

## Opening

- Today's scripture from Matthew is one you won't often hear preached.
  - This story, historically known as the "Massacre of the Innocents," is not a pleasant subject.
  - It's definitely one that we don't celebrate as part of the Christmas story.
  - I mean, have you ever seen Herod walk his part of a nativity parade?
  - And you won't see the slaughter of infants portrayed in any Christmas pageant.
  - Nope, as soon as the shepherds, angels and wise men exit the stage, we want the story to end right there.
- It's just difficult to imagine the vicious massacre carried out by Herod.
  - How could anyone be so evil as to order the killing of children?
  - It's just too hard to believe.
- Well, believe it or not, Herod was just that evil.
  - "Herod The Great," as he was known, was a cruel, evil man, who thought nothing of killing anyone, including members of his own family.
  - If Herod suspected that anyone might rival his power, that person was immediately put to death.
    - He murdered his wife and his mother-in-law.
    - He killed his oldest son, and had two other sons strangled to death.
  - He was so bad that the Roman Emperor Augustus once observed that it is was "safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son."
- When Herod realized his own death was looming, he ordered the arrest of the leading and most beloved citizens of the villages.
  - And he ordered that they were to be slaughtered at the exact moment of his death, so that all of Judea would be plunged into mourning at his passing.

- So, with this as his background, it should come as no surprise that when Herod heard that Jesus, "the newborn king of the Jews" had come into the world, he became very "troubled."
  - And that he eventually "sent soldiers to kill all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger..." in order to get rid of King Jesus.
  - Can you picture the soldiers going to every house in Bethlehem, breaking down the doors and killing their babies right in their mother's arms?
  - Grief bursts forth from this story!
  - But it's the way the world was then.
  - And in some ways, the world hasn't changed all that much.
- The grief in this story makes us want to forget Herod.
  - But it's important to remember Herod.
  - And it's important to remember that Jesus came into this world as a baby with a "price on His head."
  - It's important that we not forget this story, because it serves as a reminder that there is still good in this world which stands in contrast to the evil around us.
  - And it's important to remember this story because in it, Joseph illustrates what it means to live each day, as people of faith.

### **Living into faith**

- There was a Peanuts comic strip years ago that featured a conversation between Charlie Brown and Lucy.
  - Lucy walks up to Charlie and happily yells out, "Merry Christmas!"
    - Then in the spirit of the season, she says, "I think we ought to bury past differences and try to be kind."
  - Charlie Brown philosophically asks, "Why does it have to be that people are willing to set their differences aside and be kind to each other just at Christmastime?"
    - Why can't it be that way all year long?"
  - Lucy looks disgustedly at him and replies, "What are you, some kind of a religious fanatic or something?"
  - Lucy hasn't quite grasped the idea of living into one's faith, not just at Christmas or Easter, but each day of our earthly journey.

- Sometimes it's like that for us too. It's easy to forget that the Kingdom of God is at hand, right here right now.
- And that's quite a contrast to the story of Mary and Joseph, who each day lived into their faith and trusted God.
- So, while this part of the story of Jesus' birth is not often told, if we want the Christmas story to be complete, it's a part of the story that we need to hear.
  - The baby Jesus was being hunted like an animal, and had it not been for Joseph's quick action, Jesus surely would have been killed.

## **Joseph**

- Now as we heard in Sandra's sermon last week, we don't really know a lot about Joseph, other than that he was the husband of Mary.
  - But in this story, we also know that he was faithful.
  - On three different occasions, Joseph is visited by an angel, who has a special message from God.

## **Visit 1**

- In last week's reading we heard that Joseph was engaged to Mary when he learned that she was pregnant.
  - And he had planned to dismiss Mary quietly, rather than expose her to public disgrace.
  - But an angel of the Lord visits him, telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife.

## **Visit 2**

- In today's lesson, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph for a second time, in a dream and this time tells him to take the family and flee to Egypt and to stay there until the angel tells him it is safe to return.
  - Again, Joseph does what the angel tells him to do, taking Mary and Jesus to Egypt by night.

