

It Happened This Way

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December 29, 2019

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now after they had left, 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 about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and 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 have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

I.

Shorn of the angelic messenger and the biblical footnoting of the narrator, the story from Matthew's gospel looks depressingly familiar – and disturbingly random. Look at Matthew without some of the stained glass and we might get this: For a short while, Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus lived in Bethlehem. Then, under the cover of night, without very much notice at all, fled with his family, to Egypt. It wasn't a natural destination for a new family, much less a Jewish family. They lived in Egypt for perhaps four years. Then, around 4 CE, they returned to the land of Israel. They had intended to go into Bethlehem but, sensing political instability, Joseph took another detour, this time to Galilee, into a place called Nazareth. Nazareth wasn't a place of any historic significance. It seemed like a place mostly out of sight.

Bethlehem, translated from the Hebrew, means house of bread. And as a city, it had a long history with Israel. Egypt did too. It was place where the ancient people of Israel had taken refuge from a world taken over by famine. It was also a place where, eventually, the Hebrew people were turned into slaves.

A slave revolt eventually led the people out of captivity and into forty years of wandering.

This is where Joseph seeks refuge.

Back in Bethlehem, just after Joseph has left with Mary and Jesus, Herod proceeds to separate the kids from their parents. Too much like this morning's news. Historians say this was predictable behavior for Herod, who was prone to cruelty and incredibly insecure. Bethlehem maybe had 300 residents. It was a small place, barely worth the Roman Empire's notice. And maybe that's why Herod could do what he did. Maybe he instructed his officers to come at night, to raid the homes when the families would be least likely to resist. Take the kids, put them in cages. After that came the screams, the crying. And then there was nothing.

It all seems so random, almost nonsensical. You wonder, did Jesus look back on that day, and ask, Why did I survive and so many others perish?

In some ways, calling him a savior must have seemed ironic — from our perspective, in a world bereft of visits from angelic beings and biblical rationalizations, he looks like a survivor, perhaps not quite sure why he lived and his cousins didn't; maybe wondering why his father, Joseph, didn't do more to save others. Why, he might have asked, did we leave so many behind when we knew what was coming?

In fact, as I read this text, that's the issue that kept after me — you survived! It was more accusation. As in, How dare you! Or how shameful . . . or, how I am going to explain to the church that you alone survived, while all those others perished? Some kind of savior -- for the one child to escape while hundreds of others were killed. We may even want to stop reading the story at this point. Because how could his life mean anything — at best he was a survivor, but far from a savior.

II.

Maybe we think that about Jesus. And maybe we also wonder if our own lives make sense. Some of us who have experienced trauma — maybe surviving a natural disaster, or military conflict, or perhaps having survived disease — the question of why it happens becomes really pointed for us. It may even feel wrong to have survived. You wonder why friends you got to know because of a shared disease — why did they succumb, or why did you get better?

Sometimes its economic upheaval. I don't imagine we can really get into the minds of those who leave places like Guatemala, coming north. They do so with children. It used to be that most migrants were young men. Unattached, no children, sometimes a wife, but back home. Now, it's women and children, which is usually a sign that things are very bad at home. Nearly 70,000 migrant children have been in U.S. custody this year — placed in cages, camps, and other so-called shelters. Separated from their parents, or according to some kidnapped from their parents, in some cases for

the rest of their lives. Even those who get reunited with their parents will carry that trauma in their bodies for years, decades afterwards.

And the parents. You know they'll second guess themselves for the rest of their days; some will feel guilt for the months, maybe years of separation that our political system will exact from them for the crime of crossing a national border.

They didn't cause the famine or the drug war or the hardline on illegal immigration — but many will feel a heightened sense of their own fault.

The massacre of the innocents.

Our own Baltimore. Over 340 deaths this year. Carmen Rodriguez . . . working at a store, was gunned down in front of her children. A woman, Destiny Harris, ambitious, was killed too. A mother as well. Dozens of people have died in gun violence within a block of the Family Survivor Network. I talked with the survivors . . . Who else can you talk to after a massacre?

Maybe all of us are in some way “lucky” or “spared” — after all, we're here. I wasn't the teenager who committed suicide in my high school. I wasn't the kid who took a pill expecting a high, only to find it was laced with something deadly. I wasn't that kid. But maybe some of you know that one personally. . . . you live with the trauma of loss, and lingering questions it brings.

I drove too fast as a teenager. That wasn't unusual, but I took stupid risks. There were other kids who did the same. One of them wrapped his car around a tree on a road that I'd driven on myself. I knew that road. I slowed down to see the tree where he'd crashed. I'd taken that corner, that very corner. . . . He survived the crash, but he was never the same. He used to be quick witted, smart, funny. After the crash . . . well, he was just never the same.

Some days, driving on the highway, you pass by a car wreck and you know that could have been you . . . there were only seconds separating you.

Maybe you say God spared me. Or maybe you feel lucky. Or it can feel cruel. Or random.

III.

