

## Dealing with the Post-Christmas Blahs

Matthew 2:13-23

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To God be the glory for what He did this past weekend when over 1300 people attended our four Christmas Eve services! In order to help us focus on the baby born in Bethlehem who was crucified at Calvary as our substitute, we gave out nails and encouraged everyone to put them in a prominent place. This week I asked people to share on the Edgewood Facebook page where they put their nail. Here are some of the pictures that were posted. If you didn't get a nail, or you want another one, stop by the round resource table and grab one after the service.

As exciting as Christmas can be, it can also be an excruciating time of the year. Listen to these words from a journal for counselors: *"We are told that Christmas, for Christians, should be the happiest time of year, an opportunity to be joyful and grateful with family, friends and colleagues. Yet, according to the National Institute of Health, Christmas is the time of year that people experience a high incidence of depression... One survey reported that 45% of respondents dreaded the festive season...it appears to have more to do with unrealistic expectations and excessive self-reflection for many people."*

Elvis popularized a song called, "Blue Christmas," sixty years ago, which I won't sing for you right now.

Some time ago, Greek Orthodox and Armenian priests came to blows in a dispute over how to clean the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem following the Christmas celebrations. Priests were actually seen swinging brooms and throwing stones at each other! Seven people were injured in this 15-minute fight on the site where many believe Jesus was born. Christmas can lead to conflict and chaos.

There's deep sadness in this season in our own community as two fires killed a total of nine people within five days, one in Davenport and one in Blue Grass on Christmas night.

Now that Christmas has crescendoed, some of us are back to our complicated and chaotic lives. Others of us have moved from "ho, ho, ho" to humdrum. Has your "fa-la-la-la-la" turned to blah-blah-blah?

Earlier this week I read a powerful post called, “Holidays and Empty Chairs” and was reminded of the deep sorrow that many feel during this season of the year.

*“Though you may indeed have so many reasons to feel fortunate and to give thanks, what this season is now marked by more than anything else—is absence. Surrounded by noise and activity and life, your eyes and your heart can’t help but drift to that quiet space that now remains unoccupied: the cruel vacancy of the empty chair...though they’re supposed to nurture gratitude and deposit peace within us, the holidays have a way of magnifying loss...in the middle of all the celebration and thanksgiving, reminding us of our incompleteness, our lack, our mourning. The empty chair is different for everyone, though it is equally intrusive. For some it is a place of a vigil...for some the chair is a memorial...for some it is a fresh wound...this may be the first time the chair has been empty for you, or you may have grown quite accustomed to the subtraction.”*

We don’t spend much time on this but I think Joseph and Mary had a letdown as well...and they almost had an empty chair. While Luke’s account has no songs of sadness, Matthew’s narrative is drenched in tears and fears, pain and problems, lament and loss. The picture is not pretty and is usually kept off the cover of our Christmas cards and out of our Christmas carols.

We’re going to focus on three post-Christmas scenes from Matthew 2:13-23. Let’s first familiarize ourselves with what happened and then lock into some lessons that will help us beat the blahs. Here’s the main truth I want us to get: *Even when you’re blue, do what you know to be true.*

## Observations

But first some observations...

- **Each of these violent vignettes ends with a reference to fulfilled Scripture.** Notice verse 15 – “**This was to fulfill** what the Lord had spoken...” and verse 17: “**Then was fulfilled** what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah...” and again in verse 23: “...that what was spoken by the prophets might be **fulfilled**.” Amazingly, the coming of Christ fulfilled some 300 prophecies! Augustine liked to say, “*In the Old Testament the New Testament lies concealed. And in the New, the Old lies revealed.*”

- **God used the revelation of dreams to get Joseph to move.** We see this in verses 13, 19, and 22. And last weekend we saw that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to move him to take Mary as his wife in Matthew 1:20.
- **Every time Jesus and Mary are mentioned together, Jesus is always first and foremost.** Check out verses 13-14: “*Rise, take the **child and his mother**...and he rose and took the **child and his mother**.*” And again in verses 20-21: “*Rise, take the **child and his mother**...and he rose and took the **child and his mother**.*” Normally the focus is on the adult and the child is spoken of in reference to the parent – “*a mother with her child.*” The emphasis here is reversed with the emphasis upon the person of Jesus Christ. The child is a threat to Herod, not Mary or Joseph. Notice also that Mary is not given any title like “Queen of Heaven” or “Mother of God” or “Co-Redeemer.” We also see how Joseph is not the “real father” of Jesus, as it doesn’t say, “Take your son” but “*take the child...*”
- **God is divinely directing these events.** God is not a passive observer but rather the supreme mover as He orchestrates everything according to His plan and for His ultimate glory. His providence is profoundly evident. Proverbs 16:9: “*The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.*” I like what John Wesley once said, “*I read the newspaper to see how God is governing the world.*”

Let’s consider the first scene...

