

This week we were all horrified by the mass shootings in Las Vegas. We pray for those who are still fighting for their lives, the families of all the victims, the city of Las Vegas, and all those who are working and serving in the aftermath. The whole thing is hard for us to fathom. And this coming right on the heels of catastrophic storms in Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico makes it even more difficult and perplexing.

These things raise all kinds of questions for us: Does God protect us? Is God really in control? Does God have a purpose? How do we live in a world where such random violence and sudden destruction can happen? Maybe you're asking those questions this morning. Or maybe you're just angry. Maybe like the psalmist you're just crying out, "*How long, O Lord?*" (Psalm 13:1). When our doubt, fear, pain and anger are visceral, we need to turn to a power, to a person, a wisdom, greater than ourselves—to King Jesus.

Today, we're going to look at a story that shows us a powerful principle of God's sovereign care and protection for his children, even in the midst of great tragedy and great evil. It's a story where we'll see how in the midst of chaos and evil, there's a God who's always working behind the scenes of our lives, and nothing can thwart his good purpose. To be sure, often times we can't see what he's doing and why. But this story shows us that when things look hopeless, God has a plan and a purpose.

Last week we were introduced to two kings: King Herod and King Jesus. They were two very different kings. One was appointed by Rome to be the king of Israel. The other was appointed by God to be the King of kings and Lord of lords. One was a ruthless and insecure tyrant. The other a Shepherd who rules with care and compassion.

We saw how some pagan astrologers, the Magi, showed up in Jerusalem, looking for the newborn King. They were told by the scribes the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. When the Magi found him they worshipped him. Meanwhile King Herod was threatened by this newborn King and plotted to destroy him. But the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they returned home to their country by another route.

## **Joseph and His Family Flee to Egypt**

And that's where our story picks up, right after the Magi headed home. Look at verses 13-15.

**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."**

I've had lots of crazy and scary dreams, but as far as I know I've never had an angel speak to me in a dream. But, can you imagine what it would feel like to have a very bad dream about a powerful leader who wants to kill your adopted son?

Notice how Matthew speaks of "the child and his mother." Two things strike me about that. First, that's the threat to mighty king Herod—a child and his mother. It's satire; a mother and child threaten Herod the Great! Second, the child isn't described as Joseph's son. Mary is "his mother," but where does Joseph fit in? One thing for sure: Joseph is still responsible for their well-being. The weight of that, the fear and confusion Joseph felt, must have been overwhelming.

The trip alone would have been difficult. To get to Egypt from Bethlehem was a journey of 75 miles. It was dangerous, especially with a small child slowing them down. It's quite interesting to think that Jesus and his family were refugees. Whatever your politics might be, God cares about refugees. We see that throughout scripture (Lev. 19:33-34). Here, God provides for them and protects them.

What I love about Joseph, and what we see all throughout these pages, is his immediate obedience. Joseph never says a word in the Bible, but he always does what God tells him to do. There's no hint of him questioning the angel; no hesitation. He leaves in the middle of the night. He shows us we don't have to understand completely to obey immediately. We don't have to have all the facts to obey God. It had to be a struggle for Joseph and

Mary. I'll bet Joseph was struggling to understand what was going on; why God was allowing this to happen. I'll bet Mary was like, "Wait, where are we going? Now? I'm trying to raise a toddler here!"

As followers of Jesus, when we read his Word and hear his voice, we need to learn how to obey him even in the face of fear. Even when there are consequences. Even when we don't understand. You don't have to understand completely to obey immediately. Joseph was a righteous man who trusted God, and without hesitation, obeys the angel's words.

You might wonder, why were they sent to Egypt of all places? For centuries, Egypt was a place of refuge for the people of God. At the time, Egypt had a large Jewish population; some estimate as many as 1 million Jews were living in Egypt. It was also outside of Herod's reach. So it makes sense they'd flee to Egypt.

But, there's more going on. They're going to Egypt would fulfill prophecy and tell us something about this child. First, this fulfills the prophecy of Hosea 11:1, "*Out of Egypt I will call my son.*" In the context of Hosea, it's clear Israel is God's son who is called out of and redeemed from Egypt in what we call the exodus. Jesus fulfills yet another prophecy: Matthew is saying that Jesus is the new Israel, God's Son called out of Egypt.

