

Protecting the Innocents

Holy Innocents / Martyrs – 12/28/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 2:13-23 Pastor Keith Besel

Introduction

✘ This date: December 28th, on the Church calendar, is set aside as one of the numerous “Feast” Days or days that we commemorate specific people or events in the history of God and His Church. Today is the Feast of the “Holy Innocents.” In Germany, they call it “The Day of the Innocent Children.”

➔ The story in our Gospel Reading contains, without a doubt, one of the most tragic and horrifying of all Biblical accounts. Some background may be a bit helpful.

✘ The Magi or wise men from the east had followed Jesus’ star to Judea, and eventually to Bethlehem, in order to see and worship Jesus. However, they first went to Jerusalem; to King Herod’s palace, thinking that’s where a newborn king would be found. That’s how Herod heard of their search and of the Old Testament prophecy in Micah 5:2, “O Bethlehem Ephrathah...from you shall come forth for Me one who is to be ruler in Israel...”.

➔ Well, Herod – a paranoid King by nature, saw that as a threat to His throne. You see, he had already murdered members of his own family to protect his reign. He betrayed his own people to gain Rome’s support and was known for his violence against anyone that questioned his rule. Taking lives to stay in power was nothing new for this guy. So, when his counselors confirmed that the Magi were looking for a baby who fulfilled the prophecy of a new king, nothing was off the table to do away with the threat.

✘ First he tried to get the Magi to be his informants; to report back about where they found Jesus. But God “wised them up”, and they never did. So Herod’s plan “B” was a simple one: just murder the little usurper to the throne. Take Jesus out now, before He grow up and came for Herod’s throne. The fact that both he and his counselors hadn’t the slightest clue what Jesus’ kingdom really was; that it was to be a spiritual kingdom and not an earthly kingdom, was impossible for Herod to grasp, because he had no faith.

➔ But that’s nothing new. We still see that today. Many leaders and people still expect the reign of Christ to end all evil and evildoers in the world; to follow their agenda instead of His. They even question Jesus’ validity when they see all of the evil around us, asking, “How could a so-called loving God ever allow such terrible things to exist and take place?” But you see, things in this world are exactly what Jesus said they would be like: evil continues all around us, not because that’s what God wants, but because that’s what comes as a result of our sin. Still, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus reigns in the hearts and lives of His believers now and forever. That’s His truth then and still today.

✘ Herod though, was practically the embodiment of evil. When you consider the lengths he was willing to go to prevent Jesus from redeeming the world, it’s actually hard to distinguish him from the devil himself. When he could not find the baby Jesus – what did this embodiment of evil do? He revealed his deplorable nature and sent soldiers to take the lives of every boy under the age of two in the whole area around Bethlehem.

➔ Now it may not have been as many children as people often think, since Bethlehem was so small – perhaps a few dozen boys. But that doesn’t lessen the terrible suffering that surely filled Bethlehem on that day; all in an attempt to stop Jesus; to prevent our redemption. Yes, those children died because of Jesus. So, by tradition, they became the first martyrs for the faith that you and I hold onto and confess today.

✘ So, from the very first days, the Christian faith, has been and continues to be a costly thing. And that cost comes to life in our Gospel Reading this morning as we now see Joseph and Mary – with Jesus – fleeing in fear of their very lives; over and again; sometimes barely escaping the horror intended for them.

➔ It seems on the surface that their protection is as slim as it possibly could be – one man – Joseph. He's the main contact for the angels in his dreams. Time and again he packs up Jesus and his mother and moves to the next "safe place". How can this one unknown man be a suitable protector against King Herod? But he is. And since he's protecting our Savior, you could say that he became, at that time at least, our protector against the devil.

➔ We don't want to push that too far, of course, but let's consider this morning: How it is that Joseph protects Jesus and Mary? How does he survive the repeated attempts to harm our Savior? First, he entrusts himself to God's protection. Second, he acknowledges danger and flees from it. And third, he makes the necessary sacrifices.

I. Joseph entrusts himself to God's protection.

✘ So, first and maybe most important: Joseph shows his unwavering faith in God and he entrusts his entire family into God's protection.

➔ Verses 13-15, "Now when [the Magi] 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.' 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 had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son'."

➔ We can't just take this for granted, because we have other examples in the Bible where people do the exact opposite of trusting in God; of hearing God's plans to win a battle with just a few men, yet they want to head in with many. Not Joseph, he follows God's instructions without hesitation from the angel. Each of the three times in our text he does exactly what God directs him to do.

✘ We really don't know a lot about Joseph; how capable of a protector against danger he might have been. But we see that he doesn't take up arms or devise a special ops plan to protect Mary and Jesus. No, he simply receives the warning with instructions, and he follows it without question.

➔ There's no reason to think that Joseph was a well-traveled man either. But still he picks up and heads to Egypt, then back to Israel, and finally up into Galilee, each time with no other plan but that this was God's intent through the word of an angel in a dream.

✘ And it is that word from God that keeps him safe. He is entirely at the mercy of God's will and his trust is rewarded with God's protection. It's the exact opposite of what our world says a person should do at times like this. Joseph does not take things into his own hands; he doesn't run away from difficulty as so many men have done with a boy who is not his and a woman whom he is not obligated to take. No, he embraces the job he's been given; to protect the most precious package in the history of the world. And he does it with such profound humility that you hardly see him at work. And why? because when you compare what he does to what is accomplished, it is obvious that this is God who is at work!

