

Looking Forward to a Different Year  
*Matthew 2:13-23*

**Sermon Point:** 2016 was a strange and difficult year in many respects. Herod made a year terrible and terrifying as he killed so many children. Why doesn't God do something to change these terrible things? He did: he was born into the suffering and violence—and Jesus died in it to give us a true New Year—in resurrection.

A New Year is (almost) here! What are you going to do differently in the New Year? Can you think of one thing you want to change this year? (To the children) Maybe spend another 10 minutes reading each day? Maybe taking a big breath before speaking when your parents ask you to pick up your room? What's one thing that will make 2017 a different year for you?

We all need to be able to look forward to something. We keep moving when we know that there is a better future ahead of us—better health, better relationships, better jobs, and so on. When we don't feel like there are better days ahead, we often fall into despair. For us as Christians, we know there are better days ahead—we know the end of the story: it is not death and despair, but resurrection and hope!

But even though we know the end of the story, we also know there will be tragedy and trials in 2017. How will we weather them?

Resilience could be the word of 2017. Resilience is the capacity to endure difficult times, to bounce back from tragedy, to recover from disaster. As much as making resolutions may help us change our habits, they don't change our attitudes. Resilience helps us have a new attitude. How do we encourage resilience in our children and in ourselves?

Joan Haase (Julie Haase's mother, by the way) has done research on the role of resilience in youth with cancer.<sup>1</sup> She and other scientists have found that one part of resilience is genetic. Each of us has different biological wiring that God gave us; some are naturally resilient than others.

A second factor is the environment around a person, whether or not people around you are resilient. This is part of why we need to gather weekly as Christians, to be surrounded by people who trust in God's future and support one another to be more resilient.<sup>2</sup>

A third way they have found is that we build resilience is by telling stories of people living through difficult times. Surprisingly, telling folk tales that deal with difficult topics like death, temptation and fear have been shown to help children develop resilience. You know the story of Red Riding Hood? Many parents have been uncomfortable because it deals with these topics, but for children, the story becomes a way to think about the topics and feelings in a safe way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15381798>

<sup>2</sup> <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2015-08-24/the-science-of-resilience-and-how-it-can-be-learned>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.elp.co.nz/files/building\\_resilience\\_and\\_the\\_important\\_place\\_of\\_empathy-4.pdf](http://www.elp.co.nz/files/building_resilience_and_the_important_place_of_empathy-4.pdf)

This is perhaps why we need to tell terrible stories like the one in today's gospel reading. It was a year of devastation for the people of Bethlehem when Jesus was about two years old. King Herod discovered that God's king, the Messiah, was born and was threatened. And what do powerful people do when they fear losing their power? They kill. And so King Herod killed all the baby boys around Bethlehem under two years of age.

How did those fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers, sisters and brothers survive such a terrible event? How did they keep going? How did they manage to imagine that the New Year could be different?

Matthew shows us that they told stories. He quotes a bit from Jeremiah 31(:15): "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted because they were no more." This passage from Jeremiah reminded the people of going into exile, when God's people were forced out of their homes and made refugees. As they were being forced out of Judah, they were assembled in a village called Ramah, a village near Jerusalem (Jer 40:1). We can only imagine the weeping as families were torn apart, homes and lives left behind, some people leaving with only what they can carry. We can imagine such images because they are happening now with refugees forced from their home by wars in Syria and in South Sudan. How will the refugees see that the New Year can be different? They will tell stories of ancestors who have been refugees. The time of exile is not unlimited. There will be a homecoming.

Do you see how God gives us the gift of resilience through the stories of the Bible? We may feel like there are no better days ahead, that 2016 may have been the worst year ever, but listen to the stories of tragedy and how they didn't last forever—that there were better times ahead:

The exiles who met at Ramah to become refugees did go home!

Bethlehem was restored after so much death.

Most of all, we have reason to hope because Jesus has been raised from the dead! We know for sure that there are better days ahead, even through death, because we will be raised with him to new life.

God helps us build resilience by:

- (1) Gathering with other Christians who will look to God for the future
- (2) Telling stories, especially Bible stories, about God's people recovering from tragedy
- (3) Setting milestones and goals to look forward to

So, along with making resolutions, may I encourage you to take some time to tell stories of resilience? To talk with others about what really matters in this life—that is, loving God and loving neighbor in every circumstance? To set a milestone or two to look forward to? Most of all: to trust that in Christ, there are better days ahead in him.