

When God Breaks In, Conflict Breaks Out

Introduction

The Season of Advent is a time of anticipation and waiting for God to “break into” world history for his redemptive work. Throughout this Advent Season here at Living Hope, we have heard a series of messages about God breaking into people’s lives. Specifically, we learned that when God Breaks In... 1) He Reveals Himself, 2) He Calls us for Life, 3) He Stretches Us, 4) He Accomplishes Great Things, and 5) We See His Glory.

Today, we will conclude this Advent Series, but add a strong touch of realism into the celebration of Christmas. The arrival of the baby Jesus into this world brought salvation and hope, but it also brought conflict as the forces of evil intensified their efforts to overcome the work of Christ.

Several years ago, we took a group of teenagers up to Lake Geneva Youth Camp for a Winter Retreat. The speaker that year did a great job connecting with the students and presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ. One message he gave was particularly memorable to me.

He told about a youth retreat that he had spoken for a few years back. During one message he presented the Gospel and called for a response, and several students indicated decisions to follow Jesus. There was one girl there that had brought an unbelieving friend to the retreat, and this friend was one of those decisions.

Later, the speaker was sitting near these two girls and overheard them talking about how awesome Jesus is, and how it would be great to go home and go to youth group and have lots fun at church together. They were excited that this girl’s sins had been forgiven and that she now would go to heaven.

The girls noticed the speaker and asked if he’d share some wisdom with them about next steps. What the speaker did shocked the girls, but I think he was absolutely correct. He began by saying that it IS a great thing that Jesus forgives us our sins and that we can go to heaven. However, he continued teaching them about the cost of discipleship with verses like:

- Luke 9 when Jesus said: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”* AND
- Matthew 10 when Jesus says, *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*

He told these girls that they cannot take this decision to follow Christ lightly. They must consider the cost, and the pain that will ensue when you follow Christ with your whole heart. Discipleship is painful at times and will put you at odds with your friends and family. It's not a get-out-of-hell free card. It is a life of sacrifice and service.

Well, the girls were not too happy with *this* teaching. They went and told their youth leaders about this and they too got upset with the speaker. "These are young believers, why would you stifle their joy? Why would you dishearten their commitment to follow Jesus?"

Answer: a true disciple of Jesus could never be disheartened with the truth. And the truth is this: following Jesus can and will bring suffering and conflict into your life. However, it is still the best life ever, because no matter what may come our way, we have a God who loves us so much, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but have eternal life.

So—the pastors here at Living Hope Church do NOT want to present to you a wealth, health and prosperity gospel. Jesus did not promise you that. What Jesus did promise was that in this life you will face trials. But the Bible says that despite your circumstances, you can experience joy.

After five messages in this series that promised that God's entrance into the world would bring hope, salvation, and glory, today we're going to center on the very realistic warning that Christ's entrance will also bring conflict and spiritual warfare. God never promised that his plan in this world and in our lives would involve smooth sailing!

So today, we're going to take a look at the conflict that resulted in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. When God Breaks In...Conflict Breaks Out! I'd like to look at this in three parts. First, we'll focus on the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem from Matthew 2. Next, we'll turn to the commentary on those events provided in Revelation 12. Finally, we'll discuss God's ultimate victory through the unstoppable church from Matthew 16.

So first, let's look at Matthew 2 and see that...

When God Breaks In...His Kingdom Threatens Our Control (Matthew 2:13-18).

This point comes from the story of Herod the Great, and his plot to kill the baby Jesus. In order to understand this more fully, let's get some history. In the days of Jesus, there had not been a Davidic King on the throne of Israel for hundreds of years.

The prophet Isaiah compared the royal dynasty of David to a tree stump. Once a mighty tree possessing the throne of Israel, Isaiah foresaw that it would be cut down to nothing but a stump. But Isaiah *also* prophesied that one day a new branch would grow up from the old stump of the Davidic dynasty.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit (Isaiah 11:1).

When the Israelites returned from the exile, they hoped that Zerubbabel might be the promised king—that shoot from the stump of David's house. He was not. Generations passed. No branch grew from the stump.

Hundreds of years after the exile, the Maccabees arose to lead a revolt against the tyrant

Antiochus Epiphanes. The Maccabees were from the priestly family of the Hasmoneans. After leading Israel to victory, they presumptuously took the throne of Israel for themselves, assuming the crown *and* the high priesthood. BUT their right to the crown was illegitimate. They were not descendants of David.

