

Written Copy: Unstoppable Salvation in a Broken World Mat 2:13-18

1st Sunday after Christmas

Sunday, December 28th, 2019

Text: Matthew 2:13-18

¹³ Now when they 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." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

Exegetical Statement

The Magi, after visiting baby Jesus, depart back home avoiding Jerusalem and Herod as they were warned to do in a dream. Herod takes great exception to being stood up and sees this as their treating him, the ruler of Judea, with mocking contempt. This added to his fear of the appearance of a threat to his throne enrages him and he reacts with senseless violence, sending his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all male children two years old and under. He had learned from the Magi's report when the star they followed appeared and calculated this to be the age range of the child. His soldiers carry out his bloody orders which are cited as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15 describing the reaction of the destruction and loss of life caused by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. But Herod is not successful in killing the rightful King of God's people. The Lord has warned Joseph in a dream and he has obediently taken Mary and baby Jesus and fled into Egypt. They are to remain there until the Lord tells them it is safe to return. In this we see Jesus as fulfilling His servant role of the Messiah becoming God's children Israel condensed into one. The too fled for protection into Egypt and stayed there until the LORD called them out and to the Promised Land through Moses. Thus too the Messiah, Israel condensed into One will be called out from Egypt and back to the land of promise, to return not to Bethlehem or Judea but to Nazareth to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah's light would first shine in Galilee. Unlike disobedient Israel Jesus will live in perfect obedience to the Father. His obedience will stand in for Israel's disobedience, just as He will stand in place of all God's children assuming their punishment for sin. This baby was saved from death in Bethlehem not to live out a full life on earth, but in order to give up that life so that all might be saved from eternal destruction in everlasting hell.

Focus Statement:

Jesus birth marks the beginning of God's kingdom advancing forcefully into the devil's kingdom of darkness. But this kingdom and the salvation Christ came to win for all men would not and could not be stopped, not then and not today. Despite the evil in our world the Gospel that is Christ's life, death, and resurrection continues to save all who believe by faith

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We see the Christmas narrative through rose colored lenses where peace and good will had come to reign on earth. The birth of the King met with evil opposition and the sinful brokenness of the fallen world which continues on to this day

What the hearer should do as a result:

We should not lose hope even when evil befalls us during Christmas time. But instead hold fast to Jesus death and resurrection which not only saved Bethlehem's babies but continues to call the lost and broken into His kingdom of joy and peace through us, the Church. No one can stop God's plan of salvation

Subject Sentence: Evil will not thwart God's plan of salvation

Thank God for Christmas. It's a much-needed break from the routine of our everyday lives. It brings together loved ones that we otherwise wouldn't see. It's a time of celebration with family and friends where we can enjoy the peace and joyfulness that is otherwise lacking the rest of the year. It's a time when we festively decorate our houses inside and out. Or if we don't, we can enjoy the neighbors festive work. We enjoy the laughter of our children and grandchildren as they open presents; and when we too become a little more like the child we used to be as we open ours. We gather for worship and sing the Christmas hymns that we only sing this time of year. We experience the wonder of that first Christmas Night as we light candles, and sing "Silent Night", while we hear the Christmas Gospel. We bask in the warm glow of peace that we have in our Savior's birth and hope that it lasts into the New Year.

But it doesn't. The days that follow Christmas are filled with cleaning up the wrapping paper and getting rid of the empty boxes. There are the trips to the store to return and exchange those presents that didn't work or didn't fit, where we are surrounded by the mass of people that are just as excited to be there as you are. There is the return to the everyday humdrum of life. Back to work for some, the departure of loved ones back to their homes for others. What do you have to look forward to? Taking down the Christmas trees and all the decorations inside and out. The snow and the cold of the winter ahead. The credit card bills that will need to be paid. The diet that you will need to go back on. And that joy and peace we treasured for one brief moment begins to fade from view.