**1. Escape to Egypt (13-15).** A Sunday School teacher asked her class to draw pictures of their favorite Bible stories. She was puzzled by Kyle’s picture, which showed four people on an airplane, so she asked him which story it was meant to represent. “*The flight to Egypt,*” said Kyle. “*I see...and that must be Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus,*” the teacher said. “*But who’s the fourth person?*” The young boy exclaimed, “*Oh, that’s Pontius...the Pilot.*”

While there is a flight to Egypt, the pilot is not Pontius, but God himself. The first part of God’s providential plan to protect His Son was to warn the wise men to return by a different route so Herod would not know the exact whereabouts of Jesus. After the wise men head back home, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph while he’s dreaming and says in verse 13: “*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.*” The word “*flee*” has the idea of moving hastily to escape danger.

We see in verses 14-15 that Joseph jumps into action. He believed and he boogied. He didn't debate but instead departed. Once he heard he hurried to obey, not even waiting until the morning: ***“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.’”***

If you know your Old Testament, you'll recognize the significance of Egypt. On the one hand it represents slavery and stress. On the other, it signifies safety and security. This trip from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt was about 80 miles long and then they likely traveled an additional 250 miles to Alexandria, a city known to be home for 1 million Jews at this time. The total trip could have taken several weeks.

Matthew compares the Jews coming out of Egypt with Jesus being called out of Egypt as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1: ***“Out of Egypt I have called my son.”*** This is called a typology, or an illustration, not a specific prophecy. Here we see that Jesus represents or corresponds to the nation of Israel. Remember that God called his people ***“son”*** in Exodus 4:22-23: ***“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me...’”***

*Even when you're blue, do what you know to be true.* Let's consider the second scene...

**2. The Butcher in Bethlehem (16-18).** Herod is now hot because the wise men had outwitted him in verse 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.”***

Born into a politically well-connected family, Herod was destined for a life of hardball and power brokering. At 25 years old, he became the governor of Galilee. In 40 B.C. the Roman Senate named him ***“King of the Jews.”*** It was a title the Jews hated because he was anything but religious and that explains why he went berserk when he heard that a baby had been born ***“King of Jews.”***

Soon after becoming King, he wiped out several bands of guerrillas who were terrorizing the countryside. He held tightly to the reins of power and brutally

removed anyone who got in his way. Over the years he killed many: His brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, two of his sons, and even his wife. Caesar Augustus reportedly said: *“It’s better to be Herod’s pig than his son because pigs were protected by law.”* Josephus, the Jewish historian said, *“He was a man of great barbarity toward all men equally, and a slave to all his passions.”*

Ever since an enemy poisoned Herod’s father, who was a king himself, Herod was beset with paranoia. He went to great lengths to make sure a secret ingredient never ended up in his burrito bowl. When he became king, he commissioned tens of thousands of slaves to build over 10 emergency fortresses, all heavily armed and well provisioned. In addition, he established an elaborate network of spies. Anyone with a plot to dethrone Herod was sniffed out and snuffed out before he could eat breakfast. Those who opposed him would be invited to a midnight swim in the Jordan River with a cement bathrobe on.

Verse 16 tells us ***“when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious.”*** The word ***“tricked”*** can also be translated as *“mocked and made a fool of.”* As a result, he becomes ***“furious”*** which means, *“violently enraged and exceedingly indignant.”*

He then does something worthy of Hitler or Stalin or Kim Jung-un and orders the cold-blooded murder of all males less than two years of age. Herod the Great had become the Butcher of Bethlehem. He was perhaps the ultimate oxymoron in history. Rich in what most of us consider valuable, he was totally bankrupt as a human being. He was addicted to power, obsessed with possessions, focused on prestige, and filled with paranoia.

Notice how this also fulfills prophecy in verses 17-18: ***“Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘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.’”*** This text comes from Jeremiah 31:15 and the context refers to people getting ready to be sent into captivity. Ramah is located about five miles north of Jerusalem and historically was the holding place for Jewish captives as they were prepared for deportation to Babylon, much like Terezin was for prisoners before they were sent to Auschwitz.

It’s a time of exceeding anguish and widespread weeping, especially by mothers for their children. Rachel was known as the mother of the nation who died while giving birth to Benjamin. While she is buried in Bethlehem, in profound poetic

imagery, her tears are figuratively spilling into the soil again as mothers are weeping and crying inconsolably.

