

Title: Jesus' Protection
Biblical Text: Matthew 2:13-23
Teaching Series: God With Us
Preaching Date: December 24, 2023
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Matthew 2:13-23

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." 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." 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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "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." But 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. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went

and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Something that's unexpected yet obvious throughout Jesus' earliest days is his vulnerability. Jesus is vulnerable. Perhaps this is what originally drew you to his story. You may still have questions, but his arrival is unique to the Christian story and it captivated you. Unlike many concepts of God, the incarnation paints the God of the cosmos with intimacy and familiarity and humility. Much of the wonder at Christmastime centers on the fact that the Son of God makes himself vulnerable.

I think this draws us in because we're vulnerable too. Aren't we? In his book *Strong and Weak*, writer Andy Crouch describes humanity as a healthy blend of authority and vulnerability. He describes vulnerability as *exposure to meaningful risk*. Of course, we're not all exposed to the same degree of danger nor are we all vulnerable in the same ways. Yet, to be human is to be exposed to risk. Jesus, being fully human, is vulnerable ... and in his vulnerability we see our own.

Yet, through Jesus' risky early days we see something else: we see the Father's sovereignty or control over everything that Jesus is exposed to. Though he is vulnerable, Jesus is protected. Through ancient prophesies and intervening dreams, we're going to see the Father's protection of his Son. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the way the Father takes care of his Son amidst

the danger. *Why?* Because as much as we see our vulnerabilities in the vulnerabilities of Jesus, we also see the Father's care for us in the way he care for Jesus. You see, Jesus is protected ... and in his protection we find our safety.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- Our *need* for protection.
- The *nature* of protection.
- Our *response* to protection.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Need for Protection (vv.13-15, 16-18 ref v.12 and 1 Peter 2:11)

We're picking up the story after Jesus' birth. It's about 5 or 4 B.C. (I know, ironic that Jesus is probably born in 6 B.C. even though B.C. literally stands for *Before Christ*.) Nevertheless, the wise men have paid homage to the new born king (vv.1-12) and the shepherds have watched their flocks by night and seen the angels give glory to God in the highest (see Luke 2:8-14). It's at this point reality begins to set in. *You know what I'm talking about?* The celebration is over. The pictures are all taken. No more visitors. Mary and Joseph just gotta be parents now. Every parent knows that feeling. When you first leave the hospital with your newborn and

think to yourself ... *they should not trust me with this baby. I can barely take care of myself. Right? Reality is setting in.* Mary and Joseph are parents now.

As this reality is setting in, Matthew tells us Joseph is awakened in a dream. ***Read Matthew 2:13-15 ... 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.” 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.”*** First of all, *you know why it's Joseph right? You know why the angel wakes up Joseph and not Mary don't you?* Because Mary has been awake all night with Jesus. This angel is no fool. Everyone knows not to mess with a new mom's sleep—the little sleep she gets.

Through the angel's message we catch our first glimpse of Jesus' ***need*** for protection. We get a sense of his vulnerability and the risk he's facing. You see, Jesus is flesh and blood. He is a human baby. Therefore he's vulnerable to death. As one theologian puts it, through the incarnation the Son of God makes himself into something he has never been before ... *killable*. And the local magistrate, Herod, wants him dead. His plan was to use the wise men to find Jesus. But they're warned about this in their own dream back in v.12. ***Read Matthew 2:12 ... And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*** Once this threat of discovering Jesus' location through the wise men

was no longer an issue, an angel goes to Joseph telling him to take Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt.

Egypt was a common place for Jewish refugees in the first century. After all, that's what Jesus is ... a refugee seeking asylum. Throughout Jewish history, Egypt became a sanctuary country for God's people (see 1 Kings 11:40 and 2 Kings 25:26). This is of course deeply ironic and instructive to us. *Why?* Well, because it was the Egyptian government that enslaved God's people for 430 years (see Exodus 12:40). And now ... God is taking what once was a place of extraordinary suffering and danger and is making it the place of peace. That's fantastic.

And Jesus doesn't just pass through Egypt. Notice again in v.15, ***Read Matthew 2:15 ... "remained there until the death of Herod."*** Historical records tell us that Herod died in 4 B.C. That means Jesus, who was born in 6 B.C., would have been a political and religious refugee for up to the first two years of his life. This gives us our second look at Jesus' *need* for protection. Though there was a large Jewish community in Egypt (especially in Alexandria), like any and every refugee, Jesus and his family were no longer home, no longer in a place of familiarity with history or language or work or community. You see, to be a refugee is to trade one set of vulnerabilities for another.