Matthew also wants us to see the connection between Moses and Jesus: Like Moses, Jesus will go to Egypt and return to the land of Israel. Like Moses, Jesus will set people free, not from the bondage of physical slavery, but from the bondage of spiritual slavery to sin. Jesus is the new Moses; the new deliverer of God's people. When things look hopeless, as they did for the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt for 400 years, God has a plan and a purpose. He had a plan for Israel in Egypt and he still has a plan for his people.

## **Herod Kills the Children of Bethlehem**

Let's continue the story in verses 16-18.

**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."**

Herod sees he's been outwitted. In his fury he gives orders to kill all the children under 2 in Bethlehem. When it says, "he was furious," literally "he was very much exceedingly angry." Remember, Herod was a lunatic! He'd murdered his first wife; he had three of his sons put to death; he was filled with paranoia over someone usurping his throne.

So he orders all the boys two years and under to be killed. Bethlehem was a small town, so scholars believe there were only 15-20 boys this age. I'm not minimizing what Herod did; it was tragic and horrific and evil, but when compared with all the other awful things Herod had done, this didn't even make his top ten.

Imagine what it was like living in Bethlehem, having soldiers invade your home, looking for and then killing your two-year-old child. Some of you have lost a child and you know the pain and anguish that some of these families felt. Looking at the photos of those killed in Las Vegas it struck me how many young people there whose lives were cut short. I have no doubt God himself grieves over the injustice and suffering. We live in a fallen and broken world where terrible things happen to people who are beloved of God all the time.

But, even in the midst of the unthinkable, God has a plan; a purpose. That's not to say God did this. God has no part in evil. But God can and does use evil for his good purposes. The apostle Paul, who'd one day be executed for his own faith in Jesus, could say, "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Rom. 8:28 NASB). He doesn't say, "God causes all things." He says, "God causes all things to work together for good" to accomplish his ultimate purpose. "All things" means all things!

Matthew again turns to the OT to remind us of God's purpose, saying even this horrific event was foreshadowed there. In Jeremiah 31:15, Rachel was associated in the OT with the area of Bethlehem and with the town of Ramah. Ramah was only five miles north of Bethlehem and was a transport center 600 years earlier when Jews were conquered and deported to Babylon, a time of despair and weeping for God's people. During that time, the cries of the mothers of Bethlehem, as their sons were led into exile, could be heard five miles away in Ramah. Matthew applies that time to these mothers who are now crying for their sons who died at the hands of King Herod.

But there's a strong note of hope, even in time of great grief. Immediately after Jeremiah 31:15 the Lord says, "*Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work will be rewarded... And they will return from the land of the*

*enemy. There is hope for your future... And your children will return to their own territory”* (verses 16-17).

What’s all this mean? Just like in the exile, God is at work and there’s hope even in the midst this evil act and the tragedy of Herod’s massacre. Evil won’t have the last word. God hasn’t forgotten them. Yes, the pain is real but there’s hope in the One we’ve been waiting for. For us, there’s hope in Jesus because Jesus is the One who will end the mournful exile. Even in the pain, the hurt, and the death, there’s hope. A new King is born, a King who’ll conquer death, a King who’ll heal our hurts, a new King who’ll bring us back from exile to God. When things look hopeless, God has a plan and a purpose; the exile will soon be over.

## **The Family Returns from Egypt**

Let’s finish the story.

**After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 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.”**

**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, that he would be called a Nazarene. (verses 19-23)**

We don’t really know how long they lived in Egypt; we can only guess. But it wasn’t long. In another dream, an angel tells Joseph to return to Israel. This is the third time Joseph has been told in a dream to do something that may not have been easy at the time. Once again Joseph immediately quietly obeys and they return to Israel. But while Herod is dead, his son Archelaus is not. Joseph was afraid. He had every reason to be afraid because Archelaus, who was a tyrant like his father, was now ruling in Judea. So, God again is looking out for this vulnerable family, steering them back to Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph had once lived. Again, when things look hopeless, God has a purpose and a plan. And the plan was for Joseph to raise Jesus in Nazareth.

