

There are people who say the Slaughter of the Innocents never happened, that the killing of the children in Bethlehem by King Herod was only a story made up by the Gospel writer to add to the mythology of the birth of Jesus. They point out that no one else wrote about it including the other Gospel writers, and that there was no record of it by the King's historian. Well, duh! Why would someone think a despot king would permit his historian to record his killing of innocent children? Dumb. But the more important point might be that Bethlehem and vicinity was a very thinly populated area, and that when the Roman soldiers descended on it, they killed no more than 20 children. The loss of one life is, of course, tragic, but the death of 20 kids would hardly register a note on a scale of importance in a society which publicly crucified, dismembered, disemboweled, and burned alive its criminals dozens at a time.

This morning we're going to talk about the Slaughter of the Innocents as St. Matthew recorded it, and about what it might mean for our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 2:13-23

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."¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Then 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."¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt²⁰ and 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.”²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.²² 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,²³ and 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.

On Christmas Eve I quoted Luther, who said that angels “by their many services of friendship greatly excel our visible friends.” If it hadn't been for an angel sent by God, who knows what Mary would've done when she discovered she was pregnant? If it weren't for an angel, we do know what Joseph would've done with Mary when he found out she was pregnant! If it hadn't been for an angel, the shepherds never would've witnessed the baby Jesus in a stable and given testimony to the birth of the Savior.

The Gospel this morning reads, **“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.’¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod” (vv.13-15a).**

If it weren't for an angel, despite everything that had already happened, Joseph wouldn't have escaped Herod's killing machine with Mary and the baby Jesus.

Herod was one of the greatest kings ever to rule Judea. He was responsible for creating a powerhouse government and an army and for completing many monumental building projects. But the ability to build palaces, coliseums, and armies doesn't hold a candle to the awesomeness of Almighty God who may insert his hand wherever he likes, whenever he likes.

Let's think about the contrast for a moment: King Herod, appointed by the Roman emperor, reigned from his palace, resplendent in luxury and symbols of power. While Jesus, hailed “king of the Jews” by the Magi from Persia, was wrapped in rags and laid in a manger. The one held worldly power—soldiers, swords, and chariots—but the other one held cosmic power—angels and the Word of God. Herod was a warrior with battle scars, and he was a genius in government administration. But Jesus was only a baby, innocent and vulnerable.

Nonetheless, it was baby Jesus who held genuine power. King Herod's power was temporal and earthly; he was to Jesus what the moon is to the sun.

If we were only 30 or 40 people here in East Whittier, what kind of difference could we ever hope to make? That's how one thinks when he considers only his struggle against the powers of the world. But our power is greater than that of the world, for it's rooted in that of our Lord Jesus.

We read **“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. 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” (vv.16-18).**

There have been people who have asked about this prophesy by Jeremiah: Was it God's will that Herod killed the children? To answer this question, we look at the text itself. It does not read that this thing happened “in order to fulfill what was said.” Rather, it says, **“what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled.”** In other words, the Lord did not will for this evil, but he allowed it to happen; the prophet foresaw it and reported it. Indeed, the Lord allows people to resist his Spirit and to do unimaginable things to one another every day of every year since the beginning of time. God refuses to control man's behavior. However, he gave us Jesus, our Savior from the mayhem and insanity which would crush us otherwise.

We read that **“After 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” (vv.19-23).**

Again, the angels were hard at work! Joseph had so many encounters with them, he probably began to think, “This was fun the first time, but you’re getting on my nerves. Take a number and get in line.” But there is a word of comfort here: When we stand in God’s will, he provides everything we need, even angelic assistance.

What did Matthew mean when he wrote that when the Holy Family went to Nazareth **“So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene”**? For there is no such prediction in the prophetic books.

The best explanation is that the way Matthew wrote about this prophesy is different from the way he quoted other prophets, whom he named. Here we don’t read about a single prophet with a name but about **“the prophets”** who said **“he would be called a Nazarene.”**

Matthew may’ve have been alluding to how anyone from Nazareth was despised by others; they were like country bumpkins, rednecks. Indeed, the prophets, such as Isaiah, said that the Christ would be despised (Isaiah 49:7). As we read later in the Passion, Peter was recognized as being from the region including Nazareth because of his accent—just like we’d identify someone from the Deep South because of their accent—and Jesus was mocked for being **“the Galilean” “of Nazareth.”** (Matthew 26:69,71,73). Which means, the expression, **“he would be called a Nazarene,”** was not a term of endearment!

We ourselves know the Lord does not look at our outward appearances. But he considers the heart.

But the most important thing we can learn in this passage are the words which follow the account of the Holy Family’s escape to Egypt. We read that they stayed there until Herod died, **“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (v.15b).**

You’ll remember that the Lord freed Israel from slavery under Pharaoh about 1,500 years before Jesus came onto the scene. In the Book of Exodus we read, **“The LORD said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power;you shall say**

to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Israel is my son, my firstborn’” (Exodus 4:22-23).

“Israel is my son, my firstborn”: God talked about the whole nation of Israel—some two million people—as though it was a single individual, his **“son,”** his **“firstborn.”** He thought of the nation as a single entity which was the co-heir of his throne, a people who would together walk with him in his light forever.

The Lord fulfilled his mandate and called the nation up out of bondage, and he brought it into a land filled with milk and honey. But, alas, the people were not thankful, and they chose other gods.

But as we read in the Gospel, Jesus was begotten by God as the “son of David” (Matthew 1:1), and he grew in stature until he was greater than Jonah and Solomon (Matthew 12:41-42), greater than the Temple itself (Matthew 12:6), and that he was Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8), that he was, indeed, God’s true Son (Matthew 1:18-25).

Israel had been reduced to a single man, Jesus. He and only he had the power to fulfill God’s will for the nation. Israel was no longer God’s **“son,”** his **“firstborn.”** But through his Cross and his Resurrection Jesus made us all children of God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is in control. He built an embassy of his love and salvation right here on the corner of Mills and Mulberry. And he protects us with his angels and his Word just as he protected Joseph and Mary.

The enemy prowls around in every part of our community. And it is powerful. But the Lord’s power, the same power that fuels our prayers, is a power so much greater than anything the enemy can ever imagine; it’s a power that can move mountains; it is the same awesome power which was in the baby Jesus who thwarted King Herod.

Everything that has been written points to Christ, the Son of God, the Firstborn of God, the Alpha and the Omega. God fulfilled all his promises to Abraham through him, who has enveloped us in the love of God as heirs of his Kingdom. He is **“the way, the truth, and the life”** (John 14:6); he is the **“light of the world”** (John 8:12); he is **“love”** (1st John 4:16).

This week, my friends, let us give thanks for our God's lordship in our homes, in our church, and wherever we go. Let us give thanks for his angels who protect us.

This week let us walk with the Lord in our worship, prayers, and acts of service, knowing that he leads us in his power, a power greater than anything the world may throw at us.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.