

Matthew 2:13-23
"All According to God's Plan"
First Sunday after Christmas (A)

January 1, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Happy Eighth Day of Christmas!

One week ago, we were singing "Joy to the World" and now on this Eighth Day of Christmas it appears that this joy is over. Instead, we hear of "***weeping and loud lamentation ... because [the children] are no more***" (Matthew 2:18).

How can we go from "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled" to the deaths of innocent children?

We began today's Gospel reading with the departing of the Magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Why did the Magi even go to Jerusalem? Why didn't they just go straight to Bethlehem?

Well, these Magi may have been known as "wise men," but they still needed directions. Now, these Magi were a class of priests, astronomers, and astrologers. They were influential advisors of the Babylonian king. During the 70 years of the Jewish captivity in Babylon, the prophet Daniel was made the presiding officer over the caste of the Magi. From Daniel, the Magi learned about the promised Messiah who was to come. These Magi studied and took very seriously what Israel's prophets had foretold about the Messiah.

Then on that Christmas Day, they saw one of the promised signs "***a star will come out of Jacob***" (Numbers 24:17). It was a star that they had never seen before. It did not look like any other star, and it did not act like any other star. So, they began to follow this star toward Jerusalem. Now, it was only natural for the Magi to come to the capital city of Jerusalem. For they expected everyone there to know about the Messiah's birth, and they were surprised when they asked around and no one was aware. *Didn't anyone search the Scriptures?*

Meanwhile, Jesus had already been circumcised, presented at the Jerusalem Temple, Simeon and Anna have departed in peace after they marveled at the Christ Child, and Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus returned to Bethlehem.

Eventually, the word got out to Herod the Great that there were Magi searching in Jerusalem for the promised King of the Jews who had just been born. For Herod the Great, this was a complete surprise to him. And he was not a man who liked surprises, especially surprises that could threaten him.

If anyone got in Herod's way, he would just eliminate them, including those in his own family. He was cruel, merciless, and jealous. He had his wife's brother drowned. He had his own wife murdered. He murdered his mother-in-law. He murdered three of his own sons. He even had many of the most-distinguished citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned and then gave the orders that they would be executed at the moment of his own death. Herod wanted to ensure that there would be mourning in the city at the time of his own death.

So, it is easy to see why Herod was not happy upon hearing the news of the birth of the King of the Jews. After summoning the chief priests and the scribes, they began searching the Scriptures and found that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem: ***“You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel”*** (Micah 5:2).

Secretly, Herod summoned the Magi and told them to travel to Bethlehem saying: ***“Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him”*** (Matthew 2:8). But Herod had no intention on worshipping this child or any other child. He wanted any threat to his reign eliminated.

Oddly enough, Herod the Great may have been king, but his reign was more imaginary than real. You see, Herod was a puppet king of Rome. He was there to keep the Jews happy as a sort of intermediary between Rome and the Jewish people. Even with that being so, he didn't want anyone to take his “Jewish kingship” away from him.

This leads us into today's Gospel reading. The Magi arrived in Bethlehem, located the house of the Child Jesus and there they worshiped Him and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But as told them in a dream, they did not return to Jerusalem, but departed back another way.

Meanwhile, after at first patiently waiting, Herod believed that the Magi tricked him since they had not returned those few miles from Bethlehem.

No one messes with Herod. So, enraged, he ordered the murder of every boy in Bethlehem younger than two years old. He wanted this threat eliminated. He trusted that this boy would be among the victims of this slaughter.

But evil rulers will have no power over this Child! Herod plots and acts in vain. All the while, God planned for this to fulfill Scripture for “*Out of Egypt I called my Son*” (Matthew 2:15b).

When the angel of the Lord said to Joseph, “*Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, ... for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him*” (Matthew 2:13b), he took it very seriously. After all, everything else the angels have told him has come true. So, he did what any father would do, even if he wasn't the biological father, he cared for his adopted son. So, by the morning, Joseph, Mary, and the Christ Child were simply gone. They vanished in the darkness to Egypt.

But why Egypt? Well, the easy answer is the angel told Joseph. So, we could stop there. But also, Egypt had been known as a traditional place of refuge. **Abraham** went there during a famine. **Jacob** and his family went there for the same reason. **Jeroboam** fled to Egypt when Solomon tried to kill him. **Uriah** also fled to Egypt.

At that time, there were many Jews in Egypt, so Mary and Joseph could feel quite at home and secure there. It is likely that they funded their journey and stay there with the gifts from the Magi. And from Egypt, God would fulfill the prophecy: “*Out of Egypt I called My Son*” (Matthew 2:15).

But what about those young boys in Bethlehem? Herod sent in his soldiers to murder every boy two years old and younger to give himself plenty of leeway that this future king would be eliminated. These victims would be called “The Holy Innocents,” not because they were sinless, but they surely had not committed any crime worthy of death. These boys were murdered out of convenience of King Herod the Great. You may think: “*Why didn't God stop this?*”

The answer to that question may not satisfy us. God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. Why does He permit evil? All we know is that God uses horrible events to bring us closer to Him. God is incomprehensible and we surely cannot judge Him.

Through these victims we see the wickedness of the world. Herod would gladly murder his own child, out of fear that one would take his reign. Herod was not above getting his own hands dirty and all to preserve his own power.

This wickedness of the world is still with us. Young life is still despised by so many in our time. Herod's systematic destruction of these children ought to remind us of the countless children who have died by abortion. It was a matter of convenience to Herod as it is for nearly every abortion today. Selfishness can make murder seem like a good deed. Today, too, the world says it is a good deed to even castrate children who are led to believe that they are of the opposite sex through "gender-affirming healthcare." May we lament with Rachel weeping for her children (Matthew 2:18).

But out of this horror comes prophecy. Despite the wickedness of men, God the Father would protect His Son through His earthly father, Joseph. When Herod the Great died, Joseph brought the holy family to the forgotten town of Nazareth, which fulfilled another prophecy: "***He shall be called a Nazarene***" (Matthew 2:23), which fulfills the Christ's obscure beginning. He wasn't from the big city of Jerusalem, but He is instead from the forgotten town of Nazareth.

Yes, Jesus came in human flesh to die, but His hour had not yet come. He would be lifted up on the cross. He would die not by the will of man, but by the will of God. Jesus had to die, but not on Herod's schedule, not until the fulness of God's time, just the right time. He had to die for Herod's sins. He had to die for our sins, every sin, including abortion. He had to die because of our doubt and our fear and our unbelief. He had to die because God the Father knew we could never turn back to Him, keep His commandments, and love Him on our own. He would die for our salvation and for the salvation for those Holy Innocents, who were His martyrs not in will, but in deed.

Jesus would die for the sins all people – *Jews and Gentiles alike* – to bring about forgiveness and salvation for every sin of thought, word, and deed through repentance and faith in Him and all according to God's plan. Amen!

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +