

Sermon for December 27, 2015 – 1st Sunday after Christmas

Matthew 2:13-23 (Wartburg Project)

God the Father protects His Child

- 1) *From the direct raging of Hell.*
- 2) *From the indirect dangers of the world.*

¹³ After they had departed, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him.” ¹⁴ He got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and departed for Egypt. ¹⁵ He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” ¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys who were in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under, in keeping with the exact time which he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ¹⁸ A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted, because they are no more. ¹⁹ After Herod had died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, since those who were trying to kill the child have died.” ²¹ He got up and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there. Since he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. ²³ He arrived and settled in a city called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

A couple of days ago we celebrated Christmas - recalling the joy our Savior's birth gave Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and us.

But not everyone was happy about Jesus' birth. Satan certainly wasn't. The Messiah's arrival meant that his days were numbered. This is why he wasted no time allying himself with paranoid Herod to kill Jesus while he was still a defenseless baby.

But, knowing what the devil was planning, the LORD kept his Son safe from all harm so that he could accomplish his mission of saving us. Let us learn how **God the Father protected His Child** 1) *from the direct raging of Hell*, and 2) *from the indirect dangers of the world*.

Part 1: From the direct raging of hell.

When people think about Bethlehem, they often imagine a peaceful small town. It may well have been, but don't let that picture fool you.

Overlooking the little town, off in the distance, stood a palace of king Herod. He was a ruthless tyrant who killed many innocent people in order to ensure his reign - including his beloved wife and some of his sons. Judea may have been at peace when Christ was born, but it wasn't the peace that comes from freedom.

Now you can understand why the people of Judea were disturbed when the magi came looking for a newborn king. They were terrified as to how Herod would react.

Herod had a secret plan to kill the child. He told the magi to report back to him once they found the new born king so that he could worship him. The LORD, however, warned the magi of Herod's plan so they could avoid him by returning home via another route.

What Herod and Satan failed to do through trickery, they would now attempt through utter brutality. God the Father knew this, so He sent an angel, who *appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him."*¹⁴ *He got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and departed for Egypt.*¹⁵ *He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

Take note of the special way God protected Jesus: He could have sent a legion of angels to swoop the baby up and carry him to safety, but he didn't. Instead, God simply let Joseph fulfill his duty as foster-father - entrusting a mere man to protect His only-begotten Son!

This is certainly amazing, but it shouldn't shock us. Every father just needs to look at his own child to consider the responsibility with which God has blessed him. Joseph stands as an example for us all, for every Christian father watches over one or more of God's precious children. And, even though little is said of Joseph in Scripture, everything that is said is powerful, and provides enough of an example for a Christian man to follow for a lifetime – especially when it comes to Christian education! I will, however, save that all for another day and simply say this: Joseph believed God and this faith - expressing itself in immediate action - saved his family.

Our text continues: ¹⁶ *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys who were in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under, in keeping with the exact time which he had learned from the wise men.* ¹⁷ *Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:* ¹⁸ *A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.*

What a terrifying scene: Children torn from their mothers and killed with no time to say good-bye. Yes, hell itself was raging against the Christ Child. No slaughter was too great to accomplish its destruction.

We should note, however, that Bethlehem was a very small village. Most historians and theologians estimate that "only" 15-30 children died in this atrocity. But that doesn't make this slaughter any less horrible than if thousands had died. And if God was so moved to record this

event when “only” 15-30 babies were killed, I can’t even begin to imagine how guilty he must hold our society, when, through abortion, it allows the murder of millions of unborn each year.

Hell raged against God's Son, but the LORD kept him safe. We certainly thank God for that!

"But what about the other children? Why didn't God save them from the hand of Herod?" I would be lying if I told you that I knew the answer. There are things that God just keeps hidden from us. But God does promise to work in all things for the good of those who love him - and this is certainly the case here. Think of it this way: if God had not kept his Son safe, then our hope of salvation would have been lost with him. God saved all of us when he saved his Son.