II. Joseph acknowledges danger & flees from it.

✘ So Joseph, in his faithful trust of God becomes a great model for all of us. And what makes him a very *realistic, human* model for us is the strength of his faith in the midst of true fear. Verses 19-21: "When Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

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.' And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel." Whew! The trouble is over, right? But wait - verse 22: "But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there."

➔ You see, Joseph has not just checked his God-given thinking ability at the door. No, he recognizes his responsibility to care for Jesus and Mary and he knows he must be vigilant; to watch and acknowledge the presence of danger. That's the second way that Joseph protects Jesus and Mary – acknowledging danger and fleeing from it.

- ✘ It seems to me, at least, that Joseph knows he's a father and a carpenter, not a soldier. He knows that he lives in a world filled with danger and evil intent. Does Joseph know that his stepson is the target of that evil intent? I don't know. Do you know that this same Son of God is still the primary target of evil in our world today?

➔ Herod is gone; he's long gone by now. But that hasn't stopped the great, inexplicable tragedies, has it? We could speak of innocent children whose lives are still taken practically before they begin. We could speak of relentless criticism aimed at labeling the followers of Christ as coldhearted, fanatical bigots; of being haters and so much more. The examples of attacks on churches, shootings, bombings and open persecution on a person-for-person basis that are occurring around the world to this day are gruesome and unimaginable for us, in this country to fathom. And closer to home a whole collection of forces are weaving themselves together to lead our friends, family, and children out of the church. In the last 20 years church attendance has dropped 15% to only 30% of the U.S. population. Herod is gone, but evil is still afoot.

- ✘ And friends, it is clear that your skills and capabilities – as well as mine, are nothing in a match against evil; against the devil himself. But rest assured, your work in faith, performed with God's blessing, is a constant and significant affront and attack against the devil and the evil that he promotes?

➔ The point is this: Though the angels warn Joseph, in this story, going to battle is not the mission God has given them. Why? because God's soldier is already there. His champion is there. It's not the angels. It's not Joseph. It's Jesus! The baby! It ends up that Joseph is neither protector nor bodyguard. He simply follows God's direction in a support-role within the mission.

- ✘ So Joseph isn't over-the-top brave. When he sees a danger to himself and his family, he flees. He doesn't expect the world to treat him differently because he has Jesus. There's no special treatment. And that's the truth that all of us husbands and wives, fathers and mothers still need to face.

➔ God has provided us and all people His normal means for protection. Doctors and nurses, police officers and judges, door locks and airbags. And you need to rely on these people and things, just like unbelievers do.

➔ But here's what we do have that is different – God's special means for our spiritual welfare – Baptism and the Word; preaching; Jesus' body and blood at that altar; pastoral care and absolution; and prayer. It is not wise or safe to suppose that you can get by without these gifts from God for a long time; that your faith is somehow special or different. Not even Joseph was given special means while protecting Jesus. To pretend that you are somehow different is to hand a victory over to the devil.

➔ Herod would have liked nothing more than to send his soldiers into a house guarded only by Joseph with a dull carpenter's tool. Joseph would have been an unfaithful fool to do such a thing. Instead, when there's danger, he flees – the very means of escape that God offers him.

III. Joseph makes the necessary sacrifices.

✘ The third thing we see in Joseph serves as an important warning for us all today. Joseph is just a carpenter, engaged to a woman who appears to have an illegitimate son. Still he embraced her even though it meant he would be thrust out of his home, his work, and all that he knew as “comfortable” in life. At least for now, his life became nothing but necessary sacrifices.

➔ Stories and carols – they lead us to imagine a silent, serene manger scene. But remember, Bethlehem was not Mary or Joseph’s home! That’s why Jesus was born in a livestock stall and then into a multi-country trip with no plane, bus or SUV. Their mode of travel was by foot - carrying a baby. No Airbnbs, but sleeping on the ground, under the stars, keeping watch for fear of Herod’s soldiers out on their search. No family greeting at their destination – only the unknown.

✘ And I know – your life is neither calm nor easy. But you, my friends, are not tasked with protecting the Lord Jesus. Joseph served Jesus in that role for a time, but now Jesus needs no protection. Still you do face danger because you are close to Him. Evil does and it always will pursue the children of God. So yes, there is reason for a healthy amount of fear. Jesus did say, “In the world you will have tribulation.” But then He addresses that fear with this assurance, “Take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

➔ Yes, like Herod, the devil still wants to take out Jesus. And we see his ill-fated attempts all over the world: the deaths of millions of innocent – even unborn children, seemingly unending war; national division; international pandemics. And of course you all have losses and troubles that come for you now today, closer at home.

✘ But, do not imagine all of this to indicate an absence of God or that He does not love or care for You. He still has your safety first in mind – not in miraculous acts, but in His “normal” instruments; people who protect and heal you from sickness, both of your body and of your soul.

➔ But what is most important to see is how God dealt with the evil trying to devour His very own Son, Jesus. The Father did not spare His own Son in order to sacrifice you. No, it’s the other way around: He sacrificed His own Son in order to save and to spare you! That, dear Christians, is the means by which God finally protects you from all of the devil’s attacks; the sacrifice by which He declares you holy and innocent.

✘ Yes, that was God’s plan for Joseph – to keep Jesus safe so that He could make the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross – for Joseph; for Mary; for all people before them, as well as you and me, and even those believers yet to come. From beginning to end, rest assured: Jesus is our protector. To Him be all the glory. Amen.