About 60 years before the birth of Jesus, a civil war broke out in Israel between two Hasmonean brothers. A man named Antipater called upon Rome to intervene and settle the conflict. The Roman General Pompey marched on the land of Israel, seized Jerusalem and settled the civil war by force. As a result, Israel became a subject of Rome and Antipater was called to govern over it.

When Antipater died, his son Herod became King over Israel. As a military general, as a politician, and as a builder, Herod was truly great, hence the name Herod the Great. But as a King he was a tyrant. He was a paranoid butcher. Why? Because he knew his right to the throne of Israel was artificial, so he was always on guard.

To protect his throne, he murdered his wife (a daughter of the Hasmonean dynasty), and he had his sons strangled. Friends and family were routinely poisoned, tortured and murdered in order to keep the throne safe. Caesar Augustus said, "Better to be a pig in Herod's house than one of his sons."

Herod wanted to be the King, but Jesus threatens his goal. When Herod learns about the King to be born in Bethlehem from the three Magi, Matthew 2:3 says that he was "disturbed" and all Jerusalem was disturbed with him. Who wouldn't be disturbed, given the potential violence of his paranoid temper?

After the Magi go to visit the baby in Bethlehem, they are warned, in Matthew 2:12, to not return to Herod. Also, an angel appeared to Joseph to tell him to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath.

This all leads to that horrible act of Herod to slaughter all those innocent children in Bethlehem. Herod's pride causes him to lash out and try to kill Jesus, but he kills many innocents instead. When God Breaks In...Conflict Breaks Out. Specifically here, when God broke into history through the birth of Jesus, it threatened Herod's control and his desire to be King.

The same thing happens in our lives today, doesn't it? We all want to be in control of our lives. We have plans and we don't want anything or anyone to interfere. But when God breaks into our lives, he comes as King, and we must relinquish control or serious conflict will ensue.

For example, in my own life, I *knew* who I wanted as my wife (and it wasn't Cynthia). And I fought with God for about 6 months on that one. He was leading me in a different direction, but I was insisting on getting *that* girl. Only when I relinquished control did a whole new possibility present itself. Now I have the girl just right for me and the girl that God wanted for me.

What is it for you? What are you fighting God about? What is God telling you to relinquish?

For you can be like Jonah, who decided to run away from God rather than fulfill God's purposes. Or you can be more like Mary, who was completely confused and conflicted about God's call for her to bear the Lord Jesus, but willingly accepted His will and was greatly blessed because of it.

So—we learn here from Matthew 2 that when God broke in through the incarnation, he threatened Herod’s control, and conflict broke out through the massacre of many innocent children. But this event is just a microcosm of something much bigger, and that is what we need to discuss next...

When God Breaks In...We Learn About a Larger Spiritual Struggle (Revelation 12:1-9).

_____ read this passage for us earlier in the service, and I am not going to try explain all the imagery of this passage. Instead, I want us to see that Revelation 12 gives us the “story behind the story.” A bigger war is going on. On the one hand it is a war between the woman, the child, and the dragon. But even deeper, it is the war between the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of darkness.

You see, in verses 1-2 of Revelation 12 we see that believing Israel (the woman) gives birth to the Messiah. In Genesis 3, God promised that the seed of the woman would strike a death blow to Satan. This promise is coming true with the birth of Jesus.

Verses 3-6 introduce a dragon into the story. This is a reference to Satan and his desire to destroy the Messiah. It started right at the beginning when Satan worked through Herod to destroy Jesus through the massacre of all those innocents.

Then, in verses 7-9, we learn that an all-out spiritual war arises. This “story behind the story” helps us to interpret the events in Bethlehem. In fact, it helps us to interpret stories of spiritual conflict throughout history. Listen—there is a spiritual reality all around us. Let us not be naïve and think that we don’t need to concern ourselves with that. Take Paul’s words seriously when he wrote to the Ephesians that *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*

Right from the beginning of Jesus’ entrance into the world we learn of this spiritual reality. When Mary and Joseph went to dedicate Jesus at the temple, Simeon said this to Mary, *“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”*

Jesus life was going to bring conflict and turmoil. And as we have been going through the Gospel of Mark this past year, we’ve seen this conflict consistently. Jesus had to cast out many demons. He had to deal with disease and death. The religious rulers were constantly out to get him to the point that he was arrested and condemned to death.

What horrible conflict resulted from God breaking in to the world through Jesus Christ! But, Revelation 12 tells us the outcome of this spiritual struggle: Satan is defeated. The great dragon is thrown down and Jesus reigns victorious. The sin that separated us from God and made us his enemies has been erased through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Sure, Satan bruised Jesus’ heel, but Jesus has crushed the head of Satan through paying the penalty for our sin and rising victoriously over death.

