

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday After Epiphany, January 8, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 99, 131:1-2, 273, 294, 98:5.

Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-11, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:9, Matthew 1:18-25.

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:13-23.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last Sunday you heard about the Magi worshipping the baby Jesus and giving valuable gifts. Evil, wicked king Herod had directed the Magi to go to Bethlehem based on information from Jewish religious leaders.

That is one of only about a half-dozen events recorded in Scripture before Jesus was baptized and began his public ministry. Today, let's look at events in

THE EARLY LIFE OF JESUS

- 1. He and his parents fled to Egypt, promptly obeying God.**
- 2. Wicked king Herod slaughtered all the boys in Bethlehem.**
- 3. When the time was right, they came back and lived in Nazareth.**

The next thing after the history about the Magi which Scripture tells us about the infant Jesus is a quick trip – an escape – to Egypt. The very night the Magi left Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus, *“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.’”*

“Get up!” the angel said, showing the urgency of leaving Bethlehem immediately. The angel gave very specific instructions. Egypt was at least 150 miles from Bethlehem. Joseph was told to take Jesus and Mary and *“escape to Egypt”*. Flee. Run away. Don't hang around. This was not to be a leisurely trip, but an escape. Get away! Go quickly!

The angel tells him exactly why they must go and go quickly. *“Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”* Then this small family is to stay in Egypt until the angel appears to Joseph again.

Egypt would be their temporary home until God would permit them to return to their native land. We know that many Jews had settled in Egypt. This family would then be among fellow-countrymen and in a Roman province where the rage of Herod could not pursue them.

We go back a few verses to talk about evil, wicked Herod. But *“When King Herod heard [that the Magi were looking for the one who was born King of the Jews] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”* Matthew 2:3 (NIV) The idea of a new king having been born without his knowledge obviously enraged Herod. He was troubled, agitated Scripture says. And, we are told that *“all Jerusalem”* was troubled with him. He was an ambitious, evil, jealous, powerful man, as even secular historians tell us, and who knew what could happen when he got angry! Herod the Great was an Idumean, a descendent of Esau, not really an Israelite. He was the first of several Herods. He was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. Historians tell us that Herod did much for the people of Israel. But he was also cruel, merciless, and jealous. He had the brother of one of his wives, Aristobulus the high priest, drowned, then pretended to mourn at the magnificent funeral he provided. He had his own wife Miramne killed, as well as her mother and three of his own sons. Shortly before his death, he had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned and then gave orders that they should be executed at the moment of his own death. In that way he wanted to ensure that there would be mourning in the city at the time

of his death, for he knew that otherwise there might only be rejoicing among the citizens of Jerusalem. So it is easy to see why Herod was disturbed upon hearing the news of the birth of Jesus whom the Magi called the King of the Jews. Even though Herod was obviously near the end of his life, he felt threatened by the reports of a newborn King. Since all of Jerusalem knew how violent Herod could be, the people, too, were disturbed when he was upset.

Joseph lost no time in obeying God's command. The Lord told him to do something and he obeyed immediately.

How often don't we question, debate, and ponder something that God plainly tells us to do in his Word! Our sinful human nature wants to do things our way. Our minds tell us that there must be another way to sort of do what God tells us to do rather than following exactly what God says. We think we can find some other way, maybe fudging a little and not doing exactly what God tells us, or maybe just completely disobeying what God tells us. After all, our minds tell us, we should know well enough how to do something. We can find reason after reason why we think we might know better than God.

But Scripture abundantly and plainly tells us that God's wisdom is infinitely greater than any human wisdom. Isaiah tells us: "***As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***" Isaiah 55:9 (NIV) The Apostle Paul tells us: "***My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.***" 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 (NIV)

We only need to think of the foolishness of the cross when we try to second-guess God. How did God choose to save mankind from hell? He executed his only-begotten Son, so "***that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.***" John 3:16 (NIV) It is through faith, believing God, – not sinful unbelief – that is the way God's gifts of forgiveness of sins and eternal life become ours.

