

Matthew 2:13-23
First Sunday after Christmas
January 1, 2023

We relate to Christmas as a time of peace as we sing, "Silent Night! Holy Night!" and picture the infant in the manger in the little town of Bethlehem. It is also a happy time for gathering with friends, family and neighbors and enjoying a break from routines. Today's text jars us into the reality that we live in a world of sin. But we don't need Herod to show us that. The headlines of our times point out the same kinds of things—Russian's attacks on Ukraine, the murders in our cities, the mass shootings, the shameful deeds of people in positions of power and influence. We don't need the headlines either. We have ourselves. Perhaps we experienced pangs of jealousy as presents were opened and someone received an item we esteemed better than ours. Or family times brought arguments instead of harmony. We found ourselves cursing at irritations. We worry about life, as if God can't handle it or doesn't know what he is doing. The start of a new year with all its unknowns may accentuate those feelings.

Don't get sidetracked focusing on the problems at hand. Look at the whole text and see the good reminder

GOD IS IN CHARGE

- I. Protecting his Son
- II. Ahead of his enemies
- III. Carrying out his plans

The need for protection of the young Jesus came from the evil intentions of King Herod. This was Herod the Great, who had received a visit from the Wise Men seeking the recently born king of the Jews. They had followed the leading of a star and expected to find the youngster in Jerusalem, the capitol of God's people. Herod was ruling as king of the area for the Romans, but here was one born for the position. Herod was given to suspicion and had executed even members of his own family to remove any threats of rivalry, so he was naturally upset about this inquiry. He had been able to learn from the Jewish leaders that Bethlehem was to be the birthplace of the Messiah, for the prophet Micah had foretold that fact. The king sent the Magi on their way with the request that they return and report exactly where they found Jesus, stating the pretense that he also wanted to come and worship the Christ child. Before they could do so God had warned them not to come back, and they took a different route back east.

What Herod had told wasn't even a white lie. It was a bold untruth. He had murderous intentions as we will note later. What about God's Son? Not to worry. The Lord had things under control. "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.'" God knows everything and reads the hearts of all, so he saw through the phony, pious front to the evil that lurked within the king's heart. Thus he forewarned the family. He was a step ahead of Herod, in charge of what was happening. No, he didn't stop him in his tracks, but he took the necessary action to protect his Son.

Egypt would be out of Herod's influence. In fact, it was a rival power. Many Jewish people lived there so the family would feel somewhat at home and would also blend in with the rest of their countrymen. They may have left that very night, the same night as the Wise Men headed out, given Joseph's obedient ways when the Lord gave him instructions and his natural protective concern for Mary and Jesus.

Matthew identifies the flight to Egypt, or really, the later return, as fulfillment of prophecy. The reference occurs in the book of Hosea. There it was talking about the nation of Israel and their departure from slavery as they headed to the Promised Land. It is what we call a typical prophecy, not a direct prediction. The events for Jesus resemble an earlier event in Israel's history. With a type the parallel is recognized after it occurs. God's people left Egypt, related to fulfillment of Messianic promises and so would Jesus, that everything promised might happen in the land God had given to his people.

God's plans will not be cancelled by humans, not even by powerful ones such as kings. Would we try to end the Savior's life? Surely not, but we do have a tendency to dethrone him as we claim mastery of our lives. That attitude rejects God's rule and makes ourselves our own gods. How often doesn't our planning omit God? When making a decision on a career move, do we pray for the Lord's guidance? Or consider our plans of buying and selling. Do we make them on the basis of wants or with reflection on good stewardship and management of what God has entrusted to us? When we do make good choices, is it with a consciousness of carrying our God's will or is it just profit motivated? Those are some of the sins Jesus came to bear. Throughout our lives God is protecting us, just as he looked out for his Son. Recognize his position. Give him honor. Yield to his will. Trust that he is doing everything according to it.

II.

