

Matthew 2:13-23

Our calendars remind us that we celebrated Christmas just 3 short days ago. All of the preparation and waiting is now behind us and our lives have moved on. The birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ; the visit of the shepherds – that glorious night in Bethlehem. Angels proclaiming the news of the Savior's birth. Oh if only that holy night could have lasted. But we know that the world into which Jesus was born wasn't a perfect place. I guess we could say that he was born into our world; a world of turmoil and threats. Born as a baby, he was unable to act in his own defense which meant that his human parents were his protection.

The news of the birth of Jesus undoubtedly travelled quickly to places far beyond Bethlehem. Imagine how overwhelmed Mary and Joseph must have been when a cavalcade of dignitaries from faraway Persia came to their humble dwelling with their valuable gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh - the magi worshipping their young child. These men had encountered King Herod on their journey and asked if Herod knew where they could find the child. Hearing that a new King had been born, Herod's paranoia took hold. "Go and search diligently for the child," he said. "And when you have found him, come and bring me word, that I may worship him too."

As soon as the wise men found the child, they were warned in a dream to not return to Herod but instead return to their country by another route. Herod, of course realized that they had tricked him and went into a jealous rage. Immediately he made a plan to guarantee that this new born king of which the magi spoke would never threaten his throne. The plan: kill all males under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding vicinity.

There is no better example of the tragic abuse of power and the reality of sin than King Herod. Juxtaposed against Herod's corruption, greed, and villainy is this tiny helpless baby. A baby born into a carpenter's family to an unwed mother. But this child, the Son of God was under his heavenly father's protection. There was no time to waste.

As soon as the Magi departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream with a message that carried a sense of urgency, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." The angel's message was brief to avoid any waste of time but it contained very precise instructions. He said "Get up," "Take," and "Flee." In other words, get up out of bed now, gather your little family. And go immediately, without delay. And the angel told Joseph where to go and how long he should remain in that

place of safety. Head straight toward the southwest and find refuge in Egypt. Egypt, under Roman control, was outside of Herod's jurisdiction, and the child would be safe there. Without delay, Joseph immediately took the child and Mary and departed, doing exactly as the angel had instructed him.

But why to Egypt? Egypt was a corrupt, degenerate, idolatrous nation and the enemy of God's people. It had been a house of bondage to Israel, and particularly cruel to the infants of Israel, yet it is to be a place of refuge for Jesus. When it pleases God, He can make the worst of places serve the best of purposes because the earth is His and He can use it as He pleases. Like Joseph we should not fear going into places that are dangerous if God has led us to go.

There are no objections from Joseph or Mary. Their faith remained firm. They believed Jesus was the Son of God though no miracle would be used to protect Him from the rage of Herod. An ordinary means of protection was used by Joseph and Mary. They fled from the place of danger to a place where Jesus would be safe.

God foresees His people's distresses, and provides an escape beforehand. The continuance of God's care and guidance is revealed in the command to Joseph to remain in Egypt until he is told it is safe to return to Judah. Joseph will be told what to do when it is the right time. When we are in difficult situations we should remember the difficult situation Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were in and God brought them safely through the situation. He can do the same for us if we trust Him.

The journey to Egypt would be inconvenient and perilous both to the young Child and to His mother; they were poorly prepared for it, and were likely to meet with a cold reception in Egypt but Joseph was obedient to the heavenly vision. He made no objection. As soon as he received his orders, he immediately arose and went away by night. He went out as Abraham did, with an implicit dependence upon God. In Egypt Joseph and Mary were far removed from the temple and the service of it and in the midst of idolaters; but God sent them there. In this life there are times when a forced absence from God's ordinances, and a forced presence with wicked people, may be the lot of God's people but it is not a sin. It is the grief God's people must sometime endure.

This escape to Egypt as recounted by Mathew has raised some natural questions. The assumption is that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem on foot. So what provision had been made for the hasty escape to Egypt? We can only surmise that God did provide. Perhaps Joseph's carpenter's skills had provided the monies needed to purchase a donkey or a mule. And was it just a coincidence that the magi's gifts provided the finances for their sojourn in Egypt? This is God's Son and his heavenly father surely made all the necessary provisions for the family to make the journey and live safely in Egypt.

That command to “Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt” was a test of the faith of Joseph and Mary. They might have been tempted to think, “If this child be the Son of God, as we are told He is, is there no other way to protect Him from a man that is a murderer of the innocent? Can He not send legions of angels to be His protectors or cherubim with flaming swords to strike Herod dead, or wither the hand that is stretched out against Him and save us the trouble of making this journey to Egypt?” Joseph and Mary had been told Jesus will be the glory of His people Israel. They believed that their God, who had been faithful to them would continue to guide and protect them even under the reign of the servants of Satan and whatever danger they faced.

Meanwhile, as the holy family reached Egypt, the evil that unfolded in and around Bethlehem was unimaginable as grief-stricken mothers held the lifeless bodies of their young sons. Matthew quotes the fulfillment of the prophet Jeremiah in verse 18: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” The prophet was saying that the mourning in Bethlehem would be so intense that it would be heard on high ground about 2 or 3 miles away. He identifies the sound as Rachel weeping for her children. Why Rachel? Bethlehem was well known as the site of Rachel’s tomb. Rachel had died in childbirth there as her family journeyed through the land. As Jacob’s favorite wife, she was one of the mothers of the nation of Israel, which was named after their forefather Jacob, also called Israel. In Jeremiah’s prophecy, she poetically represents all the women of Bethlehem. Their grief recalled Rachel’s own grief as she lay dying while giving birth to Benjamin. While there is no other record of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, it is consistent with what we know about Herod. But Matthew doesn’t dwell on the genocidal act. He returns our focus to God’s provisions.

Again the angel suddenly reappears to Joseph in a dream – a dream of relief: Herod is dead, the evil tyrant is out of the way and the immediate threat removed. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel.” Those same specific orders; “get up, take, and go.” Now it was time for Joseph to take the child Jesus and his mother and return to Israel. However, the death of Herod wasn’t the end of evil in Israel. Reading verses 22-23 – “But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.” But again, God provides and sets the path for his son. Having been warned in another dream, Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee, taking Mary and Jesus to a town called Nazareth which according to history was a despised place. Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah was to be despised. Isaiah 53:3 “He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.” Nazareth was a nondescript land of ordinary people. In fact, in John’s gospel, when Philip introduced Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel responded, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” The point is that God can protect the Messiah anywhere, at any time from hurt, harm and danger. His protection allowed Jesus to experience life just like ordinary people – yes like us.

But none of this just happened! God’s hand was on the child from the moment of his conception by the holy spirit in Mary’s womb. God’s plan was charted and fulfilled as he guided Joseph to carry out his plan and Joseph responded with obedience and faith. We too can be useful to God when we obey him with absolute faith. God will provide that same protection in our times of job loss, bad news, health concerns, unprecedented social and economic uncertainty. His protective care is there if we only have faith to trust him to carry us.

In summary, today’s scripture message affirms that God can and will protect us in times of danger by warning us and guiding us out of harm’s way. When we are faced with threats or dangers, God can provide us with the wisdom and foresight to avoid potential harm. Additionally, God can also provide us with his divine protection when we are unable to avoid dangerous situations. God can also send his angels to watch over us and keep us secure in moments of peril. We can rely on God’s strength and power to shield us from harm and preserve us in times of danger by placing our trust in him and seeking his protection through prayer and faith. We are God’s children and we have no reason to be afraid. Yes, we too live in a dangerous world, but the same God that kept watch over Mary, Joseph and Jesus is watching over us. Trust Him and respond to his call with faith and obedience. Amen.