

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.”

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ 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 ²⁰ 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.”

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² 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, ²³ 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)

Jesus’ Life is Protected

Have you ever seen one of those news stories about a child calling 911? I found one this week about a four-year-old who called 911 because his mother passed out. He didn’t know his address and he was calling from a cell phone, so the dispatcher couldn’t tell where he was. But he stayed on the phone and described his house to her. When the sirens came, he was able to go outside and call to the paramedics who were looking for him, but didn’t know exactly where to find him. And he saved his mother’s life. Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around? God gives children parents to watch over them and take care of them – to preserve and protect their lives. We don’t expect young children to have to do that for their parents. This morning in our gospel lesson, we have the account of how Jesus’ stepfather protected the life of his young son. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. Except that Jesus is God. He came here to save our lives from death and hell. But in this account, **Jesus’ life is protected.**

I.

It’s protected through divine intervention. The account we have before us immediately follows the coming of the Wise Men. When they came to Jerusalem, they announced that they were looking for the one who was born king of the Jews. Herod the Great, the king of Israel, wasn’t about to let someone with a claim to his throne live. He sent the Wise Men on to Bethlehem to get information so he could kill his rival. Mary and Joseph had no idea any of this was going on. Even when the Wise Men came, they didn’t know how much danger the child was in. So, after the Wise Men left, God sent an angel to warn them. God told Joseph to take the baby and his mother and go to Egypt. Why Egypt? There was a large Jewish community there. Mary and Joseph would be able to live among their own of people. They would be able to observe the Jewish purity laws and be obedient to the Mt. Sinai covenant there. Joseph would be able to take care of his family there – outside of Herod’s reach. Joseph did what God commanded as soon as he woke up. He got Mary up and had her throw together whatever they could carry. They gathered up the baby and set out for Egypt. By the time Herod figured out that the Wise Men weren’t coming back, they were gone. Since Herod couldn’t identify which baby in Bethlehem was the threat, he killed them all. But Jesus was safe.

Joseph and Mary stayed in Egypt until Herod died. It’s hard to know how long that was. It’s possible they were there for only a few weeks. It’s also possible that it was several months or even longer. But once Herod died, God again sent an angel to Joseph in a dream and told him to go back to Israel. That’s where they Messiah was supposed to live and work. But once they got to Israel, Joseph heard that Herod’s son Archelaus was reigning in Jerusalem. The Romans had put King Herod in charge of pretty much the whole territory of Israel. When he died, the Romans divided his kingdom up. Archelaus only had the south, which did include Jerusalem. And God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream a third time to warn him not to stay in Judea. So Joseph headed north to Nazareth, the town that he and Mary were originally from. He went to a place where he could disappear with this child and his mother until it was time for God to use him.

God was following a plan that he had set out in the Old Testament prophets. Three times, he sent an angel to Joseph to keep that plan on track. Again and again, in the Old Testament, God have given details of

that plan. Matthew references two of those details in this lesson, but they're two of the hardest Old Testament references to follow. That shows us how hard it would've for an Old Testament believer to put all the pieces together and figure out the order of Jesus' life. And they didn't need to do that. They just needed to know that what God was saying was true. But God always knew how the pieces were to fit together. And he made sure that it happened according to his plan, even when he had to send an angel to keep it on track.

Herod wanted that child dead. Someone might ask why God didn't just let that happen. After all, that actually was the plan: God sent Jesus here to die in our place. God was even going to use evil rulers to make that happen. Why not just get it over with? Because Jesus needed to live a perfect life in our place. If he had died as a toddler, even a perfect toddler, it would've been harder for us to see what he had accomplished. He needed to live an adult life, too, even though it was only about 33 years long. Jesus also had to die in a way that we could know about it and understand what it means for us. So part of God's plan – and this, too, is clear in the Old Testament – was for Jesus to preach and teach and do miracles. People needed to know the promised Savior had come. The whole nation of Israel had to be turned on its head and filled with expectation. The plan required that, so God didn't let Herod muck it up while Jesus was still a baby.

Herod's actions illustrate as well as anything why we needed that plan. Herod was afraid. Herod was jealous. Herod was a bloodthirsty egotist who had killed so many people that the babies of Bethlehem aren't even recorded among his crimes in sources outside the Bible. Partly, that might be because the number of children murdered was smaller than we sometime think. Bethlehem couldn't have had more than a couple of hundred residents, so hundreds of babies didn't die that day. Maybe only ten or twelve did. But even so – the evil that would murder ten or twelve babies for no other reason than to eliminate a child that might pose a threat to Herod's rule shows the evil that rules in this world. Every since the fall into sin, evil has run rampant here. It has ruined lives and caused endless tears. It can't even be measured. We needed to be rescued from that kind of evil.

