

Second Sunday after Christmas – A

Behold, an angel of the Lord, appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

Just as we heard in the gospel reading two weeks ago Joseph again receives a message through a dream. In fact, in this week’s reading he receives three messages in dreams. First to flee from Herod to Egypt, and then another to return home again. Finally there is a third dream where he is warned against returning to Judea because of Herod’s son Archelaus. So he takes his family to Nazareth in Galilee. That makes a total of four times that God contacted Joseph through dreams. I have to wonder if Joseph didn’t start wondering each night as he lay down to go to sleep just what kind of message he might be receiving next. I hope his anxiety didn’t lead to insomnia.

Actually, both Joseph and Mary must have felt very safe knowing that God was looking out for them. God sent his son to earth for a very important reason, to bring us salvation, to overcome the alienation we have suffered by our sins and reconcile us to God. God was not going to let anything happen to this child.

So off they go in the dead of night headed for Egypt to escape from the wrath of Herod the Great. Herod thinks Jesus wants to steal the throne away from him. Jesus had no desire to take over Herod’s little kingdom which he ruled only with the permission of Rome and under their careful observation. Jesus had far greater aspirations than Palestine or even the entire Roman Empire. Jesus came for every person on earth, including Herod. He was not interested in political power. He was interested in saving souls.

But Herod had legitimate reasons to think Jesus was a threat to his power. After all the wise had come asking, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.” And then the scribes and chief priests told him that the birth was to take place in Bethlehem as the prophet Micah had foretold. So Herod devises a plan to learn from the wise men precisely where this king is, pretending that he also wants to worship him. His plan would have worked too except God intervened and warned the wise men to return home a different way and not see Herod again. Herod must have been boiling mad at the betrayal of the wise men. Rulers do not like to be betrayed especially when they think their kingship is at stake. So Herod takes matters into his own hands and sends soldiers to make sure whoever this threat to his power is he will not live long. He does not care how many would have to be slaughtered in the process. What kind of a man would do such an unspeakably evil act?

Herod was born of Jewish father and an Idumean mother about 73 BC. He never followed the Jewish religion. So while he was the king of Judea, he was never a Jewish king. After serving several years as the governor of Galilee, he was declared King of Judea by the Romans around the year 49 BC, but he

didn't actually take control until 37BC and he reigned until his death in 4BC not long after Jesus' birth.

Thirteen of his descendants are mentioned in the New Testament. This can be confusing since some of them are referred to simply as Herod. The Herod who beheaded John the Baptist and questioned Jesus after his arrest was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and brother of Archelaus who Joseph and his family avoided by going to Galilee instead of Judea. A grandson and great grandson are mentioned in the book of Acts. They are both named Agrippa. The grandson killed James and arrested Peter.

Herod murdered or had murdered a great many people in coming to the throne and then again in a desperate effort to stay in power. Many of these were members of his own family including the favorite of his ten wives and two of his sons.

While Herod was a horrible man, he was not much worse than any of the others who came to power before him or after him. This was the way things were done. It was accepted that to be a ruler, you had to be ruthless. That in no way excuses his behavior, but it was, unfortunately typical of rulers in the Roman world. Herod was merely better at it than those who would have ruled in his place, but what a sharp contrast with Jesus. Jesus willingly gave his own life that we might have life. The Son of God left the glory of heaven behind in order to serve us.

The other thing Herod is remembered for is the temple in Jerusalem. This is often referred to as the third temple. This is somewhat confusing as the second temple, called the temple of Zerubbabel, was not destroyed as the first temple, the temple of Solomon was. In fact the temple was in continuous use all the time that Herod's temple was being constructed on the same site. Herod's temple was an almost complete rebuilding of the temple, yet it did not stop the temple from being used.

In chapter thirteen of Mark, Jesus and his disciples are leaving the temple a few days before Jesus' arrest. One of the disciples says to Jesus rather excitedly, "Look, teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" This is the temple that Herod had built. He is quite justified in being amazed, for the stones were indeed immense. Some of them weighed hundreds of tons. That Herod could have constructed the temple using such heavy stones is an amazing feat, and people still speculate how they were moved into place without the benefit of modern technology.

Herod seems to have had three motives for building the temple. First was simply to make the Jews happy so they wouldn't cause him trouble. Second was to accomplish something great that people would marvel at and admire for its beauty. Also, he built it in such a way that could help defend the city if need be. There was also a secret tunnel from his palace to the temple, which he could have used to escape if the need had arisen.

After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the first thing he did was to go into the temple and look around. Apparently he was evaluating what was going on within the temple because the next day he returned and drove out the money changers and those who were selling animals to be sacrificed,

and he also stopped people from carrying things through the temple – using it for a shortcut.

