

**Born to Die**  
**He's Back**  
**12-31-17**  
**Matthew 2:19-23**

We just made it through the Christmas season and are on the edge of a new year. A bunch of us are making New Year's resolutions or you make a list of goals you want to accomplish for the year. Okay, maybe you don't do either but, there is something to this idea of making goals and new year's resolutions. We do them because we have this thought about what we could be or could do and so we set out to accomplish it. I think that desire comes from an understanding that things could get better, right. I'll be healthier and more active if I eat right and exercise. I'll be able to succeed in my job if I give up certain bad habits. I'll be better qualified for a promotion if I take the time to read and better myself. Etc. etc. What is at the foundation of all those things? It's our hope that whatever it is we put our minds to we can accomplish? We hope that things will improve or get even better than they already are. We are driven by hope to change our current situation for the possibility of a greater one. If we didn't have hope, we wouldn't make these goals because we wouldn't believe that we can change what currently is for what can be. Hope is a powerful thing, isn't it? It has the ability to change what is to what could be.

**Hope changes what is - to what could be.**

The last several weeks we have been going through our advent series Born to Die. It is a series that shows us that Jesus came for a purpose and that the account of his birth is filled with "behind the scenes: pieces that are important if we take the time to see them. It has shown us that the idyllic scene that we often see during the Christmas season misses the fact that it was a dangerous time for Jesus. It was a harsh environment that Jesus was born into. A culture filled with violence, power struggles, deception, suffering, and smelly shepherds. This is the place that Jesus was born so he could bring hope for all nations.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the fact that Joseph was forced to take his family and flee to Egypt. The holy family made into refugees in a land that is unfamiliar and not their own. We saw the selfishness and pride of Herod forcing them away. This kind of stuff is still happening today? We can lose sight of the hope in the human race in light of what people do to other people. We look around the world and we see destruction and suffering, we see violence and pain and so often those things overwhelm us. Even to the point where we can't see the good that God is doing. It is easy to focus on what is going wrong because it is right in front of us. It is often much harder to see the hope because is about that future that we cannot see.

Imagine what it was like for the holy family to be in Egypt. Not knowing when they could return, not knowing when they would be able to see their families again. It is difficult and painful when hope is being clouded out by suffering. Can you feel their hopelessness? Can you relate? Maybe you're in a situation that feels like there is no hope. Where you are going through something that is just making it so difficult to believe things could get better. Maybe you're on the other side of and you have made it through that painful time. Whether it was a divorce, losing a job, losing a friend, someone close to you passing away. The truth is that living in this world we will endure suffering. We will endure pain, but our passage today shows us that there is hope, it shows us that suffering has an end date. It will not last forever.

**Suffering has an end date.**

So, the holy family is back home. Their refugee status has come to an end. They have been called back from their involuntary exile. Joseph gets the word from the angel of the Lord that Herod is dead, so he takes his family back to Israel. I want to point out something awesome though. You know we titled this sermon, He's back and it is clearly a reference to the fact that Jesus is back in Israel, but notice who else is back: the angel of the Lord. Here we see a return appearance of the Angel of the Lord, the messenger of God. I want us to realize the importance of this fact. God gave direction to Joseph to leave through an angel of the Lord, now

he is returning with a message saying to return. You wonder though if there was any communication in between. We don't know exactly how long Joseph and his family were in Egypt but, most likely it was a couple years. What must Joseph have been thinking during that time? Should we stay, or should we go? Is it safe? Is God going to call us back any time or are we left to our own devices to figure things out? We've been there, too haven't we? You get these ideas, or you follow God's lead and then there is this silence that happens, where it seems like God isn't talking and you might even begin to doubt that he ever spoke to you. Anyone else with me?

Here is the thing, the Israelites understood that kind of silence. In fact, there is a gap between when the OT ends, and the NT begins. This time of silence lasted for 400 years. To give it perspective, the Plymouth colony in America was founded in 1620, less than 400 years ago. Pocahontas, who was instrumental in the survival of the first Jamestown colony in VA died 400 years ago this year. So, the Jews were waiting for 400 years to hear from God, to hear more about the promise of a new King who would rule the world. You think they didn't have some questions during that 400 years? I'm guessing they had some doubts and concerns about what God meant by he will return *soon*.

It is hard to cling to hope especially when it seems like God is silent. It is difficult to appreciate that, but here is the truth that we can rest in today. God is not silent. He has not abandoned us to our own devices. He is right here with us today. God has a plan even when we don't see it. The angel of the Lord appeared twice, once to say go, and once to say come back. Yet, God was with them the entire time. He was guiding them even if they couldn't see it. He was protecting them even when they were blind to it. God was with them even through it must have been painfully difficult to be a refugee in Egypt.

### **God is with us in our pain.**

So, Joseph is returning with his family and he hears that Herod's son Archelaus is in charge. Now, Herod passed on a legacy that wasn't the best. Herod is brutal and tyrannical, and his son wasn't much better. So, Joseph is naturally afraid to be too close to Jerusalem. I mean what if some more wise men show up to worship his son? I think we can appreciate that kind of fear, right? He just got out of Egypt with his family. He has just seen the promise of hope being fulfilled and now it looks like history repeating itself. The situation that he thought was safe is suddenly the same dangerous situation that he was in before. Maybe you've been there. You got out of a bad relationship only to find yourself in another bad relationship. You left a job only to find yourself in another dead-end job.

Notice what it does to Joseph, who remember is a godly man. It says that he was afraid to go there. His fear restricted his actions. Even though the angel of the Lord told him that he could return. He is struck with fear and doubt. I'm here to say, I get that. I understand being paralyzed by fear. Being unable to do concrete actions because you're afraid of what might happen. I've been there. I've seen history repeat itself and it is hard to see the hope. I find that hope often meets with heavy resistance. Doubts creep in, fears begin to surface and pretty soon we have lost sight of the hope that we had. We allow the circumstances and situations of our lives to drown out the sound of hope.

### **Trust in the midst of fear.**

Yet, I'm also here this morning to tell you to hold fast. Hold fast to the hope that God has given you. Hold fast to the promises that he has for you, because he has not left you nor forsaken you. No, he has carried you this far. He has brought you to this place, to the end of another year and he is going to lead you on. That's the promise, that's the hope we have. Joseph was warned a dream and told to go to Galilee instead. You see, God still had Joseph's back. He was leading him the whole time. And yes, fear crept in, but God led him through those difficult moments of doubt and guided him back to his homeland. Mary, Joseph and Jesus return. The exile is over.

### **Hold fast to hope.**

In 1 Peter 3 the Bible says that we are to be ready with an answer for the hope that we have. Peter was writing a people who were oppressed. A people who lived with fear and suffering. He calls on them to live in such a way that caused others to notice what made them different. To notice that they lived in hope, not fear. That is our calling today. To live with such fearless hope that others see it in us and ask us how do we have that kind of hope. And yes, we may be considered naïve or foolish, but the truth is that God has given us hope because God is leading us just as he led the Holy Family. He is leading us in ways that are far above our own. God is leading us and pointing to a beautiful future. A future where suffering passes away, where relationships are not only restored, but made new and perfect. It is a future where shame and regret are no more, and tears are a thing of the past. It is a future that we can cling to, it is what we have our hope in. So, this morning let us leave here believing in the promises of God. Believing that he has not abandoned us. He has not left us, but he has great and amazing plans for us.