'But what about the other children?' Again, Scripture does not tell us why the LORD allows the things he does - that question we have to leave unanswered. HOWEVER, the LORD does offer us some hope. The Bible says: *The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.* (Isaiah 57:1,2 NIV84)

Let's apply these words to the children of Bethlehem. We can assume that most (if not all) of those martyred children belonged to Jewish parents. The Old Testament Scriptures commanded parents pass their faith on to their children. All the children in whom the Holy Spirit had awakened faith died as believers - and as such, they died righteous. The LORD, therefore, turned this horrible atrocity into a blessing for them - ushering the believing children to his side in heaven, where they are at peace and rest. No evil can ever reach them there.

Parents, learn from this account! If you care for your children, bring them up in the way of the LORD - starting the very day they are born. Tell them about Jesus, read, sing and pray God's Word with them and bring them to be baptized. The Holy Spirit will work through these means and awaken faith in the heart of your child. Then you can be sure that, even if some illness, crime, terror or disaster takes your child away from you, the LORD has not allowed your child to be taken away from him. That child will be at rest, enjoying the company of his heavenly Father. You can be sure that you will see him again, alive and very well, when Christ comes again on the last day.

If, however, you neglect this responsibility – then I can offer no certain assurances as what becomes of your child because, as the Bible says, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard though the word of Christ. Parents, learn from this account!

Part 2: From the indirect dangers of the world.

Oh, how foolish Herod was. He thought He had won. He thought He could keep his throne forever. But all his raging was for nothing. God kept his child safe. And Herod. . . well, he died!

Our sermon text continues: ¹⁹ *After Herod had died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,* ²⁰ *“Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land*

of Israel, since those who were trying to kill the child have died.”²¹ He got up and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.²² But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there.

History records that Archelaus was as brutal as his father - starting his reign by slaughtering 3000 innocent people in the temple just to get at a few conspirators who were mixed into the crowd! This was the news that greeted Joseph upon his return to Judea and it filled him with fear.

Since he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee.²³ He arrived and settled in a city called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Even though Herod was dead, and no one was specifically trying to kill Jesus, Judea was filled with indirect dangers that threatened God's Son. This is why the Lord advised Joseph to move to Galilee - to Nazareth, the city Mary and Joseph had lived in before Jesus birth.

Because of all the Gentiles who lived in that area, the Judean Jews viewed the Galileans as uneducated, uncultured and "impure" compared to them. But, just as Kewaunee is far safer than Milwaukee, so also Nazareth was safer than Jerusalem - far from Archelaus and all the political strife surrounding his rule.

It is wonderful to see how God’s purposes always prevail: how he saved his dear child from the direct raging of hell itself and from all the indirect dangers of the world. We can take comfort in this, because whatever God did to protect His Son Jesus, He will also do for us, his adopted children through baptism.

Just as Satan and the world raged against Christ, so they also rage against us - wanting nothing less than our destruction. But, just as God guided history for his Son, He also directs history for us - protecting us in so many different ways. Sometimes we perceive it; many times we don't. However, the LORD is, nevertheless, always watching over us.

If we lose our life or suffer the loss of a loved one - as happened to many in Bethlehem - even then we can take comfort in our victory over Satan. Why? Because God promises to use all things - even illness, crime and terror - for our eternal good. What an awesome comfort it is to know that God is in control. We don't have to be afraid of terrorists like ISIS. We don't have to be afraid of illness or horrible natural disasters. No matter what happens to us, we can have this confidence: God is with us and will help us through. He will turn every evil around for our good. He promises to do this because he is our dear, heavenly Father who loves us. If God is for us, who can be against us? What can mere people do to us? They may be able to hurt or kill our bodies, but they cannot kill our souls. Rejoice, therefore in God’s promise to protect his holy children through faith – understanding that nothing can separate us from His love, which is shown to us through the person and work of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.