

Theme: Saved by a Substitute

Text: Matthew 2:13-18

¹³When 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.”

¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

**¹⁸“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.”**

The Word of God we'll consider today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 2. Let's begin with prayer:

May we ponder again what glory then, O Lord, you'll give us for our earthy sadness. The angel host can never boast of greater glory, greater bliss or gladness. Amen.

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.

Aren't you glad you came to church on this Sunday after Christmas? Could there be anything more horrible... anyone more monstrous than King Herod bringing death and disaster as the follow up to Christmas? Herod is known in history for putting his own family members to death when he thought they were a threat to his power. But this seems to be a new low, even for him. Is there a special place in hell for him and people like him – people totally devoid of compassion and devoted to evil... people who prey on the weak and the helpless... even on little children?

And yet, I would imagine there is another thought that gnaws at us when we consider this tragedy of the innocent boys of Bethlehem, slaughtered by Herod's soldiers... couldn't God have done something to prevent it? Yes, I know Matthew tells us that this terrible event was foretold in ancient prophecy through Jeremiah... but why did God give such a prophecy that spoke of these poor women weeping for their children? It moves us to tears to think about what they went through. Not only did they lose their baby boys, but to lose them in such a gruesome manner makes things that much worse.

And trying to rationalize it doesn't help, does it? Our mind might wonder... “Did such suffering come to Bethlehem because they had no room for the Savior and his family when he was born? Did they ignore the message of the shepherds who spread the word concerning this child? Were they being punished for not following the example of the Gentile Magi who bowed low and offered gifts to the King of kings?”

But none of this tracks... even if the people of Bethlehem were guilty of all these things, why kill their infant sons?

For about 1,600 years the Christian church on earth has commemorated December 28th as the minor festival of The Holy Innocents – Martyrs. In the days of Martin Luther – 500 years ago – Dr. Luther stated that this Scripture reading should not be permitted to drop out of the public readings of worship in the Christian church for any reason. And the question we all ponder as we consider this sad story today is why? Why did this have to happen? And even if it did have to happen, why do we have to read about it? And especially as we are still basking in the glow of Christmas!?

Well, a good thing to do whenever we are struggling with God's will or what he reveals in his Word is to take a breath, and take a look again at God's plan of salvation revealed in Scripture. When we zoom in on the trees we lose sight of the forest. So, step back and look again at the long view of God's plans and consider how this tragedy would be turned to triumph...

Let's start by first considering the saving work that was accomplished in this whole series of events. Mary and Joseph were still in Bethlehem with Jesus though at least a couple months, perhaps as many as two years even, had passed since his birth. And now Magi, wise men from the east, had come to see Christ. Next week we'll hear this account in full, but remember Herod had told the Magi to report to him the location of Jesus, pretending he was going to go worship too... of course we know what his real plans were. And so did God... who warned the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod... so after they gave their gifts and offered their worship to Jesus, they returned home without telling Herod where Jesus was...

And after warning the Magi, God also warned Jesus' family. Matthew picks up the account in our sermon text telling us: **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." So, he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where 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."**

So again... zooming out to see the big picture here we see God at work to save. Of course, usually when we're talking about saving, we're talking about Jesus doing the saving... but here Jesus is the one being saved! His stepfather, Joseph provided prompt obedience as always to God's instructions and fled to Egypt where Herod would not be able to find them. This would also fulfill, as we heard, a biblical prophecy which spoke of God calling his son out of Egypt. Something God did when he called his "son" Israel out of Egypt many centuries prior during the exodus from slavery. But now God applied this to his true Son, Israel reduced to One you might say, as Jesus would follow the same path out of Egypt back to the promised land to bring blessings not just to Israel but to all the world.

But here we notice it was not just this biblical prophecy that was fulfilled in these events, but another that Jeremiah spoke of long ago. And this one too would tie into the work God did in saving his Son Jesus from an early death at the hands of Herod. Matthew continues: **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 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."**

Now let's be clear... the infant boys of Bethlehem died for the same reason every person dies. The Bible says **The wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23a** Though these children were certainly innocent in one sense... they had done nothing to deserve being killed by Herod's soldiers... they were like all of us before God – sinful and subject to earthly death. But notice how God does not allow their death to be pointless or for it to be the final word in this story. They were killed for the sake of Christ and so a

Christmas catastrophe was averted as the infant Jesus was saved by a substitute in those infant martyrs of Bethlehem. Their deaths gave cover to the Savior as he fled and left Herod feeling secure that the job was done and no further inquiries or pursuit of the Christ-child were needed.

But still, isn't this a tragedy? From our perspective I suppose. But God's perspective matters most. Consider his words to his people in Isaiah 57 where he explains why he at times allows his believing people to be called out of this life earlier than we would like: **The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death. Isaiah 57:1-2**

When we are troubled by such things in the pages of Scripture or in the pages of our world's news... or in the story of our own lives... such truths help to redirect our eyes of faith to God's big picture. He will always do what is needed to keep his people safe for all eternity. He will even turn evil deeds and murderous acts into blessings as he gathers his children safely home and turns the wickedness of men to his own purposes that serve the good of all his people. Remember his promise through St. Paul in Romans chapter 8? **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28**

When God's baptized and believing little ones are called out of this life to heaven's joy, we can find peace in that big picture even when our weakness causes us pain and grief mourning for our earthly loss. And when this process is slow and painful we can fly to the arms of our dear Savior who welcomes us just as he welcomes our loved ones who die in him... arms open and ready to bless us and sustain us with Word and sacraments until we are called to join them in heaven. And we can be certain that this heaven awaits both them and us because God's plan for Jesus did not fail.

Again... remember to look at the forest not just the trees here in our text... We step back all the way and we see God bring his perfect plan of salvation to fruition as those Holy Innocents of Bethlehem would be saved by their Substitute... and given the right by him to wear the name "holy" and "innocent" – just as we are given that same right by our Substitute – our Savior Jesus.

After all, it is not their substitutionary work that matters most this day as we consider their short lives... it is the substitutionary work of the child who came to grow up in their place and live a truly holy and innocent life before the Father in the stead of each and every one of us. And through the substitutionary life of Christ, we find that our own record is changed from "guilty" "to not guilty" in God's court of law. Our Substitute Jesus earned that with his holy life and paid for our guilt by being our stand-in again under God's wrath on the cross.

This is the big picture of Christmas and the big picture that keeps in perspective the tragic things that befall us in a fallen world.

But there is one more part to this big picture we should see as we close our consideration of this text. The death of the substitute in this text is not the end of the story. The baby boys of Bethlehem died in place of Christ. But they will see life again. And that's because our Substitute Jesus did not stay dead after dying in our place. His resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of all dead... and the resurrection to life eternal for all who believe in him. God assures us of this truth in 1 Corinthians 15 where we're told: **Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 1 Corinthians 15:20**

This eternal hope was what those baby boys had through faith in the promised Savior. And it is our eternal hope too, found in the newborn King Jesus, the refugee in Egypt, the crucified on the cross, the risen and ascended Lord who understands our confusion and brings our sorrows to a blessed end. That's what he has promised, and through life's joys and sorrows and even tragedies he will always be at work to keep those promises and assure us we are safe – saved by our Substitute. Amen.