## **Visit 3**

- And the family remains in Egypt until an angel again appears for the third time and tells Joseph to return the family to the land of Israel.

## **Obedience**

- If anyone ever wonders why God chose someone so plain and ordinary like Joseph for this this amazing mission, I'd offer that perhaps it is because God knew Joseph's

heart. God knew that Joseph was sensitive to God's will and that he would do as God asked.

- Because after each visit, Joseph exhibits immediate obedience.
- Joseph trusted that When God calls, God provides a way.
- We can all take a lesson from Joseph, where it concerns putting our trust in God's provision.
- Joseph was an ordinary man, who showed extraordinary qualities.
  - He humbly accepted the fact that his bride-to-be was pregnant with the Son of God.
  - He stayed by her side, found a place for them to stay when it was time for her to give birth.
  - Then, when the family was threatened by Herod, he again listened to the Angel sent by God and he risked his own life to protect his family- to protect the Son of God.
- So, while we may not know much about Joseph, we know he was a man of character and responsibility- he was a man of faith- he was a man of obedience.

### **Character passed on**

- And this character was passed on from Joseph to Jesus.
- We tend to think of Jesus as a man and forget that he was born a baby just like everyone else and that he had to be nurtured and raised into adulthood.
  - It is easy to imagine God as the sole influence in Jesus' life, but it's quite likely that Jesus was equally influenced by his mother and father
    - And that he grew into their likeness, as well as the likeness of God.
  - The love and care Jesus demonstrated in his adult life, was not only God's love, but was surely a reflection of the love and care he had received from his earthly parents.
  - And we know from experience that children love the father that they know.
- And Joseph surely loved Jesus.
  - He probably took him to the Temple with him, and helped him learn to read and understand the scriptures.
  - He taught him his trade as a carpenter.
- Joseph could have taken the easy way out, but he didn't.
  - He could have skipped out on Mary.

- He could have ignored the angel's warning or abandoned Jesus and Mary when Herod was after them, but he didn't.
- He protected them, and he risked his own life to do it.
- Even though Joseph was not Jesus' birth father, he couldn't have loved him more.
  - Jesus is God's Son, but it's hard to imagine that God loved him any more than Joseph did.

### **Ordinary to accomplish the Extraordinary**

- In the birth of Jesus, God chooses ordinary people to do extraordinary things:
- Mary, a very young girl was chosen to be the mother of God's son
  - To give him birth, nurture him, care for him, to raise him into adulthood.
- Joseph, a carpenter, was chosen to be the earthly father of God's own Son- not his birth father, but his adoptive father.
  - And Joseph was called to protect Jesus, help raise him, teach him about the world, about faith and religion, about life.
- Mary and Joseph had to be filled with God's love, to take on what they took on.
  - And it can be seen in the way they raised Jesus and in the kind of man he grew to be.
  - They were able to do the extraordinary things God asked of them, because they were obedient to God;
    - Because, they had faith that what God asked them to do was the right thing to do.
    - And they had trust, that if God asked them to do something, God would provide what they needed.

### **Wrap it up**

- This part of the Christmas story reminds us that there is still evil in this world, but that the goodness of God can overcome evil.
  - In this story, we are reminded that God is working to bring goodness into the Kingdom and that God will ask us to help bring about that goodness.
  - In this story, we are reminded that God speaks to us in many ways.
    - It may be through a visit from an angel.
    - It may be through a vision we receive during prayer.
    - It may be through inspiration received from people around us.

- Or perhaps it may be through the Star word, we'll each receive on Epiphany Sunday next week.
  - Whatever that may be, God will speak and the real question becomes, "are you listening?"
- In this story, we are taught what it looks like to live into one's faith- to listen for the will of God and be ready to act.
- In this story, we see Joseph a good man and a loving father, who fully trusts God.
- And so, it is with us.
  - God will speak to us- God is speaking to us!
  - And God may or may not ask us to do extraordinary things.
    - But if we have faith and are obedient, we can put our trust in God.
    - And in so doing, we will be able to accomplish what God asks.
  - Because God won't let us fail. You can count on it.
  - This day and all days, may we listen for God and be ready to respond with obedience.
- Amen