

And Then It All Changed

by Linda Rex

January 1, 2023, CHRISTMAS | New Year's Day—Do you remember anything from when you were a toddler? One of the stories that goes along with the birth of Christ is an event which occurred when Jesus was about two years old. At that time, Scriptures say that Jesus and his family were living in a house in Bethlehem. What kept them in Bethlehem those two years? Were the couple there simply to avoid the notoriety going back home would give them?

The magi or wise men from the East came to visit Joseph and Mary, bringing gifts for the newborn king. Unfortunately, in their search for Jesus, they stopped in Jerusalem and enquired of King Herod as to his location. Herod asked his counselors what they knew about the prophecies of the coming Messiah and they told him that Bethlehem was where the Messiah would arrive. In response Herod sent his visitors from the East to Bethlehem with instructions to come back and see him and let him know where the baby was, so he could also pay his respects.

Even though the magi didn't know the truth, God knew King Herod had no intention of letting the baby Messiah live. For that reason, he sent an angel to warn the magi, and they took a longer, more inconvenient way home so they could avoid returning to Jerusalem and endangering baby Jesus by reporting to Herod where they had found him.

This is where our gospel passage for this Sunday, Matthew 2:13–23, begins. Joseph, warned in a dream about Herod's evil intentions is told to take his family and flee to Egypt. He immediately obeyed God's instructions and began the dangerous and arduous trip, which was lengthened by the necessity of avoiding Jerusalem. Matthew recorded the horrific massacre of all infants under the age of two years which occurred shortly after they left Bethlehem. How must have Mary and Joseph have felt when the news reached them in Egypt of their close call!

Joseph, realizing that the hard work of his past two years disappeared in an instant simply because Jesus needed to be kept safe, must have had some real challenges in having to relocate and find work again. It is interesting God permitted circumstances to occur which would require that they end up in Egypt, and eventually then have to move back from Egypt, though up farther north in Galilee. Matthew, when recording these events, pointed out how each of them was a fulfillment of the prophetic word regarding the Messiah. Even though to Mary and Joseph these seemed like random events, in reality they were events which fulfilled God's plan and purpose for his Son Jesus.

God grants us humans great freedom in living our lives, making decisions, and choosing whether to obey him. But none of the decisions we make prevent God from ultimately accomplishing what he has in mind. What they often do is complicate our lives and create issues for us when we don't follow God's leadership and guidance, or we work in opposition to God. But God can even take our opposition to him and use it to accomplish his best purposes and plans.

The story of the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem is tragic and heartrending. In many ways, it was a foretaste of what would happen to the Messiah himself. The blood shed that day pointed to the blood Jesus himself would shed on the cross on behalf of every person, including all those innocent ones who lost their lives. It was never God's intention that the children die—that was the plan of the evil one and a sick king. But having happened, every child who died that day participated in Christ's own crucifixion by the hand of broken, sinful people. And they rose, and will rise, in Jesus' own resurrection.

Tears are often a part of our story. We'd all like to have stories which never have dark places in them, but the reality is that a good story includes both light and darkness. It is the conflict between the two which speaks to our hearts and captures our imagination. We know that our human existence in this crazy world is full of both sides of the coin. That is the reality of life right now apart from Christ.

What brings us joy, peace, and hope in the midst of such a place where evil stands in such strong opposition to what is good is the incarnation. It is that this God, who is greater than any evil that exists, has come into our human existence and taken on our human flesh. This God, though attacked by evil even as a child, continued to realign our human flesh with his eternal purposes and plans throughout his time

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here on earth, forging within our human flesh a capacity for genuine, other-centered love toward God and one another.

No matter how dark things get in our world, Jesus brings light. No matter what the evil one may attempt in a parasitic effort to destroy God's good purposes and plans, he will ultimately fail. This child, born in such humble circumstances and threatened by human powers and evil plots, was guarded by his heavenly Father. He experienced the crucifixion of his human flesh in so many ways besides what happened on the cross. Here, in this part of his story, he became the one who lived when others died. He became the one who escaped while others suffered. But at the same time, he was the one in whom they suffered and died in his own cruciform offering. And he was the one in whom they will rise again in his own resurrection.

What darkness are you facing today? What battle are you fighting? What loss are you grieving? What addiction are you shackled by? Does the New Year look bleak considering what you are facing?

Jesus reminds us that whatever our story may be, it is caught up in the midst of his Father's great big story. And however bad the evil may be, it is no match for the greatness and goodness of our loving God. And it's never over, until God says it's over. So there is always hope, peace, and joy in Christ as we are held in the midst of God's love and grace. We are forgiven. We are accepted. We are beloved. And we most certainly are included—invited into and held within the inner circle of Father and Son in the Spirit. Praise God!

Thank you, dear Jesus, for going to such lengths to make us a part of your Father's story. Thank you for forging for us the gift of life in the midst of death, of grace in the midst of our failures to love and serve. Thank you for including us in your life with the Father in the Spirit. Amen.

"For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, 'I will proclaim Your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.' And again, 'I will put my trust in Him.' And again, 'Behold, I and the children whom God has given me.' Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through afear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."
Hebrews 2:10–18 NASB

"Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.' So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.' Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. Then what had been 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 were no more.' But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 'Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead.' So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into 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. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: 'He shall be called a Nazarene.' " Matthew 2:13–23 NASB

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