We turn back to the reality that is this broken sinful world that we live in. And while we might like to take a break from its brokenness the world doesn't always comply. The

sadness and emptiness of the holidays celebrated without our loved ones colors our Christmas joy with sadness. It's a sadness that becomes even more pronounced when the Holiday celebrations are over. There is so much pain and suffering and death in the world, and in our own lives as well. It can seem like Christmas brings only a thin fragile slice of peace that can barely hang on, and is soon overpowered by the darkness that was there before Advent began. The angels' proclamation on that Christmas night of **(Luke 2:14)** **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those who have his good will!"** seems like a pipe dream that the evil in the world washes away.

Should we then be surprised that the Gospel Lesson for today, the First Sunday after Christmas is filled with darkness, pain, suffering, and death? **Matthew 2:16-18** ¹⁶ **Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.** ¹⁷ **Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:** ¹⁸ **"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."** We go from angels praising and singing to mothers weeping and wailing, refusing to be comforted. We go from the joyous and wonderful birth of the Christ child to the senseless slaughter of God knows how many young infant children in Bethlehem.

The lesson picks up after a heartwarming scene that is akin to our Christmas celebration, and is often lumped in with it in the minds of many, The visit to of the Magi to Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. Their giving of expensive gifts that would be valuable to a young family

relocated in a new town. They also testified to the Magi's belief that this child was the King of Kings since they gave gifts fit for a king, and they worshiped Him as such. And when they depart, they thwart the evil plans of King Herod who wanted them to lead him to this child. We say "Good! Keep that old miserable sinful king away!" We rejoice in the fact that the Lord sends an angel to warn Joseph of Herod's evil plans to kill the child and the family escapes his evil grasp.

But then comes the senseless massacre. Herod was always fearful of hidden plots and attempts of those around him to steal his throne. So much so that he killed many members of his own family including two of his wives, two of his sons, and his mother-in-law. So, when he heard of the birth of one who was prophesied to be the King of the Jews from the visiting Magi, he put himself on high alert. He was evil and paranoid, but he was also crafty. He arranged for the Magi to be his unwitting informants on where this child was so that he could follow behind them remove the threat. But when the Magi fail to return to him at the palace, he took this as a personal affront to his position and power as ruler of Judea on behalf of the Roman Empire. These foreign Wise Men had treated him with contempt by not following his instructions. They are obviously working in league against him. Well, they may have escaped his grasp, but he will make sure that this alleged King of the Jews does not. In a fit of overwhelming rage, he sends soldiers with the command to murder in cold blood all the children two years and under in the city of Bethlehem and the surrounding area. The Christ child does escape but the price is the senseless massacre of these children. We are left to wonder for how long did the air surrounding Bethlehem ring out with the anguished mournful cries of these babies' mothers?

It 's a tragedy that has been repeated over and over in history up until this day. Innocent people ruthlessly slaughtered by an evil tyrant who is allowed to gain power and rule. And we find ourselves wondering why must this be? You might ask "Couldn't God have stopped these things from happening?" And the answer is, yes; God could have. He is responsible for putting men in power and could certainly have removed Herod from power. **Psalm 139:16**

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

Deuteronomy 32:39 "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." God decides the day we are born and the day we die. He could have stopped Herod but did not. God could've stopped the pain and tragedy that has happened in your life and mine but did not. Sometimes He may give glimpses about why things have to happen as they do. But many times, we cannot understand the why of it all this side of eternity. We are left with the confession of Job; a man who lost his house and family, his health and his wealth, with only his life spared. **Job 1:21 "And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.""**

But as we take another look at this tragedy in our Gospel Lesson, we can see an interesting truth. While the Lord permitted this evil to happen, He did not order it to happen nor did He cause it. It sprang from the evil heart of one man, certainly encouraged by the source of evil in the world, the devil. But the devil didn't need to possess Herod in order for him to carry out his evil plan, just whisper in his ear the right words, and push the right buttons on Herod's ego. And that is what was really behind the massacre of the children of Bethlehem:

the devil's attempt to thwart the plan of salvation the Lord was bringing to fruition through the birth of the Christ Child. Perhaps the devil saw his opportunity while Jesus was just an infant, unable to defend Himself. But the devil was sorely mistaken. In the midst of this tragic death we have the triumph of the devil's scheme to end Jesus' life foiled. Does the sparing of this one life balance out the death of many little infants? It does if the life spared is the Savior of the world.