But why Nazareth? People of Jesus’ day wondered about this. How could Jesus be the Messiah when he was supposed to come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth? Again, Matthew says this is in fulfillment of prophecy. In all these prophecies Matthew is giving us the credentials of the Messiah. He’s reaffirming all the reasons we should believe and follow the new king. But this particular prophecy is unique: Matthew doesn’t give us a direct OT quote. Notice how he says, it was “said through the prophets” that he’d

be called a Nazarene. But nowhere is Nazareth found in the OT. So what does he mean? He means somehow this was a summary of prophetic expectation; that’s why he uses the plural “the prophets.” You see, Nazareth wasn’t a well-thought-of-place. Remember what Nathaniel said when he heard Jesus was from Nazareth? *“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”* (John 1:26). That the Messiah would be from such an obscure and insignificant town, is consistent with what the prophets said about him. For example, Isaiah said of the Messiah, *“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face. He was despised, and we did not esteem Him”* (Isa. 53:3). Immanuel, God with us, comes from a place of insignificance.

So, Matthew starts his gospel by emphasizing Jesus as Messiah, the Son of David and the hope of Israel’s restoration, and now he ends the birth narratives with a bookend, saying the same thing again. Next week, Matthew will fast forward almost three decades to the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism which will mark the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

Let me summarize the story:

- Herod tries to kill Jesus.
- God protects him by sending him to Egypt.
- Joseph, Mary and Jesus live as refugees in Egypt.
- They return to Israel but they don’t go back to Bethlehem. God directs them to Nazareth, protecting them again.
- In all of this God is fulfilling his plan and purpose as seen by the fulfillment of OT prophecy. It’s like the entire story of God’s people in the OT is being relived in the events of Jesus’ life.

It reminds me of Psalm 2: *“Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.’ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain’”* (verses 1-6).

That’s the only time in the entire Bible God is described as laughing. What makes God laugh? God laughs at the folly of those who conspire against the Lord and his Anointed One.

But this is not just a story about something that happened 2000 years ago. This is a story about you and me. We can expect there to be great opposition to Christ and his followers from the rulers of this world. And this will impact us and our families, but we can be assured that even our personal story, so littered with

betrayals, failures and losses, can't defeat the hope of God's story—his purpose. God laughs at the folly of men and women in high places who oppose him, he protects his people, and fulfills his plan. When things look hopeless, when the darkness is deepest, God is working out his good plan and purpose. He's able to replace our weeping with joy. When things look hopeless, God has a plan and a purpose for you.

I could give more examples from the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Joseph, Hannah, Ruth and Esther. But let me give you a more contemporary example. Years ago, I was in Cambodia leading a pastor's conference. We were sitting around a large table eating lunch and I asked each one how they came to know Christ. With every one it was the same—they met Christ after fleeing from Pol Pot, a ruthless tyrant who was responsible for killing over a million Cambodians. Most of them ended up in refugee camps just over the border in Thailand and it was there the Spirit of God moved in revival and so many of them came to Christ. You see, God had a plan and a purpose even in the darkest hour. He uses even evil for good.

But, the most powerful example of this principle is Jesus Christ himself. Like Israel, we all need a deliverer. We're all enslaved to sin and in need of an exodus. But we need someone greater than Moses to deliver us. We need a Savior. Jesus came and lived a sinless life. He taught, healed, and pointed people to the Kingdom

of God. And yet, God allowed his own Son to suffer, not just any death, but the most horrible of all, death by crucifixion. Jesus did nothing to deserve the pain and the abandonment of the cross. It's like he walked that path of exile, loss and grief. When things looked hopeless on Calvary, when the enemies of God thought they'd won, when all the disciples ran away in fear, God laughed. He had a plan and a purpose. And three days later, Jesus rose from the dead and at that moment Jesus defeated sin, death and the devil once and for all. He now offers abundant life to anyone who calls on his name and embraces him by faith.

So, when your fear and pain are too great to bear, when you're dealing with chaos and evil, remember there's a God who's always working behind the scenes of your life. There's a God who works all things together for good for those who love him. There's a God who loves to bring victory out of tragedy, turn weeping into dancing, and death into life. That is the gospel; the power of King Jesus.

You can come to him when you need deliverance, cling to him when you face despair, and cry to him when you're despised. When things look hopeless, you can trust God has a plan for you and he will fulfill his good purpose.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*