Some of you are grieving the loss of a child or grandchild. I can't even imagine the pain you are experiencing. Others of you are sorrowing about the loss of your spouse or parent, family member or friend. I pray you find comfort in Psalm 34:18: ***"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."***

It's so sad that the Babylonians slaughtered so many children. Several centuries later, Herod's hatred leads to the deaths of babies in and around Bethlehem. Some forty years later up to a million people were killed in A.D. 70, including infants and children, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Hitler exterminated some 6 million Jews.

Are you aware that Rachel is still weeping today? If you lean in you can hear her loud lamentation for the nearly 60 million babies that have been aborted in our country since 1973. Some more bad news will take place January 1<sup>st</sup> when tax dollars will increasingly be used to fund abortions in Illinois. One piece of good news is that the Planned Parenthood in Bettendorf officially closed their doors on Friday!

*Even when you're blue, do what you know to be true.* Let's look now at the final scene in Matthew 2.

**3. Return to Nazareth (19-23).** Some time later, Herod dies and then an angel appears in another dream to Joseph and says in verse 20: ***"Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."*** This echoes Exodus 4:19 where God said to Moses: ***"Go back to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead."*** We read in verse 21 that after Joseph heard this, ***"...he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel."***

We know from history that Herod died of foul and fatal diseases at the age of 70. After making it back to the Bethlehem area, Joseph finds out that Herod's son Archelaus is now on the throne and he becomes afraid because he is even more sinister than Herod. He began his reign as king by massacring 3,000 people.

I wonder if Joseph was getting frustrated and fed up. He and his young family have been gone from Nazareth for a long time. Once again, he has a dream and

verse 23 says: *“And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”*

While there is not one specific verse Matthew is referencing, (notice the plural **“prophets”**), he’s likely using a wordplay to show that Jesus was the branch (nezer) from Isaiah 11:1 and was despised (nezer) from Isaiah 53:3. Jesus was not only sent as an outcast to Egypt, He also was sent to live in a place for outcasts. I’m reminded of what Jerome said in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century: *“Jesus was born in a dung heap because that’s where He knew He’d find us.”*

Jesus was often called “The Nazarene” as a title of derision, an expressive way of saying that He was despised and not influential. Nathaniel summed up what people thought of this town in John 1:46: **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** No one lived in Nazareth except those who could not afford to live anywhere else. Even in His death, the sign on the top of the cross was used to mock Jesus. The letters I.N.R.I. were the Latin abbreviation for: **“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”**

Let’s synthesize these scenes so we can figure out how to beat the blahs.

### **Beating the Blahs**

**1. Exhibit instant obedience.** While we have no record of Joseph ever saying anything, his actions sure spoke loudly. In every case, when Joseph is told what to do, he instantly obeys as he first did in Matthew 1:24: **“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.”**

In scene one, when he heard the angel tell him to go to Egypt he didn’t wait until morning but got up while it was still dark and departed. In scene two, when he’s told to go back to Israel, he does so immediately. Then, when he’s warned in a dream to not stay in Judea in scene three, he leads Mary and her son back on the road where they head north to Nazareth.

Write this down. Obedience is seldom convenient, but it’s always correct. *Even when you’re blue, do what you know to be true.* Something Beth and I heard in a parenting course when our daughters were young is spot on: *“Delayed obedience is disobedience.”*

The word, “*rise*” in verse 13 means, “*to be roused from inactivity.*” Just like us, Joseph had to be prodded from inaction to action. The word, “*take*” means, “*to take your responsibility seriously.*”

Joseph does not ask for more information nor does he request more time. Once the Lord says it; that settles it. He doesn’t ask questions or make a deal or tell the Lord that he’ll obey later on. He doesn’t complain about how hard it is to uproot his young family or wonder about travel accommodations. He just gets up and goes like Abraham did according to Hebrews 11:8 when he “*went out, not knowing where he was going.*”

In what area is the Lord expecting your instant obedience right now? Is there something He’s prompting you to do but you’ve been delaying? Psalm 119:60 says: “*I hasten and do not delay to obey your commandments.*” If you want to obey, don’t delay. Is there a decision you’ve been putting off? An ungodly relationship you need to sever? An application you need to send in? Is there a gift you need to give? A commitment you need to make? Is there a person you need to forgive? What about deciding to totally live out our 4 G’s this year? Decide right now on the cusp of a new year to gather, grow, give and go with the gospel like you never have before.

