

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "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." ¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son..." ¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." ²¹So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Do you know what this Sunday has historically been called in the Christian Church? Slaughter of the Innocents Sunday. That might sound a little shocking to you. Sometimes you will hear it spoken of in a little softer way as the Feast of the Holy Innocents. This name comes from the verses that were left out of our text where Herod sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all the boys under the age of 2 to quell what he thought was a threat to his power when the Wise Men told him of the one who was born King of the Jews. The title, Slaughter of the Innocents, certainly doesn't go along with the warm, fuzzy, sentimental scene that we picture with Christmas—but of course nothing has been warm and fuzzy in 2020. Nor does the grizzly thought of a king so insecure and power hungry that he would send his troops to kill innocent children just to protect his own power. These are not the things we want to think about around Christmas. Perhaps this is why this day is not so widely advertised.

What's interesting about the Bible is that it does not cover over atrocity or shy away from giving us vivid depictions of the brutality God's people will face in life. This account today shows us the darker side of Christmas. After just celebrating the high of Christmas Eve, it feels like quite a crash to see the low of someone so bent on destroying Jesus that he was willing to kill innocent children to accomplish this task. He didn't care about collateral damage or the pain and suffering he would cause to all of the families—he only wanted to destroy Jesus. But perhaps no account so accurately and vividly applies the blessings of Christmas like this one before us. For the light of the Gospel to shine truthfully, we need to be honest about the darkness in which it shines. Jesus was born into a world that was brutal, immoral, and power-hungry. It was full of wickedness and injustice and it hasn't changed much since then. But God cared about Jesus and God cares about you. He didn't let wicked men destroy Jesus then and he won't let them destroy you today. He cared so much about Jesus and you that he used his divine wisdom and almighty power to keep Jesus safe so that he could continue on the path for which he was sent which was your salvation and mine. May God bless our study of his word today and lead us at all times to be certain of one thing: **God Cares for You!**

While Herod's actions shock us, they really shouldn't surprise us. When the Wise Men appeared in Jerusalem and asked where they would find the one who was born King of the Jews because they had seen his star in the East, Herod was caught off guard. He was technically the king of the Jews, but he had not come by that naturally. He had usurped the throne of David and was not even a Jew. The most distressing part of the news from the magi was that it appeared God had now brought about the birth of the rightful heir to David's throne. This was a threat to him. And he reacted the way that we would expect a tyrant king who had a long history of ruthlessly dealing with threat and dissent to act. He was bent on destroying Jesus and eliminating a future threat to his throne.

What's so shocking for us is that we couldn't imagine reacting to Jesus this way. We've just celebrated Christmas in joy and thanksgiving because we have been led to see God's love in sending Jesus into this world to be our Savior from sin. The reason for our celebration and joy is that Jesus came not to establish an earthly kingdom but a spiritual kingdom. We sang praise to God and were full of rejoicing because we recognize the salvation he offers to us from sin and the certainty of eternal life that goes with it. This account is a vivid reminder that not everyone receives Jesus this way. Satan knew exactly why Jesus entered into this world and he began right from the start to try to knock him off his mission. He fueled the wickedness and jealousy in Herod's heart so that instead of receiving him in joy he sought to destroy him.

It's no different today. There is darkness all around us. While we join with the shepherds and angels to worship him and celebrate his birth, many see Jesus as a threat to their own egos and desires. They want to be the lords of their own lives. They don't want anyone else telling them what to do or limiting their options and choices. They want to be able to fill their lusts and desires however their heart chooses. They want to take credit for their own salvation and believe that God loves them because of what great people they are or how successful they are. They see Jesus as a threat and are bent on destroying him. While they can't kill him today the way that Herod did, they seek to destroy him by discrediting him. They look condescendingly down on anyone who in their opinion would be so foolish or weak as to put their trust in someone else for salvation. They condescend to name calling as a way to put down anyone who would look to Jesus. They purposefully rebel against him by doing the very things God tells them not to do. While the number of babies actually killed in Bethlehem may be a relatively small number, perhaps as little as 15 or 20 given the size of the town, we see millions of babies killed every year through abortion and people celebrate and protect the rights of others to continue doing this. They try to discredit Jesus and silence his message.

But God cared about Jesus—and God cares about you. So he didn't let Herod destroy him. He cared for Jesus' welfare by warning Joseph ahead of time and directing him where to go, both in Egypt and again when they came back to Israel. Jesus had come to this earth for the very purpose of dying, but his time had not yet come. He had work to do. He had to be a perfectly obedient boy for all the times you are not or were not obedient to your parents. He had to be the perfectly respectful teen-ager for

all the time you disrespected your parents or teachers. He had to be the perfect carpenter in place of all the times you were less than perfectly faithful on the job. And the Father could not let his Son be slaughtered as a child because to fulfill God's promise and prophecy and pay the price for our sins, he needed to be killed on a cross as a 33 year-old man. So God intervened and directed Joseph to take Mary and her child and flee to Egypt. But in caring for the physical welfare of Jesus, God was also caring for you. He protected Jesus to keep him on the mission for which he came which was our salvation. He was thinking about all that Jesus needed to do yet in order to take care of your sins and make you his son or daughter. God would not let the malice, insecurity, and jealousy of Herod rob the world of the peace he intended to bring through his Son. In protecting Jesus from the darkness and wickedness of the world of his time, God was caring for you! Because Jesus lived perfectly and offered his perfect life on Calvary's cross as God had planned and prophesied, God now forgives your sins. You don't have to worry about facing death and hell for your sins because Jesus faced it for you. This is why we celebrated Jesus' birth with such joy and thanksgiving. He was going forward to win salvation for us. God cares for you.