And evil isn't just out there somewhere. Evil lives in our hearts, too. Maybe we've never killed any babies, but can we say that we've never hated someone or wanted someone to suffer for what they did to us? How many times have we cursed under our breath at the words and actions of people around us? How many selfish actions have we done and how many angry words have we spoken just because we were threatened by someone else? We may not be King Herods, but is that because God just hasn't put us in charge of a kingdom? Aren't we all little Herods who put ourselves first and come up with all kinds of justifications for that sin? What does that sin deserve from God? Obviously, death and hell.

That's why Jesus came. When God sent that angel to Joseph again and again, he was protecting his plan to rescue us. God's plan was for that baby to grow up and live the life we can't live – because his heart was completely free of evil. No evil thought that Herod had, ever entered Jesus' mind. No evil desire that we little Herods dream up, ever touched Jesus' heart. He was perfect in his heart and in his mind, so he was perfect in his life. And that life is ours. Jesus gave it to us. Then he gave it for us when he died on the cross – not because Herod or Pilate or the Jewish leaders wanted him dead. He died because our Father in heaven sent him to stand in our place and suffer our death and our hell. He died because he loved us too much to let us die and go to hell. He died and he paid for all our sinful words and actions and desires, and then he rose and we are forgiven. He rose and we will live with him in heaven when we die. He rose and he will come again and rise the dead and make this world new. And you know what? On that day, there will never be evil in this world again. Until that day comes, Jesus protects from evil even here. God was protecting us when he protected that baby's life.

II.

Jesus saved us from all the evil in this world. He saved us from all the evil in our hearts. To do that, he had to live the life God sent him to live here. And we don't always think about one person in this account who was a big part of that life: Joseph. Mary gets a lot of attention, and rightly so. But God chose Joseph to be the man who raised Jesus and provided for him and protected him from harm and danger. We should not pass this lesson by without recognizing that **Jesus' life was protected through his stepfather.**

In this day of blended families and adopted children, Joseph should be the model of the modern father. Jesus wasn't his son. He didn't ask for his assignment, but he accepted it and from everything we can see in the scriptures, he fulfilled it to the best of his ability. He accepted financial responsibility for raising this child. He accepted his role as the spiritual head of the family. Every time we see the child Jesus go to the temple, Joseph is there. He fulfilled all God commanded for Jewish boys because he was a faithful believer. And he did the

other thing that God calls us fathers to do: he protected his son, even at the risk of his own life. If Herod had caught them fleeing through the night to escape his edict, what do you think that king would've done to Joseph? I don't think it would've pleasant. But all that Joseph could think about was the safety of the child and his mother because that's the job God gave him to do.

Now it shouldn't surprise us that God chose the right man for this job. But what should surprise is that the Son of God needed his protection. Jesus never stopped being the Son of God. So even when he was a baby in the womb of his mother, Jesus knew all and saw all. He had all power in his hands. That was still true after he was born. It just shouldn't have been possible to threaten him. But during his life on this earth, Jesus laid aside the full and constant use of his power and glory as God. He let a third-rate tyrant threaten his life. Rather than simply letting his glory blaze from his crib and incinerate the king's soldiers, the Son of God let two human parents bundle him up in the middle of night and carry him to Egypt. The Son of God hid from Herod there and then slipped back into Israel, past Archelaus and hid again up in Nazareth. The true heir of King David, the rightful King of Israel, made no attempt to claim his capital city. The maker and ruler of the universe kept his head down and lived as carpenter's son for thirty years until the moment came to reveal himself. Instead of doing miracles and drawing the whole world to Nazareth to see him, he let the whole Herod clan forget that he had ever existed.

Jesus did all because that's what we would have to do. He came here to live as one of us. Never once did Jesus use his power to make his life on this earth easier. Never once did he use it to gain popularity or comfort or power here. Every miracle he did was designed to show the world that he was our Savior. But he himself suffered. The Son of God humbled himself and made himself nothing. The ruler and master made himself a servant and came down here and went to our cross to save us.

When this account ends, the child Jesus is safely home in Nazareth. That's where he would largely stay until the time came for God' plan to move forward into his ministry and then into his sufferings and death and resurrection. God protected his life so that Jesus could save our lives. God placed all the right people in all the right places so that child could grow up and complete his mission: undoing our sin and bringing us home. Every step in his life was step toward our eternal lives. Rejoice in what Jesus has done for us. Amen.