Matthew then immediately shows the hateful, evil rage of Herod. "***When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.***" Then we read of the fulfillment of a typical prophecy. Matthew tells us of the "***weeping and great mourning***" that occurred in the region of Bethlehem. He reminds us of an Old Testament prophecy. We read "***Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'***"

Jeremiah wrote these words before Israel was taken into captivity. Matthew applies this to the slaughter of the children in the region of Bethlehem. Rachel is represented as the mother of Bethlehem and its area, because it was here that she died, giving birth to her youngest child Benjamin. We can imagine the women of Bethlehem weeping and mourning the death of their sons at this terrible cruelty on the part of Herod. They had to witness the murder of their children before their very eyes and could only wring their hands in helpless sorrow and agony. Rachel weeping for her children represented all the Jewish mothers who wept over Israel's tragedy

How horrible we think! How many infants died because of the will of such a wicked man? We don't know how many baby boys were murdered.

We have no horrible details of exactly how the infants were killed. Were their heads crushed? Were they run through with knives or other sharp instruments? Were they dismembered, disemboweled, cut into pieces? Were their mothers holding their living bodies which were then ripped out of their arms while their fathers stood by? But does the way it was done really matter? They were killed – indirectly by Herod, but he was as guilty as if he personally squeezed the life out of them.

This is sometimes called "the slaughter of the innocents". Yes, these infants under the age of two had not committed some great crime in their young lives. But they are like all humans. They are surely not really "innocent". We and all mankind must admit with the psalmist: "***Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.***" Psalm 51:5 (NIV)

The death of any child is sad, especially so for the mother and father, or at least, we would think it should be sad. But what about our world today, especially our own nation since 1972?

Millions of people have, in selfishness and for countless reasons in outright defiance of God or in ignorance of God's will, murdered unborn children. Herod's despicable act is repeated frequently in our nation.

Although there is always an outcry over the murder of children in our nation, not many people are stirred up in the same way to cry out over the murder of unborn children through intentional abortions.

An estimated 60 million unborn babies have died since 1972 because of the will of humans – the will of men as well as pregnant women – who agree to kill their unborn babies. That is the equivalent of about 1/6 of the population of the United States today!

Joseph and his family stayed in Egypt *“until the death of Herod.”* Then the angel gave Joseph the command to return to the land of Israel. *“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.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But 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, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”*

Like his father, Archelaus was a cruel tyrant. One story from secular history tells us that at one of the Passovers, he caused three thousand people to be put to death in the Temple and city. No wonder Joseph was filled with apprehension. He would have thought about returning to Judea, where his ancestors had lived. But once more God himself, through the words of an angel, directed him to a place of security, Nazareth in Galilee. It was here that Jesus lived until he entered upon his ministry. As a resident of Nazareth, Jesus could be called a Nazarene.

So, Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to the land of Israel. But it is interesting to find even here a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy from Hosea: *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”* Hosea 11:1 (NIV) Originally these words pointed to the people of Israel being delivered from slavery in Egypt. The Holy Ghost here gives us another true explanation, relating the prophecy to the infant Jesus. He was sheltered safely in the country where his ancestors had been held in bondage.

An angel was again guiding Joseph and his family. Wouldn't it be nice if we could have the Lord speak to us directly, or in dreams through an angel? Of course, many of our dreams are really foolish and insignificant compared to Joseph's dreams. Instead, we have the Scriptures. (Pick up the Bible) and we can read them any time instead of trying to figure out if God might be talking to us in a dream.

We have opportunity to search the Scriptures, using our personal knowledge of the Bible and what is in it. But we have even better tools. If we can think of a word in a passage we have heard – or maybe even memorized – we can use a concordance to search and find all the places that word is found. We can use printed concordances to find out where a specific word is found. Many Bibles even have a small concordance in the back of the book. Even easier, and with great accuracy, we have electronic tools like smart phones, computers and electronic tablets to use in searching the Scriptures. With such electronic tools, you can open up a Bible translation and search for any word or phrase and scroll through, look through all the uses of that word in the Bible.

So in these events, we see the early life of Jesus. After returning from Egypt, he and his family went to Galilee to live. But did they “live happily ever after”? Well, you know the answer to that. You know how the life of Jesus ends. He was crucified and as a result we live! And that message is the glorious gospel of our salvation.

In these history lessons we find Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. And it is all done for you, so that you might live eternally through faith in Jesus Christ! Amen.