

MATTHEW 2:13–23. (EHV)

After the Wise Men were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him.” Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son” [Hosea 11:1.] When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under. This was in keeping with the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men. Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more [Jeremiah 31:15].

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. The angel said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there. Since he had been warned in a dream, he went to the region of Galilee. When he arrived there, he settled in a city called Nazareth. So what was spoken through the prophets was fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Many people rely on other people and institutions to keep them safe. But even though they rely on those other people and institutions to keep them safe, poll after poll suggests that more and more people don’t actually think that those people and institutions are well equipped to do so.

When I see the results of such polls, I sometimes wonder, “What does this look like in a person’s life?” If someone is feeling less and less safe all the time, are they sleeping less? Do they have a shorter fuse? Are they always paranoid? Do they have to medicate regularly? Something else? All of the above?

How safe do you feel? A related question is: How well protected do you think you are? As we are about to embark upon a new year, are you looking forward to it, or wondering what kind of dangers and disasters are lurking just around the corner?

As we look at our text for this morning, the Holy Spirit wants us to see that God not only protects his Child; he also protects his children.

1.

Jesus begins his life as a human quite ironically. The heavenly King of kings has to escape the wrath of earthly King Herod. The one whose word is a sharp, double-edged sword is in danger of the physical swords of Herod’s soldiers. If you aren’t convinced that the Son of God

truly took on human flesh when you hear that his mother Mary gave birth to him and wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger and that the shepherds and the magi came and were able to lay eyes on him, then be convinced by this: When Herod decided to search for the baby Jesus in order to kill him, an angel had to appear to Joseph and tell him, “Get that child out of there right now!” If Herod’s soldiers had come and brought their swords down on the baby Jesus, their swords would not have shattered into a thousand pieces. They would have pierced his skin, pierced his vessels, bones, and organs. They would have killed him, just as surely as they killed the other baby boys in and around Bethlehem, just as surely as they would have killed any one of us.

So Joseph has to flee with Mary and Jesus, and not just to an area safely outside the vicinity of Bethlehem. He needs to take Jesus all the way to Egypt, and then he needs to stay there until he receives further instructions from the angel. And the angel does not give Joseph further instructions until after King Herod has died. Only then is it safe to return.

But even then, Jesus is still not out of the woods. When Joseph returns with his family to Judea, where Bethlehem and Jerusalem are located, he realizes that Herod has been succeeded by his son Archelaus, and he is afraid. Of all Herod’s sons, Archelaus was perhaps the most like his father, perhaps even more cruel. In one story that has come down to us, he had 3,000 Jews put to death in the temple at one time and cancelled their Passover celebration that year.

And apparently Joseph’s fear is justified, because he is warned in a dream again, this time being told not to settle in Judea. So he takes Mary and Jesus and moves back to his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee, to the north.

But in spite of all this danger, how safe was Jesus? No one ever laid so much as an evil finger on him. He grew up blissfully unaware that the episode ever happened until he was old enough for his parents to tell him about it. In fact, in the process of Jesus having to flee for his life, God actually ended up fulfilling another of his prophecies about his Son from the prophet Hosea: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Hosea was originally referring to the nation of Israel, whom God called out of slavery in Egypt, but the nation of Israel itself was a foreshadowing of Jesus, a type of Christ, and just as God called them out of Egypt, so he intended to call his one and only Son out of Egypt. And he did.

Jesus was perfectly safe. Perfectly protected. God protected his Child.

2.

Yes, and God also protected those to whom he entrusted his Child. He protected Joseph and Mary. He had actually already begun protecting them from the danger before the danger even came. Our text begins, “After the Wise Men were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream.” The Wise Men had just presented the baby Jesus their gifts of gold and incense and myrrh. When your relatives gave you expensive gifts when you were a baby, they were actually giving them to your parents to care for on your behalf. In the same way, the magi, in giving their precious gifts to Jesus, gave them to Joseph and Mary to care for on his behalf.

Before that, we are told that Joseph and Mary went to the temple and offered a sacrifice for Mary’s purification forty days after she gave birth to Jesus. Luke tells us they offered a pair of doves or two young pigeons. Under ideal circumstances, that sacrifice was actually supposed

to be a year-old lamb and a dove or a young pigeon. But God had said that if someone were honestly too poor to afford one lamb, she could have two doves or two young pigeons offered, and that's what Mary had offered.

Do you know what that means? At that point, Joseph and Mary did not have the means to take a trip to Egypt, much less stay there for any length of time. But along came the Wise Men with their expensive gifts to Jesus, gifts that Joseph and Mary could have easily concealed on the journey and also sold for enough money to take care of traveling and eating and lodging expenses on the trip to Egypt and back, in order to care for themselves and especially for the baby Jesus. God was protecting not just Jesus, but also Joseph and Mary.

In the meantime, look what else is happening: Joseph and Mary take the heart of the gospel himself, Jesus the Christ, with them to Egypt—Egypt, the nation associated in the Jewish mind with the cruel enslavement of their ancestors. Do you think there was no one there with whom Joseph and Mary shared their incredible story?

