

Out of Egypt I Called My Son  
Matthew 2:13-23  
December 25, 2022  
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Read Matthew 2:13-23

*"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Luke 11:28)

## Introduction

I don't know if you've noticed a change in Christmas movies recently. They used to be about families and relationships and meaning in life, like *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. Now they're about homicidal Santas. Sure, Hallmark is still churning out the heart-warming, family-centered Christmas romances that usually don't have anything to do with the actual Christmas story. But at least they're not *Silent Night*, *Bloody Night*. The latest one in theaters this year is called *Violent Night*, and has the cop from *Stranger Things* playing Santa Claus who drops down the chimney while a bunch of bad guys have taken a family hostage, so he has to kill them all. Some of the other titles that you could watch if you want thrills and bloodshed in your yuletide flicks are *A Christmas Horror Story*, *Black Christmas*, *Better Watch Out*, *Christmas Evil*, and *Gingerdead Man*.

I have not seen any of those, I'm not a big horror guy. I like action, adventure, war, and some violence in my movies; gore and excessive carnage, not so much. And it's very tempting to say something like "violence and gore doesn't belong in Christmas," right? It should only be a time of gifts, singing, eating fruitcakes, and spreading love and cheer. But I have some bad news if that's our mindset because there was some serious violence surrounding the first Christmas. Our passage this morning contains a paranoid, homicidal maniac who ordered the killing of children. That's something that most of those Christmas horror movies probably aren't even willing to explore!

The background of this text is that the ruler of Judea, Herod, was really upset when a group of wise men/Persian magi, arrived in his little area of the Roman Empire and started asking around about a Christ child that had been born. Herod felt threatened that this child would eventually take his throne, so he pretended that he wanted to worship the child with the magi. He asked them to let him know where the child was when they found out, but the Lord warned them in a dream not to, since Herod had sinister motives. But the child was still in danger, which led to

### **I. The Flight to Egypt (vv. 13-15)**

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, 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 until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Angels kept appearing at the beginning of Jesus' life, didn't they? The Lord made sure that His will was communicated to His people in very vivid ways by sending His heavenly messengers. Sometimes it was in the middle of the day in the temple, like with Zechariah (John the Baptist's dad) in Luke 1. Sometimes it was in the middle of the night in the skies, like with the shepherds in Luke 2. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary explaining what would happen with her pregnancy and answering her questions. We saw in our last sermon text, Matthew 1, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to explain Mary's divine pregnancy to him. Then God or an angel appeared to the wise

men in a dream directing them not to return to Herod. At every turn, and to basically every participant in the Christmas story (except evil King Herod), angels show up to direct the action.

There are a lot of times that we wish we could have a little divine direction to us to tell us what to do, right? When I've been pondering job changes, I could have used an angel appearing to me to plainly send me in the right direction. I'm sure that you've had decisions about what school to attend or who to date or marry, those kinds of things, where an archangel like Michael or Gabriel giving you a word of advice would have been greatly appreciated. But God does not choose to speak to us like that the vast majority of the time. I'm not denying that He could, but that we shouldn't expect it. We have God's perfect will revealed in the Scriptures, plus we have the Holy Spirit inside of us guiding and counseling us, and we have other believers that we can trust for spiritually mature counsel. We make our choices and decisions based on our understanding of Scripture, after time in prayer, and seeking wise counsel. Joseph, Mary, the magi, the shepherds? They all got angelic visitations because they were placed in the midst of the most important events in human history.

