

Things get a little out of order in the lectionary this week. Epiphany is Friday. Although we will celebrate it next Sunday. But chronologically, the Gospel reading for next week comes immediately before the Gospel reading for this week. Today also marks the commemoration of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus.

I know, this is kind of a jumbled mess. But just remember the chronology of the events of Nativity account of Jesus. And both Matthew and Luke are necessary to get all this right. Jesus is circumcised like every Jewish boy, at eight days old. He is presented at the temple at forty days old. This is when the holy family encounters Simeon and Anna. The wise men don't come to Jesus at the manger. They come as much as two years later. And the flight to Egypt—our text today—comes after their visit.

In the sermon today, I want to look at Herod's way of responding to Christ. I want to talk about the Prophetic statements that dominate our Gospel text. And I want to conclude with our own response to the coming of Christ. Let's begin with Herod.

It is the Magi that draw Herod's attention to the One born King of the Jews. They meant well. They were simply looking for assistance for the location of the birth. They anticipate that the Jews would welcome this coming. The star had taken them to Jerusalem. And with Herod's assistance—and the knowledge of the scribes—the Scriptures pointed them to Bethlehem. And they go and worship.

But Herod—and the whole of Jerusalem with him—took this news differently. Instead of finding joy at His birth, they sense competition for their power. Jesus' coming will require something of them. Jesus is in the way of their purposes. And they won't have it. Matthew reports, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."

Now, the Magi—after visiting Jesus—after acknowledging that Jesus is King—never go back to Herod. And this will infuriate him. He expected the Magi to fulfill his purposes. And they just don't. He wanted the specific location of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. But his purposes are twisted. And the Magi serve a different King. Perhaps it is an angel who warns them. But in a dream, they are told not to go back to Herod.

Our reading begins with the angel of the Lord appearing in a dream to Joseph. God knows Herod's intent. He knows that Herod plans to kill this Promised child. And so, the angel of the Lord directs them to Egypt. And this holy family—with the toddler Jesus in tow—are off to wait out Herod's reign in a foreign country.

It does make you wonder a little about the state of Herod's heart. This is Herod the Great—or so he called himself. He was born in 72 BC and had been king of Judea since 40 BC. He is an older man when Jesus is born. He was ruthless—killing many of his own household. And we find his cruelty in our own reading with the murder of all the male children in Bethlehem. What a horrific legacy he left for himself and for Bethlehem.

It is interesting, apart from this incident, he is best known for beginning a massive renovation of the Jewish Temple. In fact, this temple renovation will cause this temple to be remembered as *Herod's Temple*. Further, even in the Gospels, he is surrounded by the chief priests and scribes. Together, they look to the Prophet Micah to surmise the place of the

Messiah's birth. Right there in their time—right there in their presence—the prophecies are coming true. This is good news of great joy. Who wouldn't receive it?

There is every reason for him to greet the coming of Jesus just like the Magi. But he just doesn't. And this reveals a certain principle. The way that you view God will ultimately show up in the way you live your life. Herod hardens his heart at the hearing of God's Word. He refuses the Spirit's call. He turns to fear—to power—to cruelty. He ruins his own heritage. He destroys the lives of others. All because of how he views the purposes of God.

The good news here, is that Herods die. Crafty as he was, his craftiness could not keep him from dying. Kings come and go. Or, in reality, as the Prophet Daniel reminds us, "God removes kings and sets up kings." Mary's own *Magnificat* revealed something of the nature that Christ's coming would have on the powers of the world. And you can hear Herod in her words, "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones." After this altercation, Herod's reign is quickly brought to an end.

The Magi and the Holy family respond to the coming of Christ in a completely different way. The contrast couldn't be greater. The Magi return home proclaiming the wonders of the Christmas Gospel. They become early evangelists of the newborn King. We will give them some more time next week, as I suggested.

The Holy Family listens to God's Word. They embrace the angel's instructions. And they retreat into Egypt. And I want to give some attention to what this means. They aren't running in fear. Although I am sure these were difficult times for them. They were off to Egypt as part of God's prophetic plan.

The angel had told them each—separately—of the miraculous Virgin Birth. This child was conceived miraculously—by the Holy Spirit. And with the visit of the Magi, God had provided for their future. I am sure their gifts were helpful for these months they would spend away from home.

But recognize something much bigger is going on here. Simeon had warned them of the kind of opposition that Jesus would face in the world. "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." And it has begun.

But notice the other prophecies that are fulfilled, just in our reading. We have already noted the murder of the innocents. Here, Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31 regarding Herod's actions in Bethlehem. In its original context, this prophecy first addresses the lamentation of mothers who experience such great loss as the Babylonian hordes invaded. And by invoking this prophecy, Matthew compares Herod to the evil empire of Babylonian. It's too bad he never got to read this text.

