

“A Place to Grow”

Matthew 2:13-23

Last Sunday I mentioned in my message that I was concluding our series on ‘Why Bethlehem?’. Initially I was going to do a message about Hanukkah before we get into the New Year and our theme “Understanding the Times”. But my message on Hanukkah just wasn’t happening. As I was wrestling with Hanukkah I felt led to read Matt. 2:13-23 a few times before I went to bed on Monday. Which of course is the one passage about Bethlehem that I didn’t cover. I woke up between 4:00-4:30 thinking about this passage and sensed the Spirit leading me to speak on this. And by Tuesday lunch time I already had a rough outline – that’s never happened in all my years here! So, we come back once more to learn from Bethlehem.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. [2 Tim. 3:16-17]

Geography plays an important part in this section. We start off in Bethlehem. Then we go to Egypt. Later we come back to Judea, the southern province where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are but we end up in the north in Nazareth in the region of Galilee. That’s a busy 11 verses! So Geography is very important here and as we’ve been talking about how Geography and theology come together in our study on Bethlehem, we’re going to learn a few more things about how our own Geographical locations and theology come together. We too can learn about how we can grow spiritually through the places God assigns us to live. Because the Apostle Paul wrote in Acts 17:26

²⁶ From one man He [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’

Paul may be referring more generically to people groups, but if God determines what people group go where and what each one of us came from then I believe He sovereignly places us and directs us to specific locations to live.

As we pick up the narrative of Jesus’ early days here in Matt. 2:13, the Wisemen have left and Joseph and Mary and Jesus are living in a house. It could be as many as two years have gone by since that night in Bethlehem. But there’s something not right here. They came to Bethlehem for the census from Nazareth and they never went back home. It seems they’ve settled in Bethlehem. And that’s a danger for all of us as God’s people because, as we’ll see, Bethlehem reminded Joseph and Mary and all of us

Not to Get too Comfortable in our Bethlehems **(2:13-15)**

I was thinking about the different places I’ve lived and I just realized we/I have lived in Westport longer than anywhere else. The home I grew up in Woodstock, the house I bought when I was single still in Woodstock shortly before I met Michelle. The house we bought in London before we

moved here and now Westport for the last 25 ½ years. But in each place you and I have lived we have to look at our geography, theologically.

God sent us there/here to accomplish His purpose (v.13)

The reason God sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem not only so He could fulfil many prophecies but also to provide a place where others would see and hear about Jesus. Joseph and Mary remained in Bethlehem. They didn't go back home to Nazareth. Why did they stay? When Joseph and Mary left Nazareth, Mary and Joseph had not been married yet and she was expecting. Mary would have been shunned, rebuked and ostracized. Joseph refused to divorce Mary, which would have been interpreted as 'Oh, then you must be the father!?' Again, shunned, rebuked and ostracised. So leaving Nazareth was not hard. And why go back to that?

But God's purpose for Joseph & Mary in Bethlehem was finished and He used a hard situation to force them to leave. So Joseph has another dream/vision from God and he is told to escape to Egypt because Herod is out to kill the child. Egypt was a haven for Jews, many who had fled Herod. There was a strong Jewish population in Alexandria in Egypt. They even had their own mini-temple there. But the trip to Egypt was at least 100 miles to the border and another 75 to Alexandria if that's where they went. Most likely the gifts from the Wisemen provided for their needs for the trip and possibly while in Egypt.

Sometimes God has to physically move us to another location because we're too comfortable where we are. And He may have had to use something hard to force us to move. Now God's purpose changed and He had to protect the Child from Herod and move them to Egypt. And there was another purpose for that because Matthew will quote Hosea 11:1 as a fulfillment type of Israel being saved out of Egypt. When we're unsure why God moves us elsewhere, we always know this:

God sends us wherever it will make us more like His Son (vv.14-15)

The prophecy fulfillment was intentionally designed to help Israel identify with Jesus and for all God's people who find themselves in places of physical or emotional exile to know that God understands. Rom. 8:28-30 is one of those anchors in the Bible we hang on to when we're unsure of what God is doing in our life.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Every time we ask God why, we always know the over-all answers;

- 1) He's using this to make us more like Jesus;
- 2) He wants us to bring glory to Himself.

If we've ever wondered 'Lord, why am I here? Why did you move us to this place?' It's part of the process in making us more like Jesus and that God wants to be glorified in this place. Each time Joseph was told by God to move, he immediately obeyed. He wasn't told how long it would be – and it probably wasn't long – but each time he obeyed God it was part of God's plan to mature Joseph into being more godly and more holy. But if we go complaining and being upset at God, then we won't see His purpose because we're not willing to grow and glorify Him.

Of course, Joseph was told that Herod was out to kill Jesus. What Joseph wasn't told was that Herod would kill all boys under two. Since we live in a sin-filled world we have to remember,

Everywhere We Live There Will be Hardship **(2:16-18)**

If we played that 'word association' game with places in the Bible and Bethlehem came up, our quickest response would be birthplace of Jesus or David's hometown, not the tragic slaying of the boys. So often our memories of past places and times focus on the positive things. We have a tendency to shove the negative experiences aside and sometimes romanticize about how wonderful things were back then. But we know there were difficulties there too. And all of our experiences are different. For Joseph and Mary, Bethlehem

Was a place of shelter (v.16a)