Joseph took his family to Egypt, a journey of just under 100 miles. Which, with modern transportation does not take that long; I'm sure many of you visit family who live much farther than that. But imagine doing 100 miles on a camel or a donkey or on foot. To a foreign country! With all of your belongings to live there for who knows how long? They had to wait for Herod to die, it could have been a while. Now, Egypt sounds like a foreign, hostile land where Joseph's family would have no fellow Jews around them. But we know from historical sources that Egypt was actually the "go to" place for the Jews to flee from the oppressive occupation of the Romans. It was estimated that as many as a million Jews lived in Egypt at the time. It would have been easy to live among their own people while they were in exile.<sup>1</sup> But more than it just being a safe place with familiar people, Egypt was significant as being the fulfillment of prophecy: "*Out of Egypt I called my son*" is from Hosea 11:1, where it refers to God's deliverance of His people from the Egyptians in the Exodus. Matthew's recording that Joseph moved his family there established a parallel between Jesus and His people, Israel. The greater truth is that Jesus was bringing a new and greater exodus!

Back in Bethlehem, a different kind of prophecy was being fulfilled:

## **II. The Slaughter of the Innocent (vv. 16-18)**

*<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."*

In this week's issue of WORLD magazine, there is an article about the Nigerian military's strategy of targeting the children of the Boko Haram terrorist group. This is the military of the government who are being accused of killing children of insurgents and forcing abortions on women who get pregnant with their babies. The mindset is that these children will grow up to become terrorists themselves, so they must be eliminated as early in life as possible for the future good of the nation. Make no mistake, Boko Haram targets children as well, so both sides are modern day versions of Herod – seeking to kill children in their quest for power and dominance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Matthew* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Onize Ohikere's article "Secret, Systemic, Illegal" from *WORLD Magazine's* January 14, 2023 issue, Vol. 39, No. 1.

Herod's order to have all the male children under 2 was not an isolated case of his ruthlessness – he had ten wives, two of whom he murdered, including his favorite because he suspected she was unfaithful. He killed an uncle, a mother-in-law, and three of his own children as well.<sup>3</sup> The Emperor Augustus said, "I'd rather be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons." Less chance of getting killed. Now, there were probably fewer than a thousand people in Bethlehem at the time, so we're not talking about a huge number of infant boys that were killed; the estimates are around twenty. But to each family and each parent, it was a great tragedy for them. The heartbreak is reflected and prophesied back in Jeremiah 31:15, which Matthew quotes. "*Rachel weeping for her children*" - Rachel being the wife of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel; it was a way of saying that the Hebrew people mourned their children who had been taken from them.

Did you know that this violence directed at the Christ child is an event that is referred to at both ends of the Bible? Both Genesis and Revelation refer to Satan's attempts to kill the Lord's anointed Messiah – in Genesis 3 it's Satan as a serpent and in Revelation 12 it's Satan as a great dragon:

Genesis 3:15: "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*"

Revelation 12: 3-5: "*Behold, a great red dragon... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.*"

What's the point? Dan Doriani explains: "Cast from heaven to earth eons ago, Satan fought to keep his realm when Jesus invaded it in the incarnation. He used the malice, the mania, and the lawlessness of Herod to destroy the Christ, if he could, by ordering the death of all the baby boys of Bethlehem. In this way, Satan kept fighting even though his defeat was and is sure. Our adversary is potent and malign, but our ally is greater. Satan's rage endures, but the Lord defeats him at every turn."<sup>4</sup>

The last three verses trace

### **III. The Return to Nazareth (vv. 19-23)**

<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, <sup>20</sup> saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." <sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

So there was a change in political rulership while Jesus' family was staying in Egypt. Herod the Great died, and Rome decided to divide up his kingdom and give each to one of his three sons. As verse 22 confirms, his son, Archelaus, was given the territory of Judea. He was known for his cruelty, perhaps not to the level of his father; but Joseph had another dream from the Lord advising him not to live in that area. That's what brought Jesus' family to Nazareth, which was where both Joseph and Mary were from.

