

*When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”*

*<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” ... After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”*

*<sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> 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.” (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)*

### God Used Joseph to Protect his Son

A few weeks ago, my wife and I saw the *Lion King* on stage at the Opera House. It was a wonderful production, full of amazing costumes and catchy music. Both the play and the Disney cartoon are about Simba, a lion cub who is heir to the throne of the Pride Lands. In the first half of the play, he’s a boy. His evil uncle is plotting to get rid of him. Twice he almost succeeds. But both times, Simba’s father, Mufasa, rescues him – the second time at the cost of his own life. The play and the cartoon both do a really good job of tapping in to the idea of a father as protector. Mufasa’s primary concern in life is the safety and well-being of his son. I wonder how true that is for us non-fiction fathers? That is what we strive for, right? God designed fatherhood and then he called us dads to that incredibly important and demanding job. This morning, we see one of the most famous of all biblical dads doing that job. Even though he’s really a stepdad, he is constantly willing to sacrifice his own good for the good of the child God gave him. God called Joseph to do that in a sinful and dangerous world. **God used Joseph to protect his Son.**

#### I.

Now, it might seem just a little out of season to tell the story of Joseph in March instead of December. But today is the day that the church has set aside to commemorate this faithful Christian. The verses we’re looking at don’t tell us everything. They leave out the part of the story when Joseph learns that his fiancée is pregnant and he prepares to quietly end his relationship with her, but then God tells him that the child is from the Holy Spirit. That part tells us why Joseph was willing to risk his life for a child that he didn’t father. It wasn’t that Joseph was a really great guy. God told Joseph that this child was the promised Savior. Now, how clearly he understood all that, I can’t say. But he understood enough to obey every command God gave him about this child. He understood enough to raise him as his own son, to provide for him and care for him and love him. All that was an act of Joseph’s faith. **God used Joseph to protect his Son – to carry out God’s plan.**

Today we see Joseph after the child has been born. They’re not in a stable anymore. The Wise Men have come and gone. Joseph has apparently settled into life in Bethlehem, the town that the Messiah is supposed to come from. Jesus may have been almost two years old by this time. Joseph probably expected life to go on there in Bethlehem, when God interrupted his sleep. I often have trouble sleeping, so I feel for Joseph. Every time God communicates with him directly, he lets him get into a nice, sound sleep and then he sends an angel to speak to him in a dream. Then Joseph wakes up, with work to do.

That happens in our text for today. An angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and says, **“Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”** Joseph drags Mary out of bed. He packs up their belongings – including, I’m sure, the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the Wise Men had brought. He gathers up a sleepy little boy and heads out the door. Understand, he’s not loading the family car. If they had a ride at all, it was a donkey. And there were no street lights. Joseph had to haul his family through the darkness, leaving behind the life they had just started in Bethlehem to go to Egypt. Now, there were lots of Jews in Egypt, so he at least had some hopes of

finding his kind of people there. But this was all so unexpected. Why did God send him on this road? You know what happened next. King Herod tried to kill Jesus because he was worried about a rival. Since he never found Jesus, Herod slaughtered every child in and around Bethlehem that was under two years old. God had Joseph rescue his son from that fate.

But that wasn't the last time God woke Joseph in the middle of the night. Some time later, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that it was safe to go home because Herod was dead. So Joseph got up and packed his family up again and hit the road. But on the way, Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was reigning in Jerusalem. Joseph didn't like the idea of going back to Bethlehem where Herod's son might feel just as threatened by a child who born to be king of Israel. Then God woke Joseph up one more time and confirmed his fears. So Joseph went back to his and Mary's home town, Nazareth, way up north in Galilee. Why did that help? Herod had only been king because the Romans had made him king. When he died, they split his kingdom up. Rome took over responsibility for Galilee, the part where Nazareth was.

Why did God interrupt so much of Joseph's sleep? Why did God have him traipse south and north again? To preserve his plan. This story really isn't about Joseph. It's about the baby Joseph and Mary carried along the road and the man that child grew up to be. God used Joseph to move that baby Jesus that many steps closer to the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus did have to die, but on a cross, not at the end of soldier's sword. He had to die as a man, not as a toddler in some anonymous house. He had to die as the prophet from Galilee, as the Son of Man, as the Christ who entered his city in triumph and chose to lay his life down at the one moment that his enemies did not want to kill him. Jesus had to die according to God's plan and not one moment before and not in any other way. God chose Joseph to make sure that Herod and Archelaus did not derail that plan before it really got off the ground.

Why did God devise this elaborate plan? Why did God send his Son to hide his glory in this child's body and to grow up as a Jewish boy? Why did God carefully choose exactly how and when his Son would die and then make sure it happened in just that way? For you and me. The Son of God became one of us. He lived and died just like we have to, because that is the fate of all sinful human beings. On the cross, Jesus even took the hell that we sinners deserve. Then he did something that no sinner should ever get to do: he rose. He defeated death itself. But he even did that for you and me. In that victory he told us that we are free, that we are forgiven, that our sins are gone forever.

We needed him to do that more than we can even imagine. But we get a hint of it every time we feel bad. Every time we parents fail to protect our children, every time we fail to provide for their physical wellbeing or their emotional health or most important of all, the faith in Christ, every time we have at ask ourselves, "What did I do wrong?" we earn the hell Jesus suffered and the death he died. But we don't get any of it because Jesus took it all away. He endured the tortures of hell and the rejection of his Father. He died. And then he rose to say that it was all enough, not just for you and me, not just for us parents, but for our children, indeed for the whole world. And if it was enough for the whole world, it was enough for you and me. We are forgiven, now and forever.

## II.

Jesus didn't die in Bethlehem as a toddler. He died outside Jerusalem. He died the most shameful death that the Romans and Jews could imagine. God chose to have him die in the prime of life, in his early thirties. God used Joseph to get Jesus through his childhood to the age when all those things would happen. But before he died, Jesus spent three years preaching and teaching. God used Joseph to make sure that happened, too.

### **God used Joseph to protect his Son – to preserve Jesus' ministry.**

God didn't actually need to wake Joseph up over and over again to accomplish that. He could've reached down from heaven and stopped Herod cold. He could've sent angels to scatter the soldiers. He could've caused the earth to open its mouth and swallow them or he could've sent fire from heaven or ten plagues to destroy them. And Jesus himself, even as a baby, could've used his power as the Son of God to pass to send those soldiers shaking with fear back to their master. But he didn't do any of those things. The truth is, God never did any miracle for the benefit of Jesus. Think of all the people he healed, think of the two times he fed thousands of people and the time he turned water into wine. Then think of Jesus' temptation when he was hungry and thirsty after forty days of fasting. The devil told him to make stones into bread. But every miracle Jesus did, he did for someone else because the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Part of that service was three years of preaching and teaching and doing miracles. Crowds crushed him wherever he went. His human body must have been bone weary sometimes. But always, Jesus pointed them to the cross and to the empty tomb. Why? To save them, of course. But not just them. Jesus preached and taught and did miracles so that we, too, can see who he is. You see, my friends, Jesus died and paid for all the sins of everyone who will ever live. But it doesn't do us any good if we don't know about it. So God showed us the prophet from Galilee, the Son of Man, the Christ of God demonstrating his power and proclaiming his mission and finally winning his victory of sin, death and the devil. So every time God woke Joseph up, every time Joseph had to load the family donkey and trek south or north, every moment of anxiety he felt for his stepson and every hour he worked to provide for him, Joseph was preserving God's plan for Jesus to spend three years preaching and teaching and doing miracles so that untold generations of sinners would see their Savior and believe.

Just like he used a human father to protect and care for his Son, God uses human messengers to tell what his Son has done. God uses us. If you don't feel up to the job, ask yourself if Joseph ever felt up to the job of protecting the Messiah from a bloodthirsty king who killed so many people that killing those babies in Bethlehem doesn't even make his top ten list? God made sure that Joseph succeeded. It was never really up to him. He trusted his Lord and God blessed his efforts. Trust your Lord, too. God is with us. He won't let his message fail.

What is a father's most basic job? It's to provide for and to protect our families. How well do we do that job? I could tell you about the time my eighteen month old daughter didn't get off the elevator with us and the door closed and I had race three stories down to be there when the door opened. I could tell you about the time my two year old son ran away in store and thought me chasing was a game and I could hear him giggling as he raced into a cavernous, pitch black storage room in the back of the store. I'm sure all you dads could tell me stories of high places your kids climbed up to and roads they toddled off towards and scary moments when you weren't sure where they were. But you get the point. No matter how hard we try, we can't be perfect protectors and providers. But God calls us to do it anyway. Joseph was one of us. He was a sinner just like we are in a much tougher situation than we face as parents. But God sent his holy and eternal Son to be the son of a sinner so that he could rescue us sinners from all our sin deserves. Because God made sure that plan worked, you and I will live with Jesus – and Joseph – forever.

What is a Christian's most basic job? It's to share the gospel. I could tell you stories of falling flat on my face in doing that. But you already know how hard it is. Joseph shows us that God conquers our weakness. God didn't need Joseph, but he chose him to accomplish his plan so that we believe today. God doesn't need us. But he chooses us to save others. He chooses us to speak his words and to channel his power. He chooses us, and we will rejoice forever in heaven with those people God saves through us. Embrace the work God has given us to do! Amen.