The Father spared the life of His only Son not so that He might live long and prosper. Jesus life was spared so that He might grow to be a man, live a life of obedience to God's will and command, and then give up that life on the cross. Jesus was spared only to suffer and die in a manner far worse than the death those children suffered. Far worse than any death our loved ones suffered. He suffered physical, emotional, and spiritual pain beyond what any other man could bear. He had to. Because He took upon Himself your sin, my sin, and the sins of the whole world. Each of us have the same evil in our hearts that Herod had. Even when we do not commit murder as Herod did, our thoughts and words of anger against others are considered the same offense in the eyes of our Holy God. Our sin deserves the same end as Herod's. And Herod will suffer terribly in the Eternal Lake of fire. But you will not. And I will not. Because Christ suffered for our sins and has removed them from the Father's eyes. By the faith we have been given we are declared no longer worthy of punishment but worthy to be called precious sons of the Heavenly Father through our baptism into His family. He gives to us all the gifts that Christ's death and resurrection have to give: forgiveness of sins, salvation from eternal death, and life everlasting. Just as Jesus rose from death to life never to die again, so too will you and I. That is the future of those murdered children of Bethlehem: their souls went to be with the Heavenly Father and on

the Last Day they will be raised up and given new bodies to live in forever in the new heavens and new earth. What will they have missed? A life of sin and suffering. While we on earth see their young deaths as a tragedy, through the eyes of faith we see the eternal blessing they were given. All because the devil's plan to foil God's plan of salvation was stopped cold.

And that's the victory that Christ won over evil and the devil. He took the worst that the devil could throw at Him on the cross and in the end, Christ made it the greatest victory ever: for Him. For you. And for me. Try as hard as he might the devil cannot stop God's plan of salvation for the world that He loves. That plan of salvation is still being declared in power in this world and the devil is helpless to stop it. That's because when its shared as the Gospel Message, the Holy Spirit is present with the power to make the message and the work of Jesus Christ that it describes a lifesaving message for whoever may hear it: for them, for you, for me. It's a message that sometimes is most fruitful when people are suffering from the brokenness of this fallen world, when they are being oppressed by evil. When they've lost something or someone most important to them. When they are broken and mourning, just like those mothers of the children of Bethlehem. And we the Church are there with them, oppressed, hurt, and mourning as they are. But we are there with that lifechanging message of the Gospel to change their lives forever as it has changed ours.

It would be nice if every day on this earth could be like Christmas. It would be nice if we didn't have to pack everything up, say goodbye to our loved ones, and deal with the winter, the bills, and the depression that comes with this time of year. And there will come a day, the Last Day, when the future laid out for us will make even our most joyous Christmas

celebrations pale in comparison. But that day is not yet. We still live in this sinful broken world where evil men and the devil are allowed to do terrible things like the killing of those children in Bethlehem. A world where we will experience the pain, suffering, and loss of loved ones. We will experience things that will give us cause to ask God “Why did you allow this?” But then we look to what He allowed His only Son to suffer, allowed to happen out of love for you and for me. We remember what Jesus’ suffering earned for us now, forgiveness of sins and His presence throughout our days of temptation and suffering. We remember what He has promised our eternity will be. And we remember Jesus response whenever someone asked Him about God’s dealing with other people. Jesus would have us to remember that God desires to be gracious and merciful to all. But we are to concentrate on our relationship with Him. And let Him worry about the others.

It may seem at times that evil and the devil are winning the battle. But all we need do is look to Jesus death and resurrection. There we see how the devil’s greatest scheme to foil God’s plan of salvation worked to as the greatest victory ever for all who believe in Jesus. We hold fast by faith that all the devil’s schemes and plans will result in the ultimate victory for His Church, for you and for me. We hold fast to His promise that He is with us even now foiling every attempt of the devil to steal you and I away. And He uses those attempts to draw us ever closer and grant us daily that Christmas peace, the one that passes all understanding. Amen.

