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## Sermon

### **Finding Hope and Purpose for 2020**

**Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23**

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Here we stand on the brink of a new year. It's like being on a bridge in the middle of a journey. As we look back, we can see what happened last year and as we look forward, at the other end of the bridge, maybe there are some high points ahead that we can probably anticipate, but most of the way is cloudy. No-one can see into the future. We may have questions such as, "What will happen?", "How will I cope if things don't improve from last year?" I wonder what your questions are. As the New Year season comes, it's useful to pause and capture what the questions are and hold them before the Lord in prayer.

Joseph and Mary must have had similar thoughts, but they were being thrust into a desperate flight. They were leaving everyone they knew and everything they were familiar with. They were facing a long journey, needing to flee from a death threat from a ruthless, raging King – Herod the Great. Their goal was a foreign country, but one where a different language was spoken. Not only were they new parents, coping with a preschooler, but also, getting used to marriage and now travelling internationally for an unknown length of time. Jesus knows what it is to grow up with change and uncertainty.

One thing I notice as I look at these passages, however, is how closely and carefully God attended to the details of Jesus' birth and growing up. God knew that even though the correct and proper time had come for Jesus' birth, it was not all going to be smooth-sailing. He carefully guided Joseph and Mary by a series of dreams and angelic encounters, all lining up with and fulfilling prophecies in Scripture that had been written many years before.

As I spend time with people in the challenges of their lives, I often say, "This is not a surprise to God." Because it is a surprise to us, it is easy to get rattled when seemingly random, bad things happen, but we can see here in this piece of written history, that God knew well in advance that certain things would happen and would need to unfold, to fulfill his master plan to save us. We see in Matthew 2 just a few of many times in which Mary and Joseph were guided by God through dreams. (vv13&19) In verses 15 and 23, twice our attention is drawn to ways in which OT prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus' life, even though he had no way of orchestrating that. "Out of Egypt, I have called my Son," and "He will be called a Nazarene." No wonder the chief priests and teachers of the law didn't catch on, because Scripture also says, "...Bethlehem... out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel."

Only God could make those diverse prophecies come true, for one life.

We see how easy it is to get the wrong end of the stick, if we only focus on a few parts of Scripture and don't consult God about His current instructions. In our short Gospel passage alone, there are at least 4 different places where prophecy is woven together for Jesus' coming. There is the stuff written years before he was born and there is the "Do this now!" communication from God through dreams.

Twice, an angel brings instructions. Each time, Joseph had to make a decisive response to God's instructions. It is written, "So he got up." The plan unfolded as he heard and obeyed, even if he did not know every detail of the plan before it came to pass. How could Joseph, a common labourer, know the connection between, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son" and "He shall be called a Nazarene"?

The Great Plan unfolded as Joseph heard and obeyed, even if he did not know every detail of the plan before it came to pass. That is how a relationship with God develops. It is our response of obedience and trust which demonstrates to God that we love him. 1 John 2:5 says, "But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him." Our love for God becomes complete, mature, when it expresses itself in acts of obedience to Him. As Joseph obediently leapt up in the night and dragged his family out of bed, he was expressing his love for God and trust in His faithfulness.

The Holy Family were well on the way to Egypt by the time Herod's soldiers swooped down on the little town of Bethlehem and killed all the baby boys aged two and under. In Roman culture, children were regarded as commodities: able to be bought and sold; not regarded as people with rights. It could be easy for compassionate people to blame God for these babies' deaths, but in our time, even Christian-based western culture is fast becoming desensitized to a baby's right to life, just as much as it was in the first century. Our minds are so compartmentalized and influenced by culture and media. Can you see how allowing abortion up to the time of birth, is similar to the kind of attitude that made the actions of Herod and his soldiers allowable? Are the babies a source of danger or inconvenience? Get rid of them. Such an attitude has been normal and indeed prevalent in a number of Asian countries for a long time – now it is coming to New Zealand too.

How does God view the babies' deaths? Firstly, we look at today's reading from Isaiah. "In all their distresses, he was distressed too." We are instructed to weep with those who weep, (*Romans 12:15*) and he does the same himself.

Secondly, Jesus took on flesh and blood and deeply understands how it is to be human and vulnerable. The Hebrews 2 reading today, tells us that "the author of [our] salvation was made perfect through suffering." That word 'suffering' means the adverse circumstances, the persecution and undeserved aggro he received. It means the determined opposition he faced from people.

We must understand the source of evil. We have a real enemy – Satan - who does not want us to trust God totally. He wants us to blame God for the bad stuff in our lives, and to not recognize and so drift into his own evil plans. Jesus did not wimp out in the face of opposition and thus avoid God's plan. He obeyed and trusted his heavenly Father at huge cost to himself. He stuck close to His Father, kept the lines of communication open, and held onto Scripture right up until his last breath.

How could he be so strong? Well, he was deeply connected to the source of strength, the ground of his being. The Scripture talks of being rooted and grounded in love. It says, "*Let your roots go down deep into the soil of His love.*" (Ephesians 3:17&18) It says Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. John 15 instructs: *Stay connected to the vine and you will flourish and bear much fruit.* Only branches that stay connected to the vine can bear fruit. I looked outside yesterday and saw my grapevine solidly rooted, supporting branches that are developing large bunches of swelling grapes. Come rain, come shine, come drought, they are growing. The roots are deep.

Do our lives reflect Jesus' strength of character, hope and purpose that was so deeply rooted in Scripture and his love for God? As we journey from 2019 over the bridge into 2020, we don't have to focus on anxious questions or self-improvement programmes. Ephesians 2:8-10 reminds us that

*"...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Isn't that amazing? Even before we were born, God prepared good things for us to do. No need to be bored in the Kingdom of God. No need to feel our lives are pointless. No need to feel we have to earn the favour of God.

Father God is ready and willing to help us walk into these good things, as we heard in Hebrews: <sup>16</sup> *For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.*" And we are Abraham's descendants through faith.

Let's walk into the coming year, full of hope and purpose, as we prayerfully ponder these truths and questions:

1. Jesus is not ashamed to call me part of his family. How can I grow into this truth in 2020?
2. Jesus says, "*Without Me, you can do nothing.*" I want to do things with Jesus that have eternal significance and value. How can I access more of the goodness and strength that Jesus supplies, to resource what I do?
3. Jesus says I am a branch of the True Vine. What can I practically do, to allow Christ's love to flow through me this year?

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