

This Sunday's texts:

Isaiah 63:7-14

Galatians 4:4-7

Matthew 2:13-23

God's Child

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The Holy Gospel for this Sunday after Christmas comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, the second chapter:

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." So he got up, took the Child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt, where they 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." 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. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "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." After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 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." So he got up, took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in the town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to You acknowledging that there are many days, many moments, and, in truth, every moment when we need Your help and we need Your encouragement. Help us to remember Your faithfulness, to turn to You, and to experience Your encouragement, love, and healing in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The prophet Isaiah starts with an amazing word from God. From Isaiah 63 today, listen to these amazing words that tell us about the faithfulness of God. "I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which He is to be praised,

according to all the Lord has done for us.”¹ Isaiah is acknowledging the faithfulness of God to the people of Israel, as God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and walked with them through the struggle of the wilderness. “Yes, the many good things He has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, ‘Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me’; and so He became their Savior. In all their distress He too was distressed, and the angel of His presence saved them. In His love and mercy, He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”² God is good. And yet.

And yet the words of the prophet reflect the reality of life and the words of the prophet continued, “Yet they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.” Unfortunately, God's faithfulness often does not extend to *our* faithfulness. Very often, God's people fall short of faithfulness. Instead of looking for direction from the Lord, we take direction for our own lives. There was brokenness and these very challenging words for us, “So He [God] turned and became their enemy and He himself fought against them.” Now, I don't know if there's a more terrifying text in all of scripture. The idea that almighty God would go from loving and providing and caring for us to becoming our enemy ought to terrify everyone. And yet.

And yet while this is true, while this is the history, while this is the story of God and His people, the text does go on. The people of Israel, God's people, are invited then, and now, to remember Him. Having turned away to our own devices, having ignored the direction of God, having sought our own way, our own will, our own fortunes, we still have an opportunity to remember God and turn back. It's amazing that if we will turn back to God, He will turn back to us.

This language of “God as enemy” can be overly interpreted, that is, misunderstood. It's really not God becoming our enemy, but rather, our becoming enemies of God. When we turn away from God's ways and go our own way, that's called hamartia, sin. Hamartia is the Greek word for sin in the New Testament. Literally, what it means is “missing the mark.” I like to think of sin, I prefer to think of sin as going against God and doing horribly evil things because most of the time I can honestly say I don't do that. So if that's what sin is, then I'm innocent. But if sin is “missing the mark.” Man, I'm really good at that, just pulling a little bit to the right or the left and missing the mark. Maybe doing the right thing, but with the wrong motivation. Or doing the wrong thing with the right motivation. But I really *meant* it to be the right thing and that should count for something,

¹ Isaiah 63:7a

² Isaiah 63:7b-9

shouldn't it? Please? Give me credit, so that I'm not sinning, so that I'm not missing the mark.

And yet, so what is our invitation? Where is there a gospel in this word, this scary thing about God becoming an enemy? It's in remembering God's faithfulness. It's in remembering that God's people are able to turn back to Him, to remember Him, and live. "Then His people," Isaiah says, "recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and His people - where is He who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of His flock?"³ God, being the shepherd to protect and guide His sheep through the challenges of the wilderness, to experience provision and goodness.

Several years ago, I was a very unhappy Senior Pastor, going into our Christmas Eve services. Not the kind of mindset I want to be in when I'm getting ready to preach Christmas Eve services. I had chosen to that the Associate Pastor who was doing Youth and Children's ministry to do our family service, the first service on Christmas Eve. I was a little bit taken aback when he chose our Gospel text for today to be his Christmas Eve text for that year, the text known as "the slaughter of the Innocents." I know. That's exactly what I said. What was he thinking? How could we possibly look at a text like that for Christmas?

And yet, that is the text for the fourth day of Christmas pretty much every year and we, as pastors, can choose to ignore it and often do. I was very tempted to this year because it is such an awful text. The sad thing is it's real. The sad thing is we live in a world where there is indeed profound evil. Evil things like this happen in our world. I was listening to an interview and they were talking about the potential peace negotiation that might happen now with Russia. They would cease this war. Someone suggested that that would be a win and the person being interviewed said win? Who wins? No one wins in war. There's all of this evil. There's all of this consequence that just rolls forward for years when evil has its way.

Now brothers and sisters in Christ, I would love to just be really Pollyannaish. I would love to just be able to say, "Look, all we've got to do is take out our rose-colored glasses, and, by golly, the world looks beautiful." We could hide our heads in the sand and say texts like this don't really happen. I'm not sure how it is we get stuck in this thinking, but I can't tell you how many Christians I know that are stuck in this kind of thinking. The thinking I'm talking about is to say, "Hey, look, if you're a Christian, life is going to be rosy." Where have you been and what Bible are you reading? Because when I look at the people of God

³ Isaiah 63:11

throughout history, when I look at the followers of Jesus, what I see is challenge and difficulty. What I see is their faithfulness creating enemies. And yet, we think if we follow Jesus, if we live our Christian lives faithfully, then everybody will love us. Right? Isn't that the way it should be? Isn't that sometimes how we expect it to be?

