

The Lord is Watching Over You

Joseph smiled as he put his head on his pillow. The last several months were tough. He and Mary were thrilled to be married, but they were tired of the constant gossip behind their backs. It was tough when they were ordered to travel to Bethlehem to file their taxes since Mary was nearly ready to give birth. Still, they decided it was a good opportunity for a fresh start. They would stay in Bethlehem. Joseph hitched his donkey to his cart and loaded his tools inside next to a pillow where Mary sat. Of course, it took them longer to get to Bethlehem than most and they were not surprised when there were not any guest rooms available for them.

It broke his heart that his beloved had to give birth on a barn floor, but he cried tears of sadness that his step-son and Savior was born on a barn floor. It was nice that the shepherds visited, but Joseph still had to scramble for food. He quickly started doing some carpentry jobs. He pinched pennies until he could make a down-payment on a fixer-upper house near the edge of town. From sun-up to sun-down, he was cutting down trees, shaping them, shaving them, sawing them, fitting them together. Eventually Mary and Jesus had a roof over their heads. The last several months were tough.

Late one morning as Joseph was sawing some logs, some rich men on camels road up and asked if his son was Jesus. He said it was true and wondered why they wanted to know. They explained that they traveled hundreds of miles to see Jesus who they knew was going to be a king. They heard the prophecy of a special star shining in the sky when he was born. Joseph dropped his saw as he called, "Mary, please bring Jesus outside here." The rich men, who called themselves Magi – advisors to eastern kings – got down from their camels as their servants took care of their supplies. They exchanged pleasantries as Mary sat on a chair with Jesus on her lap. Mary and Joseph felt as if they were dreaming when the Magi bowed down in front of Jesus, touching their foreheads to the ground, confessing that Jesus was true God. (Mary and Joseph had not shared that with anyone besides Zechariah and Elisabeth!) The servants opened boxes filled with gold, incense and myrrh (luxurious perfume) and gave them to Mary and Joseph as gifts. The Magi expressed their faith that little Jesus was God who had come to earth. Because of Jesus, even though they were sinners, they would not suffer when they died. They would live forever in paradise, the Persian word for heaven. Mary and Joseph were speechless.

The Magi broke the awkward silence by asking, "May we please give you a meal to express our joy at finding our Savior after our long journey?" Mary and Joseph stuttered, "Y-y-yes. Thank you. Thank you, very much." Not only did they eat until their bellies were full, but their taste buds danced with delight. They ate like royalty. Mary and Joseph invited them to stay the evening and get a good night's rest, but the Magi politely declined. They knew that they and their servants would be a tremendous drain on Mary and Joseph's resources. They explained that they accomplished what they came for. Their hearts were glad and they would see Mary and Joseph again in heaven. They got on their camels and left. Wow, what a day!

Joseph smiled as he put his head on his pillow. The last several months were tough, but things were looking up. They had a house. They had money. Joseph slept the deep sleep of contentment until an angel slapped him awake (:13), "**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 felt as if his donkey kicked him in the gut. Instantly, the quiet peaceful house turned into a flurry of activity. Their hearts were racing. The baby was in danger. He hitched the donkey to the cart and loaded his tools as quickly and quietly as he could. Mary put all the food and clothes they had into the cart. Lastly, she gently picked up Jesus and managed to keep him asleep as she sat on the pile of clothes and they started heading southwest toward Egypt. They could not even say good-bye to their friends. No one could know where they were going so Herod's henchmen would not be able to find them. No doubt the gold, incense and myrrh covered their expenses along the way. The trip would take them over two weeks of steady travel constantly looking back over their shoulders until they arrived in Egypt, most likely Alexandria, where there was a Jewish community. Once again, Joseph started another carpenter's shop from scratch. Life was tough again.

It's easy to imagine Joseph thinking, "Lord, what's next? It's been one hardship after another. I did not think that raising Jesus was going to be a cake walk, but would it be too much to ask for a little less drama? Why couldn't Mary have given birth like other mothers? Why didn't you give Herod a heart attack instead of making us scramble for our lives? Why do we have to live in fear every time we see a soldier?" You and I have not faced any of the hardships that Joseph faced and yet we can keep up with him when it comes to complaining. We have far more luxuries, food, conveniences, money, health care, supermarkets full of food, kitchens, indoor plumbing, television, furnaces on cold nights. And yet when someone asks us how we are, we are quick to complain about the few things that we do not have and the few things that do not go the way we would like and how unfair life is to us. We have not had the federal government searching to kill our child and yet we are quick to worry that things won't go so well for us. It's a good thing that the Lord did not ask us to raise his son.

What would it have been like to be a mother in Bethlehem at this time? King Herod was known for being particularly cruel. He had his wife and sons killed when he was suspicious of their political ambitions. When the Magi showed up in Jerusalem and asked where the new-born King of the Jews was, Herod was obsessed with killing that baby – as if a tiny baby was going to be a threat to his reign. He told the Magi to report to him exactly where Jesus was so that he could “go and worship him.” He wanted to kill him. However, the Lord told the Magi to go home by another route. When Herod realized that the Magi were not coming back to him, he became a deranged mad man. He ordered his soldiers to kill every baby boy in Bethlehem who was two years old or younger.