And who is going the other direction, to Persia? The Wise Men or magi, who have just come looking for and have worshipped Jesus as the Messiah, who have just been warned in a dream to return to their country by another route. They return to Persia, formerly known as Babylon, the land and nation associated in the Jewish mind with the captivity and deportation of their ancestors. Do you think the magi were silent about what and whom they found and what happened to them?

The apostle John wrote that Jesus “came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). While Jesus is being threatened and endangered by the leaders of his own people, the good news of his birth is going in opposite directions to two Gentile nations associated with godlessness. Already, God is making it clear that this baby's birth is meant for all people.

And what else is happening? God is putting Joseph and Mary's faith to the test and strengthening it. Mary was told that the One to be born of her would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High and the Son of God. Joseph was told that the One his betrothed would give birth to would save his people from their sins. And now they must flee with him to protect him from mere mortals?

So what are they going to believe? What their five senses tell them? Or the word of the eternal God? Judging from the prompt and exact obedience to God's word that we see on display from Joseph and Mary in this section, we have to conclude that God's purposes are being fulfilled, and that their faith is being strengthened even as they appear to be in danger.

But they only appear that way. Just as no one lays so much as an evil finger on the baby Jesus, so also no one lays so much as an evil finger on them. They are eventually able to settle back down safely in their hometown. God protected not just his Child, but also his believing children.

The strongest challenge in this text to this truth that God protects his children is the slaughter of the baby boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem and in the surrounding countryside. Scholarly estimates place the number of baby boys between 15 and 30. The weeping over their deaths was loud and heartrending. But there is a reason we call them the *holy* innocents. We assume that these Jewish baby boys were circumcised, in keeping with God's command, and circumcision was the seal of God's covenant promises with his people, promises

that were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. We also later hear Jesus telling us that we adults should pattern our faith after that of little believing children and infants (Matthew 18:1–13; 19:14; Luke 18:15–17). So we assume that these little children were believers who were taken to heaven. And even in being mourned, they received a privilege that King Herod himself could not obtain. Before King Herod died, he had all the principal men of the Jewish nation summoned and locked up in the hippodrome, and he gave orders to his sister and brother-in-law that upon his death all of them should be killed. He did this because he was worried that there would not be sufficient weeping among the Jews when he died. When you're godless and unloved, no one mourns your passing. But these godly children were loved and mourned. Yes, God was also protecting them, by bringing them safely to the place where nothing could harm them anymore.

And what about us? Angels may no longer appear to us in dreams, but we definitely still enjoy their protection. The psalmist tells us that if we make the Most High our dwelling, “no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:9–12). Jesus particularly mentions the angels that are assigned to guard the little children who believe in him (Matt. 18:10).

And still today, God often has the angels carry out tasks so as to offer us protection in advance of the danger. Have you stopped to think, “How many of the decisions that I and others made in 2025 will God use to protect me in 2026? How many of the events of the past years, ranging from the public and political down to the most trivial and private and even unknown, will God use to protect me in the coming year?”

And as we face those dangers, what continues to happen? The gospel of Jesus, the good news of his forgiveness and salvation, spreads to regions and to people that have not heard it before—people that we might never choose or expect to be recipients of the gospel, but that God already chose in eternity.

And what else happens as we face those dangers? God puts our faith to the test and strengthens it. We are forced to ask ourselves, “What is true? What my five senses take in, or what God says in his Word?” And that question forces us to pay more attention to God in his Word. It leads us to see that God's protection can never fail us, that our safety is assured, because this Child was and is not just true man, but also true God. Notice that God does not say to Joseph, “Take your wife and child and escape to Egypt.” He says, “Take the child and his mother.” He is not truly Joseph's son, but God's.

Our dangers furthermore lead us into God's Word to see that this Son of Man and Son of God was not protected forever. No, when the time was right, and he had made it clear that he was the Messiah, then God withdrew his protecting hand and forsook his Son and did not spare him. He did not send any of his angels to tell Jesus or his disciples, “Whatever you do, don't go to the Garden of Gethsemane after the Passover meal.” Jesus even asked his Father, if possible, to take the cup of suffering from him, and God did send an angel to him...not to deliver him, but to strengthen and prepare him for the cross (Luke 22:43). When Jesus hung on the cross, God brought down on him all the danger and wrath and punishment that was ours by right, for all our worry and paranoia and reliance on the transitory people and things of this world.

And when we see the Son of Man and the Son of God taking all our danger and wrath and punishment for us, and rising from the grave to prove it, we realize: What is the worst that can befall me now? If 2026 is the year I should die, then it will also be the first year of my eternity in the perfect holiness of heaven. If 2026 is the year that someone should lay an evil finger or an evil hand on me, then it will not be apart from the will of my heavenly Father. Behind that evil hand will be his own good and gracious hand accomplishing something for my good, not to harm or destroy me, but to help and save me.

God doesn't just protect his Child. He also protects all those who are his dear children through faith in his Child and Son Jesus. Maybe our country is less safe, physically speaking, than ever before—I don't know—but I do know this: All of you, as God's redeemed children, this coming year as always, have never been safer. Amen.