So ... from the first moments of his life, Jesus *needs* protection. He's exposed to meaningful risk. His life is threatened. He's forced from his home. Jesus is vulnerable. And in his vulnerability we see our own. We realize how vulnerable we

are as Herod exacts his violent will on the region. ***Read Matthew 2:16-18 ... 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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "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."***

Though Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were likely not the only family to flee as word of Herod's plans spread ... many had to stay in Bethlehem. The best estimates tell us that about 20-30 baby boys were murdered in Herod's massacre.

You see, we're vulnerable because like Jesus. We're flesh and blood. We're killable. We're vulnerable because like Jesus, many of us are under evil and oppressive powers. Power dynamics at work. Inequitable governments. Family power structures that hurt and harm. And even if we're privileged enough to be in positions of power on earth, where no direct authority threatens our well-being ... the Apostle Peter tells us we are all spiritual refugees. ***Read 1 Peter 2:11 ...***

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." While this passage should make us deeply mindful of our friends and neighbors who are refugees seeking asylum in our city, we should also be mindful that none of us are home yet. We are all daily exposed to the meaningful risks of this *light and momentary affliction* called life (see 2 Corinthians 4:17).

So, where and how do we find protection?

Movement 2: The Nature of Protection (vv.19-23, Hosea 11:1-2, Jeremiah 31:15)

Well, it's clear, the Father doesn't leave his Son unprotected. Jesus' willingness to be exposed gives us space to witness the Father's great love and care. The Father protects his Son. And in his protection we see the way our Heavenly Father takes care of us in our own vulnerabilities. *Read Matthew 2:19-23 ... But 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. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.* Once again, Jesus and his family are on the move. Now they go back to Israel, particularly to the region of Judea. After Herod's death his kingdom was split into four main regions. Three of his sons took over three of those regions and his sister ruled the fourth. Judea was ruled by his son named Archelaus, who was even more ruthless than his father. And so Jesus' family goes to Galilee, specifically Nazareth where a more chill son of Herod's was in charge.

In this new migration, a central theme is repeated. Notice again v.23. Matthew says, ***Read Matthew 2:23 ... "so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled."*** Something was anticipated long ago that is now coming about or being fulfilled, manifesting in the life of Jesus. That's the theme. This is where we see the nature of the Father's protection come into focus. You see, at every turn the protection of Jesus was foretold by biblical prophets. Look back through the passage with me ...

- Verse 15 ... Jesus' exile in Egypt was promised by the prophet Hosea. This is where Matthew is drawing our attention. ***Read Hosea 11:1-2 ... When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.***
- Verses 17-18 ... Herod's massacre of the Bethlehem boys was seen by the prophet Jeremiah thousands of years before it happened. Again, Matthew makes the connection in his text. ***Read Jeremiah 31:15 ... Thus says the Lord: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."***
- Verse 23 ... Jesus' arrival in Nazareth was promised by various prophets Matthew says. While this is not a direct prophetic word, Isaiah communicates the Messiah's arrival in unexpected obscurity (*esp* Isaiah

52-53); particularly because the term "Nazarene" was an slang reference to an individual from a remote or obscure place.

The *nature* of the Father's protection of the Son is demonstrated in his foresight through the prophets. Like a good and loving parent he anticipates the implications of his Son's weaknesses. In other words, the *nature* of the Father's protection reveals the nature of the Father himself. *Are you with me?* He is all-loving. But not only that. A good and loving parent does more than know their child and anticipate their vulnerabilities. They also intercede on behalf of their children to appropriately care for them and protect them. That's the second aspect of his nature we see. The Father works in real space and time to take care of his Son. He speaks through dreams and works through people to keep his Son safe. So, he is all-loving but he is also all-power. This is captured in his very name ... Heavenly Father. Heavenly, all-powerful. Father, all-love. Theologian Michael Reeves explains, "*it is only when we see that God rules creation as a kind and loving Father that we will be moved to delight in his providence*" (*Delighting in the Trinity*, 24). As we witness the Father's powerful love for his Son, we understand better his powerful love for us.

But this, of course, leads us to an important obstacle in the text. Something we can relate to I'm sure. After all, the Father protects his Son ... *but what about all those others sons who were killed by Herod?* Or we might ask, *if God is Heavenly Father why am I not married yet? Why did my parent die? Why am I suffering?* Or more broadly, *how could a good and loving God allow suffering?* It's in moments like

this we are tempted to split the character of God in half. You see, we often interpret our need for protection as the absence of God's protection. *He must not be able to help. Or he must not care to help.* Perhaps that's the tension you feel with the massacre of the Hebrew baby boys. God saves his son, but not the sons of those other thirty families. *He must not be able to help. Or he must not care to help.*

Danish writer Isak Dinesen once said that "*All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story*" (quoted in *How to Know a Person*, 217). I think that's really true. And interestingly, no other historical documents cover the execution of these Bethlehem baby boys. This has led some to suggest that the massacre never happened. Others surmise that Herod's violent exploits were so frequent and massive that the killing of thirty male children in Bethlehem was not historically noteworthy. But this is precisely where we see the heart of our Heavenly Father. God remembered these boys. Only God remembered these boys. The Father saw his Son ... and he saw these sons. Generations before their unjust execution God even began to lament their loss (v.18). When we see death and suffering within the narrative arch of the Heavenly Father's love and power, we find more understanding and hope.

