**Jesus is taken to Egypt**

Text: Matthew 2:7-23

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 46:1-7; 26-27; Matthew 2:7-23

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 243, 46, 255, 261, 522

**Series:** Advent (#6)

**Theme:** Having been warned by an angel about Herod’s intent to kill Jesus, Joseph takes Mary and her child and leaves for Egypt, later returning to Nazareth when instructed to by the angel.

**Proposition:** Just as God protected His Son Jesus, so He protects all who are in Christ.

**Introduction**

Many of us here today came to New Zealand as immigrants, or we are the children, grandchildren or great grandchildren of people who came here from other countries. Sometimes people relocate to other nations because they want to. That was my situation more than 35 years ago when I came here as an adult from the land of my birth in England. When people are forced to leave their own country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster they are called ‘refugees’. Refugees move to a different country because they are looking for a place of safety.

Today as we look at the account of Joseph taking Mary and the child Jesus to Egypt so that they would be refugees there, we see the protective power of God over the life of His Son, and we are also reminded that it is in Christ alone that God ultimately protects us from the consequences of our sin. We’ll look at our text in Matthew 2:7-23 under three headings:

1. The threat
2. The escape
3. The return
4. **The threat**

Herod, the ruler of Roman-occupied Israel under Caesar Augustus, was a troubled man when he heard from some wise men that a child had been born who was king of the Jews (Matt 2:3). Herod was greatly agitated because he saw the new-born child as a threat to his reign and rule. The Emperor, Augustus, who was a close friend of Herod and who knew him well, was quoted as saying “*I’d rather be Herod’s pig than his son*.” Even though Herod was an Edomite, not a Jew, he tried to present himself as a Jewish king when that suited his purposes. Augustus’ point was that Herod was unlikely to kill and eat a pig – forbidden food for Jews, but his family members were not so safe. For example, Herod had killed his favourite wife, Mariamne (he had 10 wives), because he suspected her of infidelity. He also killed his uncle, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons.

Herod was deeply insecure and dangerously paranoid. Having what appears to have been a very fragile ego, he always felt threatened and unsafe. When powerful cruel rulers fear that they may lose their power, they tend to act with violence, bringing death and destruction to many, including those who pose no threat to them at all. We sadly see this distressing dynamic being played out on the world stage at present. In essence, there truly is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9).

Matthew records Herod’s cunning with the wise men, instructing them to “*Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him*” (2:8). Herod actually had no intention of worshipping Jesus. You might be wondering why Herod didn’t just go to Bethlehem himself with some soldiers from his army and find the baby Jesus for himself. Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem (about 8 kms). The Scriptures do not reveal the reason why he relied on the wise men. Perhaps Herod didn’t want to act against the new-born king in public, fearing a backlash from the Jews. Perhaps he was used to instructing others to do his ‘leg work’ and so having the wise men gather ‘intel’ for him made sense.

What is important here is that God, knowing Herod’s wicked heart, protected His Son by warning the wise men in a dream not to return to this cruel tyrant. When Herod found out that he had been tricked by the wise men, he “*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*” (2:16). We can only imagine the wailing, grief and pain of the mothers and their families in Bethlehem when Herod’s soldiers came into town and savagely took the lives of these young sons. Matthew expresses the deeply emotional response to this infanticide by quoting from Jer 31:5: “*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*.” Here Rachel, the favourite wife of Jacob, represents all Israel in her weeping under a king who did not protect his people, but instead killed their children.

There is also a connection here to the baby Jesus being taken away from Israel to Egypt. When Jesus left the country, Israel had ‘lost’ her true king who was no longer in the land, just as previously Rachel’s boys Joseph and Benjamin had left for Egypt (Gen 37:28; 43:15) and were then ‘lost’ to her. These events in the early life of Christ on this earth reflect of the suffering of Israel under a cruel master. The promised land was to be a place of freedom, security and blessing; in contrast to Egypt which had been for God’s people Israel the place of bondage, oppression and distress. Now Egypt became a place of refuge and Israel one of danger.

Herod was greatly troubled by the thought that he might lose power to a true king, even though ironically he himself was not a real king, just a well-paid puppet ruler under the occupying Roman Empire. So it is for those who reject Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, they will not give over the throne of their hearts to another, but want to be their own king. Yet they too, like Herod, are then slaves to their own sinful nature, being under the rule of the ‘*prince of this world*’ (John 12:31) Satan. Do not be threatened by Jesus, accept Him as who He is: the perfect king who alone can rule you – completely for your own good. For a time, the life of Jesus was threatened by Herod, but He was protected by His Heavenly Father, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The escape**

A migrant is a person who moves away from his or her usual place of residency, whether within a country or across an international border. There are currently an estimated 281 million migrants in the world today. That is about 3.6% of the global population. Migration, both temporary and permanent is nothing new. Did you know that in the first century AD there was a sizeable population of Jews living in Egypt? Many had settled in the prominent city of Alexandria. It was there that the Old Testament was translated into Greek becoming what we know today as the ‘Septuagint’ during the 3rd to 1st centuries BC. The Jewish philosopher Philo wrote that in the 1st century AD there were many synagogues in each section of the city of Alexandria.