God used the census to get them away from the difficult family life back home. Here she gave birth among new friends and renewed family acquaintances. Here Jesus took his first steps, spoke His first words, maybe they scratched his changing height on a door post. Here the shepherds came and later the Wisemen came. God protected them there. But then they had to leave because a terrible tragedy would occur shortly after they left. God spared them from that tragedy. Yet for others

It's a place of pain (vv.16b-18)

Herod was insanely jealous of any threat to his throne. A backdoor way of affirming Jesus being the Messiah was Herod's belief that He was. Why kill this baby if he wasn't a threat? Sadly Herod ordered the deaths of any boy under two. And Bethlehem may have been smaller than Westport and there may have only been 10 or less deaths but think about this. Let's say this happened today in our town. That means those twin boys born to Scott & Stacy Blair would have been killed. That Michael & Amanda's son Ben, our grandchild would have died. We know how much pain goes through a small community when one young person tragically loses his/her life, imagine if 6-12 little children were murdered? The whole community would be totally devastated.

As we look back at our own places where God has directed us to live, we can see how sometimes God sheltered us from pain and suffering, but at other times there was pain and suffering. So how do we get through these things?

We Trust God's Plan as We Journey to our Final **'Forever Home'** **(2:19-23)**

Yes, I do like watching those renovation shows! The Property Brothers have coined that phrase 'Forever Home' because they want to fix people's homes so they can enjoy it and never move again. But that's not reality. Every person whose ever lived is a visitor to this planet. We are created by God uniquely and wonderfully, but marred with a sin nature. We are in need of having our sins paid for. We will find that no place, no experience and no person or amount of money can satisfy us here. So we will never find our Forever home here. God has a better place reserved for us in eternity. And we see it modelled through His dealings with Jesus, Joseph and Mary.

Eventually Joseph receives another dream revelation from God and is told that Herod has died and it is safe to return to Israel. Surely Joseph knew they would get back at some point but he never forced God's hand. He waited on God and God directed him. And while we may look at Joseph and Mary differently because they were Jesus' parents, let's not forget that they were just that, parents with a child looking out for what's best for them to grow in God for themselves. Likewise, each of us has to trust God's plan in our journeys from location to location

In seeking to raise our families in the Lord (vv.19-20)

We know Joseph and Mary were godly people. Joseph never speaks a word in Scripture yet every time God directs him, he immediately obeys because it's what God wants for His family. What does God want for our children? He wants us to model a godly life and lead them in what God wants for them, not what we want for them or our culture. We live in a culture that models to parents that we should make sure they get the best education so they can get a degree that will enable them to get a good job and make good money. We live in a culture that says we should get our kids involved in sports and activities that will advance them in those activities so they will get rewarded through scholarships or achievements. While all those things are good, are they the best God wants for them?

If the best thing for all of us is to know God through faith in Jesus and to prepare us for our true 'Forever Home' is that what we're modelling to our children ourselves and is that our main goal for them? Do we make our child rearing decisions with God's ultimate purpose in mind, which is making them more like Jesus? If we raise culturally successful children who don't make God a priority in their life, we may have gained the world but lost their souls.

Every time Joseph is led of the Lord to follow God's leading - which means leading his family to wherever God directs - he obeys. Notice Joseph's initial move when he left Egypt.

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² 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, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Where was he going? Back to Judea in the southern part of Israel. I think Joseph made a common sense judgment that if Jesus was to be the Messiah then He should be raised in the religious south close to Jerusalem where all the scholars and teachers were. But that's not the environment God wanted Jesus to be raised in. So when he heard Herod's son was reigning in Herod's place he knew it was still unsafe for his family, and God directed him one more time to go back home to Nazareth. The place they had made no effort to return to. Yet God says, 'Yes, you need to go back there because it's where I want My Son to be raised.' Not just to fulfil prophecy – which of course Jesus does. Is. 9:1-2 says the light will shine from the areas of Zebulun and Naphtali (two tribes that settled in Galilee) and Is. 11:1-2 says the Messiah will be the Branch, the nazar, who rises from the stump of Jesse. While Nazareth may have been the last place Joseph and Mary wanted to go, they obeyed God because it was the best choice for His family. And those are the hard decisions we have to make sometimes for our own families. So let's make sure we

Don't despise the Nazareths along the way (vv.21-23)

Nazareth was a small un-walled town of little significance. An un-walled city or town was one always open to potential attacks. It's almost a statement that says 'We're not important enough to rob'. There's nothing significant here. But that's the world's perspective. Later in John's gospel when

Philip tells Nathaniel that he has found the Messiah and that He's from Nazareth, Nathaniel's infamous reply was 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?'

If God has led us at different times in our lives to places of obscurity or places of discomfort, remember God has a purpose for us and our families. And that purpose is always the same – to grow us to be more like Jesus. Always pray, Lord what is the best way I can help myself and my family grow to be more like Jesus? What's here that will help us do that? You may find God directing you to make difficult and counter cultural decisions, but our purpose is to point them to Jesus and show them there's a real 'Forever Home' being built for us right now by Jesus.

Sometimes God directs us to stay in one place all or most of our life. Nothing wrong with that ether. Others are directed to move around a lot. However God leads us, let's make sure we don't despise where we are or get too comfortable where we are. Bethlehem reminds us that every place we go is a place where God wants to grow us to become more like Jesus. He may uproot us out of our comfort zones at times and shelter us in an Egypt. He may bring us 360 right back where we started. Why? Because there are people and an environment there that will help us mature in Jesus at that time. And godly parents need to be sensitive to the Lord's leading on how and where they can help their kids and grandkids grow in Jesus.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
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