What's more, the Father didn't save Jesus *instead* of these boys. It's just the opposite. While at first it might seem like Jesus is spared and dozens of boys are murdered, ultimately Jesus makes himself the most vulnerable. You see, the Father protected Jesus from Herod but he did not protect him from the horror of the cross. In fact, Jesus is ridiculed as he dies for not saving himself. The religious elites

yelled at him on the cross, *Read Matthew 27:42 ... "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea."* You see, the *nature* of protection is wrapped within the story of our all-loving and all-powerful Heavenly Father. His protection is not demonstrated by going toe-to-toe with Herod. Jesus was protected from Herod so that he could hang utterly vulnerable on the cross. And through his death, these babies boys enjoy eternal life. So do you. So do I. In fact, because Jesus Christ left his home to die ... when he returns we will no longer be killable and we'll be home forever.

So, how will you respond?

Movement 3: The Response to Protection (2:1-3, 13-14,20-21,22, Luke 22:42)

At first blush, the one person who doesn't seem vulnerable is Herod. Right? After all, he's the one using his power to inflict fear and death in this story. He's the only who's not exposed to meaningful risk. So it seems. Upon deeper consideration, Herod is completely exposed by the birth of Jesus. *Read Matthew 2:1-3 ... Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."* When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all

Jerusalem with him. Herod was *greatly troubled*. Why? Well, he doesn't want to lose his throne. And he's likely a narcissist and incredibly insecure. Insecure narcissists respond to vulnerability with things like anger and violence.

Psychologist Darlene Lancer explains that when narcissists feel vulnerable "*they crave power and vigilantly must control their environment, people around them, and their feelings ... Their defense system ... protects them, but hurts other people. When they feel most insecure, they're more malicious and the impact of their actions is irrelevant*" (*Why Narcissists Act the Way They Do*, May 2019).

That's Herod.

That's one *response* to our need for protection. When we know we need protection, we try to protect ourselves. Now, you don't have to be a narcissist or murderous ruler to exhibit defensive behavior. You see, defensiveness is really the fruit of not trusting that the Heavenly Father is all-loving and all-powerful. It's a failure to trust that God protects us and so we have to protect ourselves. *I wonder, is that something you recognize in your own life? Do you try to protect yourself?* I know I do. For me this results in trying to control my reputation. I feel vulnerable when people leave our church or when my children don't act the way I think they should in public or when I meet with a loud talker at a coffee shop. In those moments I'm tempted to protect myself instead of trusting that the Lord protects me and my reputation.

By the way, protecting ourselves never goes well. After all, the one who we think isn't vulnerable ends up dead ... losing the very thing he was trying to protect.

That's not a healthy response. There's another *response* though. It's subtly conveyed in this passage. Mary and Joseph respond differently to their need for protection.

- Look again at vv.13,14. The angel says, *Read Matthew 2:13-14 ... "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt ... And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt."* And? They obeyed and trusted the Lord and they were protected.
- Now look at vv.20,21. The angel says, *Read Matthew 2:20-21 ... "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel ... And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel."* And? They obeyed and trusted God and they were protected.
- Check out v.22. *Read Matthew 2:22 ... being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.* They obeyed and trusted God and were protected.

Mary and Joseph's response reminds me of what a woman named Corrie ten Boom said ... *"The safest place is in the center of God's will."* Now, we might think that's a nice sentiment, or belittle her thought as suggesting that God's will protects us from suffering. But that's not true. Nor is that ten Boom's point at all. You see, she was a Dutch Christian imprisoned for helping Jews escape the Nazis. She followed her Heavenly Father directly into harms way and trusted that despite the

pain and suffering she would endure ... his will was the safest place she could be.
That's the other response.

We can either self-protect, or we can surrender.

This is ultimately what we see Jesus do. He surrenders to the will of his Heavenly Father. On the shore of his crucifixion Jesus prays, *Read Luke 22:42 ... "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."* Church in the Square ... even in death, Jesus trusted the safest place to be was his Father's will. And the invitation for us is to not try harder to surrender this season. Rather, the invitation is to see the one who already surrendered for us. When we realize what Christ has done and how the Father has protected him, we too will learn to enjoy the protection of our Father amidst our own persistent vulnerabilities. Even the places of our past suffering become places of peace.