In our Bible study, sometimes, we're reading in the scripture and we read this expectation that was clear both in Jesus' day and in the Old Testament, this expectation that if something's going bad in someone's life, that's an indication that they've sinned and God is punishing them for their sin. Most of us today go "Aww, boy! They were really superstitious back then, weren't they?" I mean when I get sick, I don't blame God. I don't say God is punishing me for. Or do I? Do you? When life gets hard, do you sometimes interpret that struggle as having lost God's favor somehow? Do you sometimes ask yourself the question "what did I do to deserve this?" As if there is, in fact, a one-to-one relationship between life going well and life going poorly. And if life is going poorly, clearly I must have done something to deserve it. We still think that way sometimes. But the Bible is clear. Both good and bad people experience the storms of life and sometimes being a follower of God brings challenge upon challenge upon challenge.

I've been at Saint Timothy's for a little bit more than two years now. There are a few families, who I won't mention, who, even since before I got here, have gone through challenge upon challenge upon challenge. The language that comes to my mind is more than anyone deserves. I wonder if you've been there. I wonder if you, like some of our friends who are a part of Griefshare, don't ask the question, "Why?" Or enter into the lament, "How long, oh Lord?"

But what I want to suggest to you today is that, whether in good times or in bad, whether because we deserve it or because we're being attacked for our own faithfulness, we have an incredible opportunity to remember the faithfulness of God and simply ask for help. Lord Jesus, come. Lord Jesus, be with me today. Help me to continue to walk this path of faithfulness. Help my life to reflect a Love that will overcome evil. Help me not to react to those in my life who do things to hurt me by trying to hurt them back. Allow me to walk in Your love and in Your embrace and to both experience and bring healing into my life and into my world, by virtue of Your goodness and Your presence. For it is true, the scripture teaches in Ephesians 6, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in the high places."⁴

⁴ Ephesians 6:12 KJV

Life can be a battle. It's simply the reality that I want to ask you to acknowledge exists. But do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, as *hard* as it might be to find that strength to do so. "Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist on the evil day, and having done everything stand firm."⁵ God would bless us by equipping us.

I want to just look out for a moment and I know you can't be in my mind as I do this. I'm just looking out and I'm seeing some of you who have been a great blessing to me in the last two years, by your presence, by your smile, by your faithfulness, I want you to know in difficult times that are encouraging, in difficult times that is life-giving. For those of you who have stepped alongside others who have been in those hard places, I just want to say to you. Thanks be to God, he's used you. Thanks be to God, he's created you and used you to be a blessing to those who are struggling. And sometimes, you're the same person because you've not only been the blessing, but you've been the person that's needed it and you've remained faithful throughout the struggle. I want to say to you thank be to God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as I suggested on Christmas Eve, this is a redemption story that we are a part of. This Christmas celebration of God sending His Son is a redemption story where God, instead of leaving us alone in the struggle, joins us in the midst of the struggles, walks with us, and feels the struggles with us. Where we are distressed, he is distressed. God is with us in this struggle and he calls us together to be a family of God in the midst of the journey.

I don't know what 2023 brings. I'm hoping it's going to be a lot easier than 2020 and 2021 and 2022 had been. And yet, I look back at the blessings that have been poured out in the midst of that struggle and I thank God for them. I thank God for you. I thank God that we journey into this new year together, knowing that God will bear us up, give us strength, allow us to stand and face whatever it is this new year might bring.

We are not only blessed by the redemptive work of God. We are a part of this redemptive story, for God is at work in our lives, in our church, in our world, through us, through his people. He says we are His children. He says we are a part of His family. He says we can turn to Daddy. I will tell you, even though both of my children are grown and most of the time they call me "Dad," there is still a very simple tool with which they can wrap me right around their little fingers. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. I just mean that if they want to move into an intimate conversation where we're just endeared to one another, all they simply

⁵ Ephesians 6:13 (NASB)

say is “Daddy, ...” and they got me because I so love to be their daddy. Abba, Father is a language of recognizing we’re turning to our Daddy. We’re saying, God, I need You. I need You today. I need You to walk with me. I don't understand everything that's happening, but I just want You to be with me. And if You wouldn't mind, call a few of my brothers and sisters and have them walk alongside me as well, because we need some family time.

To experience this encouragement, listen again to these incredible words of Galatians today. “When the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are His sons [and daughters], God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child;”⁶ We celebrate in Christmas Jesus born of the flesh, God's child begotten, not made, of one being with the Father through whom all things were created. But we celebrate also that because God’s Son, Jesus came, we, you and I, become God's children, His sons and His daughters. That's our identity. That's who we are and we become a part of this redemptive journey of God's people, bringing honor and glory to Christ by demonstrating His love, in the good times and in bad, in the struggle and in the journey together as God's people because we are children of God. We are a part of this redemption story. God is good. If you feel like your back might be to Him, turn around to His open embrace. God is good and as the song we're about to seeing reminds us, we are loved by Him. That's who we are. Please stand and be blessed by the song.

⁶ Galatians 4:4-7