And then there is Matthew's quotation of the Prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Joseph was to keep the Child and His mother safe from Herod's selfish and murderous intent. And Joseph obeyed. But these events also took place to fulfill God's prophetic mission. The Prophet Hosea states, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

And with these words, Matthew is suggesting that Jesus is Israel. This means that God has now begun to preform His great end-times salvation. The exodus from Egypt for millions of Israelites—as great as it was—served as only a type and shadow of what God was now doing in Christ. God’s Son has come to take the place of Israel. He is Israel—reduced to One.

We will see this all over Matthew’s Gospel. It is one of His key points. Jesus is doing all that Israel would not do—refused to do—as God’s people. At Jesus’ Baptism, He is fulfilling the parting of the Red Sea. In His temptation He is fulfilling the wilderness wanderings.

Who is Jesus? That is such an important question for us. And here, He is Israel—the nation—summed up in Himself. And now He is undergoing His own Exodus from Egypt. And this perfect Son offers perfect obedience. He will go where they went. He will stand where they stood. And He will handle it all in righteousness and truth. Nothing will deter Jesus from His purposes. Not even Herod.

There is one more prophecy worthy of our attention. It appears to be a passing statement from Matthew. And I mentioned this a few weeks ago in Advent as we talked about John the Baptist. It is a little bit difficult to pin down.

This is the only time that Matthew will quote from the *Prophets*—plural. Every other reference is more specifically from a particular Prophet—singular. But finding this reference in the Old Testament has proved a little tricky. You won’t find these exact words, “He shall be called a Nazarene” in the Old Testament.

Now, this may just some ancient wordplay. *Nazareth* and *Nazarene* are different words in Hebrew—even spelled differently—although they do sound alike. This may be a way of suggesting that Jesus fulfills the office of Nazarene, just like He fulfills the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. Like Samson, the ancient Judge, His life and death will be set apart as a Deliver for God’s people.

But I think Matthew has one more purpose in this text. As Joseph comes back from Egypt, it appears that he intends to return to Bethlehem. It is a nicer place to live. But with Herod’s son now in office—danger remains. And so, God sends another dream. And here God instructs Joseph takes the Holy Family back to Galilee—to Nazareth. And, as always, Joseph obeys.

And this builds upon the unexpected nature of Jesus’ coming. God’s salvation transpires in humble and unexpected ways—ways that neither the pious, nor the wicked, can know apart from divine revelation. Although Jesus is born in Bethlehem—and according to the Scriptures—part of the prophetic plan for Him was to be called a *Nazarene*. He is to be from Nazareth.

This runs against all typical Messianic expectations. And that is precisely Matthew’s point. Jesus is surprising. He is not what we expect. In fact, *Nazarene* becomes a term by which Jesus is despised and rejected in Matthew’s Gospel. Nothing good comes out of Nazareth. At His passion, Peter is accused of being with “Jesus the Nazarene.” And it is this contempt that we see from the world—from Herod—even from the citizens of Nazareth—that fulfills the words of the Prophets.

It is as the Prophet Isaiah suggests, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” This is the Savior that God chose for the world. It is the Savior that God has chosen for us. The whole thing is surprising. And we are left wondering how to respond.

We have dealt with what the Prophets have said about Him. We have heard what Herod thinks of Him. But how about you? What does the coming of Christ reveal about your heart? Maybe we don’t have the senseless rage of Herod. We don’t have a lifestyle to protect from the dangers of an innocent Child.

And yet, in a certain way, Christ is always getting in our way—His crucifixion was no accident. He said things we would rather not hear. He affirmed a set of priorities that conflict with our own. Even more, if He is who the Scriptures suggest He is—even though He comes in such humble circumstances—then His word must trump our own voices. He reigns over all of the choices that we think are in our best interest. Jesus challenges us. For me, I think He is worth hearing. Let Him get in your way.

I usually try and offer some kind of challenge at New Year’s. I actually think that this is a good time to examine our lives. January is typically a quieter month. It’s cold outside. Things get cancelled. We get some extra time at home. And it is also something of a new beginning. It is a good time to get some of your thinking right.

I have been trying—for years—to get you all to be daily Bible readers. This is what Lutherans do. I hope I have had some success. But let this be your year. There are Bible reading plans downstairs. I think the three-year plan is just a perfect pace. There is a one-year plan as well. Or if you are just stubborn and you are going to do it your own way—no matter what the experts might say—start in Genesis and just keep reading.

But let me add one more detail. Read with yourself in mind. Not in a selfish way. But allow the Word of God to get to your heart. Let it teach you. Let it change your thinking. Let it reprove, rebuke, and exhort you. Let it forgive you for sins—even the ones you really don’t want to let go. Let it renew your mind.

We can harden our hearts to God’s purposes. But don’t. Don’t resist the Spirit. Kneel at His cradle. Kneel at His cross. Kneel in eternity. But for now, let Jesus get in your way. And follow Him on the way that He is going.

You have probably heard this quotation from me already. But it is one of my favorite lines from our devotional last year by Bo Giertz. And let me finish here. I think He summarizes the two different responses to Jesus that we have been talking about today. He says, “the Word is always in action, causing faith or defiance, grace or judgment. We either come closer to God or further away. No one is ever left unaffected.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*