a carpenter, Joseph could find work in most places.

It's kind of like today. If you can do what we call blue collar work, and you work hard, you really can work anywhere you want. But Matthew lets us know that this fulfills the promise of God in Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

To be clear, God did not cause the horrendous actions of Herod. Herod was evil and he had power. He didn't want that power threatened by anything. So he devises a plan to kill all the male children up to two years old in Bethlehem. Hence, we know Jesus spent a little of His infancy growing up in Bethlehem. Anyway, the evil intentions and actions of men do not thwart the plans and intentions of God. God had even prophesied this event in Jeremiah 31:15:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more."
(quoted in v. 18)

This is the second event fulfilled in our Gospel reading. It isn't about Jesus directly, but it is due to an evil man trying to kill Jesus. God kept His Son safe in the midst of true evil.

The third event is the fact that Joseph took Mary and Joseph to Nazareth to live. The Scripture says that:

"It might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'" (v. 23)

We're not sure what prophecy Matthew is referring to. We can't find it in the Old Testament. Interestingly, the closest reference we can find is Judges 13:5 speaking about Samson when the angel of the LORD tells Samson's mother:

"For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."

I find it really interesting that Samson prefigures Jesus. Jesus did not take a Nazarite vow. We see Him drinking wine, which Nazarites were forbidden.

But just like Samson sacrificed himself to save Israel, Jesus sacrifices Himself to save the world. We do know Jesus was considered from Nazareth. During Jesus' mock trial, a serving woman asks Peter if he is with "Jesus of Nazareth" (Matthew 26:70)

Regardless, overall we can take three things from today's Gospel.

First, God acted to save His people Israel so that the Word of God was kept pure until the Word of God came in the flesh.

Second, God acts to save people through the work of Jesus.

Third, God acts to save His church where the work of Jesus is applied to sinners.

First, God acted to save His people Israel so that the Word of God was kept pure until the Word of God came in the flesh. You're familiar with Jesus testifying to Himself in Moses and the Prophets. When Paul is being tried in front of King Agrippa he says this:

"Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come--that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."
(Acts 26:22-23)

God kept a people for Himself that He might bring His only begotten Son through that people for the benefit of both Jew and Gentile. This word that Paul proclaims is for small and great. For Jew and Gentile. For all people. For the whole world.

Second, God acts to save people through the work of Jesus. People are saved through faith. But faith in what? Faith in the person and works of Jesus. The Old Testament people of God looked forward to the Messiah and the work that He would do. New Testament saints, like you and I, look back to Jesus, the Messiah, and His work on our behalf. The gift of salvation comes to us freely. The gift was earned by Jesus through His life and death. Faith is nothing else than believing that the work of Jesus, both in His life and in His death, is *for me*.

The demons believe the work of Jesus in His life and death. They were there. They saw it with their own eyes. They heard it with their own ears. Figuratively speaking. But they don't believe the work is for them. We do. We believe that the work of Jesus is for our benefit and it is delivered to us in the Word of forgiveness and Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As we say about our worthiness for the Lord's Supper in the Small Catechism:

Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed *for you* for the forgiveness of sins."

But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "*for you*" require all hearts to believe.

We understand that the surety of our salvation is dependent on Jesus' work and now our own. We can say along with Paul, "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand."

Third, God acts to save His church where the work of Jesus is applied to sinners. Thanks be to God, He didn't locate His salvation in the temple in Jerusalem for all people. He created the church so that the proclamation of the Gospel could go out to all people. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well:

"The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."

People assume that means that we can worship Jesus wherever we want, apart from the church. There is an element of truth to this. When you pray at home, your Father in heaven hears you. But that's always been the case with the people of God. God entrusts His Word and Sacraments to the church so that His presence *for* His people is not located in the temple in Jerusalem but in all nations. Paul leaves no doubt about this when he says:

“For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.” (Galatians 4:24-26)

So much could be said about this passage, but suffice it to say that God locates His saving presence in His Word and Sacraments to be received in faith and He has entrusted these things to His church. This is what Luke describes in Acts and what the author of Hebrews warns us against neglecting.

The children of Israel as described in the Old Testament are no more. Jesus’ work in His life and death was accomplished about 2,000 years ago! God chooses a people for Himself now through the work of the church. God protects His church so that His Word continues to be proclaimed in the world until He comes again. The church in Rialto might not make it until Jesus comes again. The LCMS might not make it until Jesus comes again. But God will preserve His church. And He will preserve you!

Thanks be to God for His saving work for us!

In Jesus’ name. Amen.