Now, there is no specific Scripture that you can look up that says, "*he would be called a Nazarene,*" as verse 23 might make you think. So was Matthew confused? Or was he quoting some prophet

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<sup>3</sup> Sproul, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Doriani, Philip Ryken, and Richard Phillips, *The Incarnation in the Gospels* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), p. 62.

whose words didn't make it into the Bible? The most convincing explanation of this that I read is that being called "Jesus of Nazareth" was like saying He was from nowhere, today we'd say He was from the boonies. It also adds to the picture that He was one who was despised and rejected by men, which is how Isaiah 53 paints Him, the suffering servant, an outsider and someone that you would least expect to be the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Like the book of Esther that we just finished, we see God's providence in the life of His Son. In Esther, it was a hidden providence, since we only saw coincidences and actions that came together to save the Lord's people; no angels showed up, no one heard from God directly to save them. But here in Matthew, God guided Jesus' family to safety, even as He had already guided events leading up to Jesus' birth. In these short eleven verses we have three references to Old Testament prophecies. Matthew quotes or alludes to the Old Testament continually in his Gospel. Remember that Matthew was writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, so showing them the connections to their sacred writings in the life of the Man that he is convincing them is the Messiah was a wise move. But it's a lot deeper than just the Gospel writers trying to harmonize Jesus' life with what had already been written in Hebrew Scripture – Matthew presents these things as fulfillments, in other words, God arranged and planned the writing of Scripture to present the things that Jesus would fulfill. One thing we see in this (Matthew doesn't say it directly, he only alludes to it) is that Jesus is the greater Moses – remember that Moses narrowly avoided being killed when Pharaoh had all the babies in the area killed; just like Jesus. Later Jesus would spend 40 days in the wilderness just as Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness. Moses came out of Egypt, leading God's people out of their slavery in the Exodus. As I said before, Jesus would bring the greater Exodus, becoming the Passover lamb slaughtered so that His blood would save His people from death, and bringing His people out of the slavery of their sins into the Promised Land of heaven.

A recent Christianity Today article talks about Christmas in the Ukraine and how they are clinging to the holiday in a way that resembles Matthew 2: "Ukrainian Christmas traditions, music, and culture are deeply rooted in the country's history of sorrow, courage, and resistance. This is not so different from the very first Christmas. Then, Judea was under occupation and Herod, was a terrorist and mass murderer, hunting innocent children to secure his own throne. ... Christmas is a time that reminds us that justice and love prevail, even when it seems that both are slowly dying. It ensures the indestructibility of hope in times of the greatest hopelessness. For as long as we celebrate Christmas, we can neither be defeated nor destroyed. This is the message that Ukraine is trying to convey to the world."<sup>6</sup> Let us all continue to pray that the Ukrainian people will persevere and that God will change Russian leader's hearts so this war will end quickly. But even as the battles rage on, may Christmas remind them and us that God prevails in time over all evil.

We here in America may not live under foreign occupation, we may not have violence close to our homes, and we may not have an edict for our murder or the murder of our children. But every human being who has ever lived has been targeted by Satan for destruction. He tempted the first Adam back in the garden of Eden to commit the first sin, not to free him but to destroy him, and to bring the whole creation into ruin in the fall. Since then, Satan has sought to lead as much of

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/december-web-only/carol-of-bells-ukrainian-christmas-shchedryk-gerbish-hrytsa.html>

humanity astray as he can. And since we are born with fallen natures, we are by nature enemies of God. Here's how Ephesians 2:1-3 says it:

*"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."*

But God's great rescue plan came in the form of His Son's taking on a human body, being born in Bethlehem, where He had to flee to escape with His own life. But eventually He gave up His life willingly on the cross and defeated the forces of death and hell. God used His death to pay for the sins of His people. Colossians 1:13 says that *"He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*

Satan hates you and me, he wants to destroy us. Jesus loves us and wants to redeem us and claim our souls for eternity where He is preparing a heavenly home for each one of His people. I beg you to not only celebrate Christmas but believe the full Gospel that it points to – that *"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, the whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). And that *"neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39). Amen.

Benediction - 2 Peter 3:18 - *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."*