Jesus wants the temple to be used as God intended it to be used. When he drove out the moneychangers he said, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” The temple is supposed to be a holy place where people can come to grow closer to God. Herod’s concern with the temple is only for his own glory and safety.

The temple was destroyed not only because it was being used contrary to how God intended it to be used, but also because those who had stewardship of the temple rejected the Messiah when he came to them. Jesus twice predicts the destruction of the temple. The first time is rather cryptic because the temple itself is not mentioned, BUT it is found in Mark between Jesus’ examination of the temple on Palm Sunday and his cleansing of the temple the following day. This is the very curious incident where Jesus curses a fig tree and it withers. When you examine where Mark places this in the gospel, it is apparent that the fig tree represents the temple and those who should have seen that it was properly used.

Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple a second time a few days later. This is in response to the disciple’s comment about the wonderful stones and buildings. Jesus says, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” Interestingly, it is not that comment that people use to accuse Jesus of blasphemy against the temple, but one that he makes not about the temple, but about himself. Jesus told those who were looking for a sign, “Destroy this temple and I will build it again in three days.” Of course, he was referring to himself and the crucifixion and resurrection rather than a building. Jesus allows this misunderstanding because he is replacing the temple. He becomes the means whereby people can come and know God. We can know God through Jesus. We can pray to Jesus and put our trust in him. And so as a little baby he is protected from the evil designs of Herod the Great and lives for a time in Egypt.

This reading had an interesting parallel with the Old Testament. The family of Jacob, also known as Israel, leaves the Promised Land to live for four hundred years in Egypt. They go there under the protection of another Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons. God saves them from the bondage of slavery to the Egyptians by bringing them back to the Promised Land. Now God frees everyone who turns to Jesus from the bondage of slavery to their sins. Like Moses being protected by God from the wrath of Pharaoh, Jesus was protected by God from the wrath of Herod.

People in those days did not move around like many people do today. For the great majority of the common people it would only be disastrous circumstances that would cause them to move from one place to another. But Joseph and his family have gone from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Egypt and finally back to Nazareth. There is a similarity here with the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years, although for Joseph and his family it is only a few years. More importantly, it seems to foreshadow the wandering of Jesus himself during his last three years when he seemed to have no permanent

residence. Jesus once told a would-be follower, "Birds have nests, foxes have their holes, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head."

Jesus is protected so that he can fulfill his mission. But his mission will bring on incredible suffering and death. So Jesus is protected for our sake rather than his. But what about those our gospel reading skips over? What about the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem. Our reading skips over verses sixteen to eighteen in order to concentrate on the movements of Joseph and his family. Those three verses tell how Herod, trying to avert the treat he perceived from the birth of Christ, killed all the boys in Bethlehem who are two years old or younger. Thankfully this is a much smaller number than people often imagine because Bethlehem would have had a very small population in those days. That in no way diminishes the horror of this cruel and selfish act. Five or fifty, it is a cruel and despicable thing to do.

So what about the holy innocents? Why are they not protected? Does God not care about them as well? Of course God cares for them. God loves each one of us with a perfect love. He even loves Herod, although he hates the evil things he did. But God has given us free will in order that we might choose him of our own volition. Without freewill we could not truly know him. That is the wonderful and often times terrible consequence of being born "in the image of God."

God grieves over every tragedy in our lives. When you consider all the people who are in the world and all the tragedies that have occurred and are occurring, that is a lot of grieving. Far more than any human could begin to bear. Far more than we can even begin to imagine. Some day all tragedies will cease. In the meantime humans still have to endure terrible calamities such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and famines. The book of Revelation gives us a wonderful glimpse of what this will be like when there will be no more tragedies: "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

We must not let the evil in the world detract us from the goodness of God. We need to be aware of suffering. We need to work to prevent it and alleviate it where possible. But our focus should remain on what God has done for all mankind and what he continues to do.

In one of his books, Rick Warren wrote: "It's not about you, the purpose of your life is far greater than you won personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were made by God and for God, and until you understand that, life will not make sense."

God has a plan to end all our grieving. That plan began to unfold on the very first Christmas. Tyrants like Herod the Great will continue to inflict their evil schemes on mankind until the return of Christ. In the meantime, we must stay faithful to God's plan of salvation. We must stay faithful to Jesus. The Holy Innocents are with God. They are now safe from any and all tyrants. If we are faithful to God's plan of salvation, we will someday we will be with God as well,

and he “will guide [us] to springs of living water” and “wipe away every tear from [our] eyes.”