By God’s grace, 2018 will be an exciting year for Edgewood as we continue to move forward with our facility project. We’re in the conceptual planning stage and will move to final drawings this summer, a capital campaign this fall and construction next fall. Here are some other highlights that come to mind:

- Financial Peace University begins Wednesday, January 17
- Legacy Grandparenting Conference on Saturday, February 24
- Apologetics Easter Weekend Sermon
- Law Enforcement Memorial Service in May
- Missions Trips this Summer

**2. Expect constant opposition.** Have you noticed that every time hope is born, hard times are sure to follow? While we may want a sentimental and sanitized Christmas, that’s really not an option. Properly understood, Christmas will take us out of our comfort zone. Hebrews 11:13 says that we are “*aliens and strangers on earth.*” This post-Christmas world is neither our hope nor our home. Just as Joseph endured opposition for the sake of the baby, as those who bear his name,

we should expect no less. 2 Timothy 3:12: ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”***

Joseph learned that to be caretaker of the Christ-child meant that his simple and quiet life was over because good news always has enemies. I don't know who said this but it's so true: *“In order to see the Babe in Bethlehem, one must pass through Jerusalem and awaken King Herod.”* And, there are Herods everywhere because Herod is simply the seed of the serpent.

Revelation 12:17 tells us that Satan is intent on wiping out believers: ***“Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”*** Since Satan couldn't murder Immanuel as an infant he is out to assassinate the offspring of Eve.

**3. Embrace God's operation.** I love this quote: *“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the real work of Christmas begins.”* God is weaving everything together to accomplish His will. The happenings of history work out in a way that will bring Him ultimate glory for He is the God of history. There is nothing that surprises Him, nothing that slows Him down because He rules and reigns. King Herod was strong but he was nothing compared to King Jesus. Life is often not like what we planned. Blahs come, plans change, life happens but God is great and He is good and He's in charge.

God providentially takes care of us and prepares us for what hasn't happened yet. That means He brings blessing from brokenness, triumph from tragedy and he can turn our mess into a message. Hold on to these three truths:

- **God provides what we need.** Gold, frankincense and myrrh were liquid assets and easy to transport for the family.
- **God is always present.** God never left Joseph and Mary to figure things out alone. He was with them, reminding them that Herod could not kill hope.
- **God's purposes will prevail.** Nothing and no one can thwart His plans.

God doesn't always tell us everything about the future, does He? Here's a principle that is helpful. *If you want to know God's will then do the will of God that you already know.* Many times we ask God to tell us what to do and God says, *“I've already told you in my Word. Even when you're blue, do what you know to be true.”*

I find it very interesting that God did not tell Joseph to go to Nazareth until he had first obeyed and went to Egypt and then to Judea. The old adage is true: *“God doesn’t steer parked cars.”* If you want God to guide you, then start moving on those things you already know He wants you to do.

### **Resolutions for 2018**

We don’t have time to list all of God’s revealed will but here are seven clear resolutions as we get ready to welcome 2018.

1. **Care for the refugee and immigrant.** Properly understood, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were refugees in Egypt. Leviticus 19:33-34: *“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”* You might want to consider serving with World Relief, one of our Go Team partners.
2. **Put God and His kingdom first in all things.** Matthew 6:33: *“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*
3. **Read His Word daily.** I love what Psalms 1:2 says: *“But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”* Pick up the new Bible reading plan each month. We’ll be in Genesis and Ecclesiastes during January.
4. **Practice sexual purity.** 1 Thessalonians 4:3: *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.”*
5. **Give on a weekly basis to the work of God in the world.** 2 Corinthians 9:6-7: *“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*
6. **Encourage others and challenge them to grow.** Hebrews 10:24: *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”* Leverage

your role as a parent or grandparent, redeeming the time, for the days are evil.

- 7. Make weekend service participation a holy habit.** Hebrews 10:25: *“Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

Lucy walks up to Charlie Brown just before Christmas and says to him: *“Charlie Brown, since it is Christmas, I suggest that we lay aside all our differences and be friends for this season of the year.”* Charlie Brown responds: *“That’s a great idea, Lucy, but why does it have to be just at this time of the year? Why can’t we be friends all year long?”* Lucy looks at Charlie Brown with disgust and asks, *“What are you, a fanatic or something?”*

Friends, Christmas changes everything. Let’s let it change us all year long. Most of us could stand to be a bit more fanatical in our faith. Let’s do that by...

- 1. Exhibiting instant obedience.**
- 2. Expecting constant opposition.**
- 3. Embracing God’s operation.**

*Even when you’re blue, do what you know to be true.*