That is the larger story behind the story. We don't always see it, but Satan is indeed at work trying to thwart the plans of God, and that leads me into the final point I want to make this morning:

When God Breaks In...He Wins and Guarantees Our Victory (Matthew 16:18).

So yes, when God Breaks In...Conflict Breaks Out. But be encouraged today that even in your darkest hour, even when everything seems to be going in the wrong direction, God is sovereign and He has already secured the ultimate victory. Let's prove that by looking at Matthew 16:18. This is after Peter had made that great confession that Jesus was indeed "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus said in verse 18,

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

So from this verse let me explain 3 aspects of the true church that help us remember that God wins...

1. Jesus builds the church (Matthew 16:18a).

Jesus is the one who ultimately builds the church. There are books, seminars and CD's that are made to help people build the church. There is a whole movement called the church growth movement. But if YOU are the one building the church, then it isn't the true church.

Jesus did not say, "and upon this rock you will build my church." No, "upon this rock I will build my church." Jesus and only Jesus, builds the church. When God Breaks In...He Wins and Guarantees the Victory. That is why we can have comfort and hope today even in the midst of conflict. It's not about us and our kingdom. It's about Jesus and what he wants to build and do with His church. A second aspect of the church here is that...

2. Jesus owns the church (Matthew 16:18a).

Jesus bought the church with *His own* blood. He didn't promise that He "...will build your church." No, "...upon this rock, I will build MY church." The church belongs to Jesus. He is building His church.

There's a story about a contractor who built homes in a small town, but he was never able to afford a home of his own. One day, the wealthiest man in town came to the contractor and asked him to build a house for him. He said, "I want you to build the finest house you are capable of, and I want you to spare no expense. I am going on a journey and when I return I hope that the house is completed."

The contractor agreed to the job and was about to begin when a thought struck him, "I will use inferior material, do a quick and sloppy job on the house, make it look real nice and charge him the full amount. That way I can pocket the leftover money and finally afford to buy my own house." This is what he did.

When the rich man returned he went to view the house and was very impressed. It looked beautiful from a distance. The wealthy man turned to the contractor and said, "The house looks wonderful! I am so glad that you spared no expense for I intend to give this home to a dear friend." With that, he handed the keys over to the contractor and said "Here is your new home,

my friend.” The contractor graciously received the keys to his new home, but his heart sank as he realized what he had done.

What kind of effort and quality of workmanship and materials would the man have put into the home if he knew that it would be the place where he and his family would be living? When Jesus is at work building His church it will be beautiful and solid. He doesn't do sloppy work. Jesus is still in process with us, making the greatest and most solid church he can. That again is why we can be confident that when God Breaks In...He Wins!

And finally, we learn that...

3. The church that Jesus builds is unstoppable (Matthew 16:18b)! “...and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Listen to that! The enemy we face is powerful. He has been around for a long time, trying to trip us up. He knows our weaknesses. He has an army of soldiers at his command. He and his forces surround us.

Now—if this is the way we picture spiritual reality, then we see the church as a kind of refuge or shelter. The church becomes a fortress where we are defending it against the threats that surround us. However, this is not the way that Jesus describes the church in this verse.

Jesus said that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His church. If you stop and think about it for a moment, you may realize that a gate is not an offensive weapon. Police don't pack loaded gates. Terrorists don't hold victims and gate-point. Dogs don't run loose with little signs around their necks that read “Beware of Gate.”

Gates are not a threat, they are defensive! You see, the church is to be on the offense, not defense. The church has been held hostage at gate-point for far too long. It is time that we stop being intimidated by a gate!

And if you study the usage of the phrase the “gates of hell,” it turns out that this is actually just another way to express “death.” Death is one of the greatest tactics of the enemy to keep us running scared. But Jesus is saying here that even death, the ultimate weapon of Hell, cannot destroy the true church. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and conquered death! And that is our destiny as well.

The church today needs to make a switch from defense to offense if we are to be all that Jesus intends. When God Breaks in...conflict does break out. But ultimately, God wins. He has already secured the victory. This is church according to Jesus.

Conclusion

So as we conclude this Advent series about When God Breaks In...and as we look forward to a New Year, let us remember that even though conflict will continue in our lives, we serve a God who loves us deeply and has secured the ultimate victory for us.

The church is a vibrant, authentic expression of Jesus' love and truth in this dark world, and with Jesus, the church truly is unstoppable!