As he operates he is ahead of his enemies. It didn't take long for Herod to realize the Wise Men weren't coming back with a report. He was furious and launched into action. His orders revealed his real intent. "He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under." We shudder at the thought. Scholars guess the size of the Bethlehem area at the time and estimate

that 15-20 young boys were killed as a result of his edict, so maybe not as large as we might have envisioned, yet if one of them was yours, it would heart wrenching indeed. Matthew cited a prophecy from Jeremiah that was fulfilled in this tragedy. "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Ramah was the gathering point for the exiles as they were removed from Judah and sent off to Babylon. It was a place of sadness as the population had witnessed the destruction of their capitol Jerusalem and its beloved temple and faced deportation to a strange land far away. Rachel was Jacob's favored wife, who died in childbirth when Benjamin was born. Such sadness echoed throughout the area when Herod's orders were carried out. The families were devastated. Had Herod's plans succeeded, the whole world would be mourning in despair, with no hope of salvation.

Opposition to God's Son would continue. We might recall Satan's tempting of Jesus at the outset of his public ministry, right after his baptism which inaugurated it. There were attempts on the life of Jesus. At his home town of Nazareth the crowd tried to throw him over a cliff. Other times opponents also tried to seize him. Plots were formulated, and of course, we know eventually he was put to death, but nothing succeeded until it was God's time and according to his plan.

Opposition continues to the Savior, now directed against his Word, to undermine its authority. Some of it arises within the church by scholars who deny its divine inspiration and treat it as a human product, subject to errors. Or it shows up in the minds of any of us when we ignore or doubt what it teaches.

Satan directs his attacks against God's people as he subjects them to ridicule or sometimes even physical persecution. Still God shows he is in charge and ahead of his enemies, for they can cause no real harm. Times of testing draw believers closer to their Lord and strengthen them. Even if Christians are killed for their faith, they do not suffer loss, for God welcomes them to heaven with its total happiness.

III.

Whatever happens, God uses it for his purposes and is ever carrying out his plans. After Mary, Joseph and Jesus escaped to Egypt, Herod died. He experienced a horrid death (we might call it fitting). His flesh decayed in his last while, along with other conditions I'd rather not describe. Then Joseph received the instruction, "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."

The specific place of residence was not commanded. It seems Joseph was planning to return to the Jerusalem area or Bethlehem. The hub of Jewish activity would seem to be a logical place for the Son of God. However, a problem existed.

After Herod's death, the territory he ruled was divided among his remaining sons. Archelaus, who received Judea, had traits similar to his father. He was reported to have killed 3,000 people at the Passover time. Their crime? Remembering a pair of martyrs his father had executed. When Joseph learned that he was ruling the area, he was fearful.

He took the family instead to Nazareth, their hometown. Friends would be nearby. Nazareth was in Galilee and neither the town nor the province was highly regarded. The territory had a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. It was the hill country and not respected for its learning or culture.

Again the events were identified as fulfillment of prophecy. However, we don't find the words, "He will be called a Nazarene," in any book of the Old Testament. There is some discussion about the similarity between the word "Nazarene" and the word for "root" which is used for Jesus in one of the Messianic prophecies, but the connection is a bit tenuous. Matthew could have been citing a prophecy that was well-known but not recorded as he stated "the prophets" had said it, not quoting an individual one but a general message of several. Christ's lowliness and the ridicule he would endure as people poked fun of him and his origin was noted by a number of prophets. Again, God showed he was in charge as he carried out his plans and brought his Son safely back to the land of Israel.

Because God carries out his plans you and I can live in confidence. His plans are good. Your life is secure. Jesus is not just a king: he is a Savior. That is the biggest plan he carried out, completely and successfully. Jesus was born as a human to live as one of us under the law and in the face of temptation. Lowliness was evident already here in his young life as he was on the run, lacking a welcome. Yet he lived perfectly in our place. He took on our sins and went to the cross, where he suffered and died. He made the payment for the whole world including for you and for me. His rising from death declared his victory. We are forgiven. Jesus fulfilled the plan exactly.

Moreover, he carries out his plan in your individual life, especially to bring you to faith. He will continue to guide and direct you according to his plans and that means one day he will take you to heaven for all eternity. Live with confidence. God is in charge. You are blessed. Most of all, Jesus is your Savior. Trust him always.