That fills us with horror. How could Herod give such an order? How could soldiers run a sword through a baby boy? Historians guess that there were about 25 babies killed. In 2020, there were nearly a million abortions in the USA and that doesn't seem to bother us at all. There are over 2500 abortions per day.^[1] If a baby survives an abortion in California, the new law they passed last November makes it legal to kill that baby up to 28 days after the failed abortion.^[2] Our country is just as evil as King Herod. We need to pray for our country, for the unborn children, and for those mothers who feel compelled or confused to do undergo such a procedure.

Meanwhile, Bible critics have a field day with this Slaughter of the Innocents as this story is called. The babies were just as sinful as all humans. They were innocent in the sense that they had not done anything worth being killed by the government. Bible critics argue, “If your God is so loving, then why would he let cruel King Herod kill those baby boys?” There is no way for any of us to answer such a question or any other question about some tragedy.

- Why does a blizzard hit NY the week before Christmas leaving dozens dead?
- Why is there a drive by shooting in Milwaukee that kills a young child?
- Why does a child end up with a cancerous tumor?
- What does someone get a debilitating stroke?
- Why does someone else drop dead from a heart attack?
- Why does someone else get cancer?

The devil continues to wreak havoc in the world and then tries to blame it on God.

This story about Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt and the baby boys in Bethlehem being killed is not about a loveless God who stands with his hands in his pockets unable to help. Far from it. This tremendously dramatic story overflows with details of God's power and goodness. Ever since God promised to send a Savior to crush the Devil's head, the Devil did all he could to stop the Savior from coming and saving the world. But our God is stronger and smarter. God knew that Herod wanted to kill Jesus so he directed the Magi home a different direction. The Lord knew that the Devil was prompting King Herod to kill the baby boys in Bethlehem, so he sent an angel to Joseph in time for Mary and Joseph to get out of town safely. Meanwhile, through all the hardships that Mary and Joseph endured, the Lord strengthened their trust in him as he continued to protect and provide for them. He does the same for you and me today. Through our hardships – as painful and heartbreaking as they can be – the Lord keeps us hanging on to him which is exactly what we need to do. The result is that when it is time for us to die, we are hanging on tighter than ever.

And about those innocent boys in Bethlehem. Truly tragic from our earthly perspective. Remember, though, that they were children of the covenant, circumcised on the 8th day, part of God's chosen family of faith. They ended up in heaven and no

one gets into heaven – no matter what age – and complains that they would like to go back to a sin-infected earth for a few more years. They ended up just fine. Those poor mothers and grandmothers and aunts and others, though. Matthew said that it was as tragic as when Rachel, who was married to Jacob and was the mother of the Israelites, died giving birth to Benjamin. It was as tragic as when the Assyrians destroyed the Israelites and the survivors were herded together at Ramah to become slaves. I doubt if the hearts of those mothers in Bethlehem every recovered from such a trauma. I would also guess that when they thought of their own death, though, they weren't so scared. When it was time for them to die, they were willing to let go of life here on earth and be reunited with their loved ones in heaven, and that was a good thing.

This story of the Flight to Egypt teaches us to hang on to God and to trust him no matter how mixed up and messed up life on this dying world gets. God is still all power and all loving. God is still in control. God made sure that Jesus was not killed by a soldier's sword in Bethlehem because, even though Jesus was born to die, it wasn't time for him to die yet. It's not terribly surprising that the angel told Joseph to go to Egypt. Matthew reminds us that God said through the Old Testament prophet Hosea (11:1), "**Out of Egypt I called my son.**" God used Egypt to protect his son, Jesus, and then guided him out of Egypt.

Once King Herod died, the angel told Joseph that Herod was dead and he could return to Israel. Joseph was headed back to Bethlehem, but as they got closer he heard that Herod's son was now king. He was not much better, having ordered 3000 people executed during the Passover celebration. Joseph must have wondered if his life would ever be calm. The angel directed Joseph north to Galilee. Mary and Joseph came full circle as they settled in Nazareth where they first fell in love. It was not time for Jesus to die yet. He still needed to live a full life for us, keeping all of the commandments perfectly. He needed to preach and teach. He needed to train disciples and on and on. God controlled everything. Jesus' enemies did not want Jesus killed during the Passover, but Jesus was put on trial, falsely accused, unfairly condemned, and cruelly crucified exactly when it was supposed to happen. God made sure that everything happened according to plan so that you can be sure that you are completely saved. Jesus even rose again on Easter morning right on schedule to guarantee you life after death with a glorified body. God was in complete control so that you can know that each one of your sins is completely forgiven and heaven is already paid for..

As we move into a new year, there is always a bit of fear and trepidation. What is going to happen to the economy? Will the war in Ukraine escalate into a global conflict? Another pandemic? How secure is your job? Your retirement account? Your health? Will another member of St. Matthew die in 2023 as in 2022 and the year before that, etc.. In our other two lessons this morning, we were reminded that God calls you his child. Your baptismal certificate is your official adoption paper. God made a promise to you as an individual to watch over you and care for you. You are not aware of how the Lord is moving his angels around like chess pieces to guard you in all your ways, but he is. This story of the Flight to Egypt is a reminder of how God is also watching over you. Do not be afraid. God has said (He 13:5), "**Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.**" Jesus' parting promise to you was (Mt 28:20), "**Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**" As you move into 2023, take comfort in knowing that the Lord is watching over you. Amen.

[1] <https://www.all.org/abortion/abortion-statistics>

[2]

<https://www.lifenews.com/2022/03/24/california-bill-would-allow-killing-babies-in-infanticide-up-to-28-days-after-birth/>