Matthew doesn’t record where Joseph and Mary lived in Egypt, just that they departed Bethlehem at night, fleeing Israel, in order to protect the baby Jesus from Herod’s sword. Joseph and Mary were already migrants when they lived in Bethlehem, having travelled there from their hometown of Nazareth. Then they became refugees, temporarily crossing the border into Nabataea to the south and then on into Egypt. Egypt had earlier been a place of refuge for Jacob and his family when they left the land of Canaan because of a famine there (Gen 46:27). Now Egypt was again a place of security. This time for Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

We can only imagine how Mary and Joseph felt. They were far from their hometown of Nazareth; first having travelled to Bethlehem when Mary was almost at the end of her pregnancy. Then they had endured rough conditions in an animal shelter. They remained in Bethlehem to see their son Jesus greatly honoured with expensive gifts by wise men from the east. Then Joseph heard in a dream from an angel of the Lord the instruction to “*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*.” (2:13). Joseph was under the direct command of God. Obedience has been defined as “*doing what your told, when you're told, with the right heart attitude*”. Joseph was promptly obedient – God used that willing response to save His Son Jesus from death as an infant.

Brothers and sisters, God is pleased to use our willing obedience to His good commands both for the good of others and for our own good. Matthew reveals that the actions of Herod were not outside of God’s plan, but were sovereignly used by the Lord to fulfil a prophesy He had made through the prophet Hosea “*Out of Egypt I called my son*” (Hosea 11:1). There are two references being made here, past and then future: It was out of Egypt that God had delivered His people from slavery through the leadership of Moses; It was out of Egypt that God would deliver His Son, having protected him so that He could fulfil His work of saving His people from their sins.

Jesus is both the New Israel and the New Moses. It is in Him, not in Egypt, that God’s people ultimately find a place of refuge, an escape from sin and death. Just as Jesus was taken to Egypt for safety, but was humanly completely passive in the arms of his parents, so we are taken by God’s mighty hand into the refuge of His protection through faith in Jesus, His Son. This is His work alone. Brothers and sisters “*for by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*” (Eph 2:8). Just as God was able to secure the life of His incarnate Son from the threat to His life, so the Lord secures the lives of all His people. As we sang earlier from Psalm 46: “*God is our refuge and strength, our ever-present aid*”. Joseph, Mary and Jesus were temporary residents as refugees in Egypt before they went back home, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The return**

We don’t know exactly how long Joseph, Mary and Jesus remained in Egypt. It is probable that Jesus was 1-2 years old when His parents took him to Egypt. It is thought that Herod the Great died around 4BC, at which time Jesus was likely between 2-3 years old. What we do know is that the death of Herod the Great removed the previous threat to the life of Jesus. Matthew records ‘*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*’ (Matt 2:19-21).

Character traits often run in families. Like father, like son. Like mother, like daughter. Herod Archelaus was the son and principal heir of Herod the Great. Like his father, he was a cruel man, at one time killing about 3,000 people in Jerusalem, among them Jewish pilgrims. He had three-half brothers who were older than him, but they were all put to death by their father because they posed real or imagined threats.

Archelaus did not automatically become king because Israel was under Roman control and any appointment was made by the Emperor. The Herodian family had a history of bitter in-fighting. The will of Herod the Great was contested by Archelaus’s brother Philip before Caesar in Rome. At the same time a party of Jews, mainly Pharisees, came before Caesar to plead for an end to the Herodian Family’s domination of Palestine and asked for direct rule from Rome instead. In the meantime, there was great civil unrest in the whole of Israel as rebellion spread under a number of leaders who had differing aims and were hostile to one another.

As a result of all these factors, Caesar Augustus decided to limit Archelaus’ rule to just Judea and Samaria. This was a much smaller realm than that left to him in Herod the Great’s will. Archelaus was given the title ‘ethnarch’ (ruler) but not king. After a reign of nine years he was deposed (in AD6) and all, or most, of his private property was confiscated. He had proved from the outset to be cruel as a ruler, but likely not as crafty as his father who had survived as king until his death. Clearly Joseph knew something of the reputation of the Herodian family and Archelaus in particular, because Matthew records that: “*But when he (Joseph) 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*”.

Now this is something you may not already know. Because Archelaus’s rule only extended as far north as Samaria, Galilee was a place of safety whereas before, under the reign of Herod the Great, it was within his cruel jurisdiction. The events in the early life of Jesus on this earth correlate precisely with what we know from early historians about the reigns of Herod the Great and Herod Archelaus. Again we see how the Lord perfectly protected the boy Jesus, enabling Joseph and Mary finally to take him to their home town of Nazareth- which was out of reach of Herod Archelaus.

When Matthew writes that Joseph went to live in Nazareth ‘*that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled:* “*He shall be called a Nazarene*”’ (Matt 2:23), he is not referring to any specific Old Testament Scripture. This is a broader reference to the prophesy that the promised Messiah would be despised, abhorred and rejected by men (e.g. 69:8; Isa 11:1; 49:7; 53:2, 3, 8 and Dan 9:26). Jesus was known on earth, not as a Bethlehemite of royal descent, but as someone from the obscure backwater village of Nazareth (John 1:45; 46; 7:42).

God protected His Son Jesus throughout His life on this earth, until the time came for Jesus to willingly lay down His own life at Calvary. God the Father could easily have prevented this from occurring and continued to protect Jesus, but because of His love for us, brothers and sisters in Christ, instead He abandoned His own beloved Son to physical and spiritual death. On the cross, Jesus cried out in the deepest pain and anguish any human being has ever experienced “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mark 15:34).

Why did God not protect His Son then and there? So that in Jesus, His people would be eternally safe and find refuge from sin and death in His presence for eternity. Brothers and sisters, this is God’s gift to us in Jesus. Praise Him, thank Him, rejoice in Him.

AMEN.