The story of Jesus may seem like words scribbled on a page, maybe even randomly — it just happened to happen this way. Matthew introduces Jesus' birth with almost exactly those words, “It happened this way in the days of King Herod. . . .” Jesus' birth happened during the reign of Herod. It might have been otherwise. I think there's something of that in every life. Our lives are happening in this way, in the days of this administration. It could have been otherwise. But by the same token, isn't it also possible that our lives, when we look at them from a different perspective, suggest God's invisible handwriting our story, not in some random way but in a loving and tender way?

As you probably noticed, virtually every town or village or nation had a biblical narrative attached to it. Bethlehem, Egypt, Galilee. That's Matthew's way of saying that all of this belongs to God's salvation story. Each of these places has a kind of biblical pedigree to it; Matthew's point

throughout this is that Jesus isn't merely an individual; the whole experience of Israel, its experience of wandering, captivity, persecution, and deliverance flows through his life.

He is God with us, through captivity, persecution, and deliverance. The story isn't even just about the story itself — the story of a small-time tyrant committing heinous crimes and a family caught up in that madness.

Matthew's narrator introduces characters that will return later on in the story. The chief priests and pharisees meet with Herod; they will do the same with Pilate, just before Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. Likewise, it was Gentiles, the wise men from the east, who recognized that Jesus was the true king of the Jews, and more than the king of the Jews; at the end of Jesus' life, it is a Roman soldier who sees Jesus dying on a cross who says, "Surely this is the Son of God!"

Even the city that doesn't have any other role in the Bible, Nazareth, plays a part in Matthew's story. Matthew is usually very specific when he quotes scripture, when he indicates the significance of a specific city or nation. Jesus went to Egypt, according to the narrator, "in order to fulfill the scripture that says, I called him out of Egypt." But when it comes to Nazareth, however, Matthew speaks more vaguely, about the prophets. The prophets say . . . no specific prophet. Nazareth wasn't a big place. But in Hebrew, it sounds like branch, which leads some to believe that Matthew is recalling Isaiah's prophecy that from this branch (which in Hebrew is *nezer*, thus echoes Nazareth) a new and perfect sovereign will arise; it's Matthew's way of saying even this random place, with no real significance otherwise, plays an integral part in God's plan (Eugene Boring, "Matthew" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 147).

It may sound strained to our ear, but in a sense, Matthew writes out a bold narrative of God's grace — nothing in Matthew's estimation is beyond God's care and providence.

IV.

In his Sermon on the Mount says, Jesus says, "Don't worry about what you will wear or what you will eat. Look at the lilies of the field and how they are dressed — not even Solomon in all of his glory was dressed as beautiful as one of these flowers. And yet, these are here today and tomorrow they are gone. If God clothes the flowers of the field, which are here today and gone tomorrow — and seem about as random as wind, seed, and soil — will not God clothe you even more than these?"

Our lives matter to God.

Maybe the places we have called home. The living room where this happened; the bedroom; the apartment; the heart ache of house and hearth. Addresses with a number and a name that only we seem to know. And seasons of life when we have felt homeless. The near misses. And the painful losses. The friends we lost to HIV AIDS; and those who survived, seemingly by a miracle. The regrets that haunt us to this day.

Some of us didn't want to be survivors. And some of us have spent decades trying to understand what it means to survive. Maybe we're more than survivors. We're more than the near miss. We are more than pawns in some demented game of chance.

It's not always possible to achieve Matthew's exalted theology, looking at everything and having it all make sense. It doesn't make sense. Not always anyway. Perhaps we would do better to remember those who look for us every morning. There may be days when you don't know why you live. But I bet there's someone who looks for you, whose heart fills with happiness when they see you. Live for them . . . and you might find in that love reason to live and love yourself.

Guilt is another way we deal with survival. Maybe we punish ourselves. But guilt is also a way of saying we were somehow in control. Is a soldier in control of a combat situation? No, not really. Flying shrapnel is the opposite of control. Psychologists who study trauma survivors say guilt is an exaggerated sense of our own agency — it doesn't allow us to really grieve. Grieving may be a sign that we're beginning to surrender ourselves to God's care . . . or perhaps surrendering our anger to God.

Maybe what I'm trying to say here is that surviving isn't the same as living. Surviving takes the decimation, the loss as the beginning point.

The whole story of these cities, these near misses, isn't that anyone survives. Jesus doesn't survive. In a sense, his innocence dies on that very day, that very day of seeming survival. He can't live casually; he lives boldly, because he understands that this is living. He lives in such a way that he dies because he is determined to live completely, fully, and boldly.

Being with the stranger. Eating with the estranged. Befriending the friendless. Follow Matthew's story and that's the kind of survivor, savior Jesus you will find. The resurrection suggests to me that the cross is part of the story — in our Apostle's Creed, we say, it happened this way, that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into hell, and on the third day he rose again.

Maybe our invitation for the new year, is to think about our lives, how they happened this way . . . under this or that ruler, this or that calamity, this or that near miss, this or that displacement . . . and to listen for the way God's grace writes the true and substantial story of our lives, including our lives, as they unfold, in Christ, with Christ, through Christ, under Pontius Pilate. . . .

Amen.