I can't help but think about what Mary and Joseph must have been thinking as they went through all of this. Their world was about to be rocked again. After first going through the emotions of hearing the news that not only was Mary going to have a child before they were married, but he would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and be the long awaited Messiah God had promised; after Joseph going through the decision making process and finally deciding to quietly divorce Mary and then be told about the situation by the Holy Spirit to take her as his wife; after making the trip to Bethlehem with a very pregnant wife and finding no place to stay except for a barn where Mary delivered her baby; after the visits of the shepherds and wise men, they must have had enough excitement. Surely they would have been ready to rest and be done with all the excitement. But that was not to be. When Joseph laid his head down to rest that evening he had no clue what was about to come: *"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."* He didn't have time to prepare and get ready for the trip. They had to leave and they had to leave right then and there. They had no idea what lay ahead for them. They knew only that the King was trying to kill their son and they had to leave Bethlehem and go to the foreign land of Egypt as quickly as possible. Yet, once again, Joseph did not challenge God or question him, he simply followed God's lead. And God cared for them. Egypt was a place many Jews had gone for refuge. There was a Jewish community there so Mary and Joseph could feel quite at home and secure there. They probably used the costly gifts from the Magi to finance their journey and stay in Egypt. It was also probably only a few months they had to live there before Herod died and God directed them back to their homeland. When they tried to go back to Bethlehem, they found Herod's son on the throne who was even worse than his father. So in fulfillment of his prophecy, God directed them to Nazareth where they could settle and where Jesus could grow.

Throughout all of this...we see God's care for his people. One of the attributes we celebrate about our God is that he never changes. As he cared for his people then, so he cares for his people today...and that includes you. With all the wickedness and darkness in our world, you may have found yourself at least at one point like Mary and Joseph where you sat down and said to God: "Ok, God. I've had enough! This is too much. I can't handle any more. I need a break." And God replied, "Oh, just wait...this is only the beginning. You haven't seen anything yet!" Yet through the darkness and evil and wickedness which you had to suffer, God was right there through it all. He kept his promise to be with you always...even in the valley of the shadow of death. He used his almighty power and divine wisdom to guide you, direct you and protect you. It just goes to reason: if God cared for you and thought about you all the way back when he sent Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, he cares about you now! We see how God can use even the wicked and evil actions of others to move his people where he wants them to be and to shape and strengthen them to be who he wants them to be. God not only cares for your spiritual needs which he demonstrated in not letting anything happen to Jesus, he cares also for your physical needs as well.

God cares for you! What a comforting thought as we look out over the new year before us. We're always excited for something new because new often brings hope. It brings the chance for something different. Yet, we've been in this world long enough to know that new doesn't always mean better. It can be scary to think about what the new year might hold. We wonder about what kind of dark times God may ask us to walk through. Who could have ever guessed a year ago that this last year would have turned out the way that it did! Yet, here we are. We made it through. God saw us through the challenges of this past year and brought us to this point here today! This lesson today reminds us that just because we celebrate Jesus as our Savior and have the peace of being reconciled with God doesn't mean we will face peace on this earth. We live in the same world Jesus lived in. That world comes with hurts, weeping, pain and grief. Violence and war still reign in our world. Injustice and crime and suffering still are very real. I can't tell you what the new year will hold for you. But I can tell you that God knows...and God cares. Many years ago Bette Midler sang about God watching us from a distance as if he were mildly interested in us and simply curious to see what would happen but carried no other concern for us. That can't be farther from the truth. Through the darkness of this world, the light of the Gospel shines brightly. Through it, we see the everlasting light of Jesus, who not only has heaven waiting but who cares for us. In fact, these challenges often give us the best chance to witness to the love of our Savior. They help us to witness to our faith in Jesus without even using words. They help people see the tangible benefits of faith—that despite the challenges and darkness, we can cling tightly to the love of Christ our Savior who continues to keep his promise to hold us tightly to him.

Slaughter of the Innocents may not seem like the warm, fuzzy way for us to continue our Christmas celebration. I'm sure it wasn't what you were expecting when you gathered in God's house today. Yet what an opportunity for us to be realistic about the world in which we live and see with all clarity the brightness of God's light and his love for us. I don't know what you will face in the year before us. Yet through the darkness, I know this: God knows and God cares for you! Hold tightly to this promise as you step boldly into the new year. Amen.