

## **God Protects**

### **1) Protection Defined**

The theme for this final Sunday in Advent is “God Protects.” According to Merriam-Webster, “protect” can be defined as to “keep safe from harm.” Some possible synonyms for protect are to save, safeguard, preserve, defend, and shield.

This definition and these synonyms would imply protection from an immediate danger. If there is a tornado near you, you protect yourself by seeking out shelter, preferably in a basement. If you’re playing soccer, you protect your legs from the ball and cleats by wearing shin guards. We wear seatbelts in cars to protect ourselves from getting hurt even worse in an accident.

The other implication of this definition of protection is not only is the danger immediate, but it is also temporary. You can leave the basement after the tornado has either left the area or dissipated. You can take off the shin guards after the game is over. And you don’t need to wear a seatbelt when the car is parked. Protection is a response to an immediate but temporary need.

However, protection can also be defined as to “preserve,” as in protecting endangered species so as to preserve them from going extinct. According to this definition, then, protection is still responding to an immediate need or danger, but the effects are ongoing. You get house insurance, or car insurance, or health insurance, or life insurance to protect you against an immediate and ongoing need. You don’t know the next time you will be sick, but you know it’s going to happen, and you want to have health insurance so that you can be protected when some medical need inevitably arises. You won’t necessarily get in a car accident, and your house will hopefully not catch fire or be damaged from a storm, but you know that is always a possibility, so you have insurance for an ongoing but ever-present danger.

Our Advent Psalm for this morning proclaims that God is our protector. The Psalmist recalls how God intervened for Israel’s immediate and temporary needs by protecting her against physical enemies in war, but maybe even more importantly he reiterates God’s covenant with David, and that God would offer ongoing and endless protection through the line of David.

We are going to use the Advent Psalm as a launching off point to look at the Nativity story. In Matthew 1, the Gospel writer primarily focuses on the character of Joseph as both the active agent and recipient of God's protection. And for and through Joseph we see God's protection, both immediately and temporarily as well as ongoing and eternal.

## **2) Immediate and Temporary Protection**

***Let's first consider the way God immediately protected Mary and Jesus from danger through Joseph's character and Joseph's faithfulness.***

Matthew tells us in vv.18-24: <sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Now, there were plenty of legends circulating during Joseph's day about women who had mysteriously become pregnant by means of a god. The great Roman hero Hercules was supposedly the son of the god Zeus and a mortal woman. Joseph surely would've been familiar with the stories. However, that does not mean

that he would have believed that this could happen to his fiancé. And so, although Mary had told him a fantastical lie, or so he thought, his character demanded that he treat her with respect rather than revenge. Joseph's plan became to divorce her quietly, preserving her dignity. It's important to note that culturally, Jewish people were considered married at the time of their engagement. So to break off an engagement was a much more serious and legal affair than it is today and would be akin to divorce.

And Joseph, according to the Law of Moses, had every right to exact justice for Mary's indiscretion. In Deuteronomy 22:20-24, if an engaged woman cheats on her husband before they are married, "The city's elders will bring the young woman to the door of her father's house. The citizens of that city must stone her until she dies." Joseph had the legal right to have Mary killed for becoming pregnant before they were married. It's doubtful that this law was practiced during Jesus' time while the Romans occupied Jerusalem, but the point stands that the punishment for adultery was extreme. And even though Mary would not have been killed, she would have carried with her the reputation of a cheater, a sinner, and an unclean person.

God knew, however, that Joseph had a righteous character and would not want to humiliate her, thus the quiet divorce. God protected Mary through Joseph's character.

However, God had more use for Joseph in his plan beyond even his character. So, he sent an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream in order to reinforce Mary's words.

Matthew 1:20-21 says:

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel's message of "don't be afraid" had a double meaning for Joseph; it was firstly, don't be afraid that this angel appeared before you out of nowhere, I mean you no harm! Secondly, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, God will protect you as you go into this unknown.

Because of God's intervention and Joseph's faithfulness, Joseph would make Mary his wife and raise Jesus as if He were his own son. God protected Mary and Jesus from

the immediate danger of cultural ridicule and the immense challenges that would come from growing up without a father. God used the righteous and faithful character of Joseph to offer Mary the protection of a proper marriage and to give Jesus the protection of having an earthly father.

**Transition: Now, let's consider God's ongoing and endless protection that comes through his fulfilling the covenant he made with David, to establish a king in the line of David who would save His people forever.**

## **2) Ongoing and Endless Protection**

The Psalmist writes in **Psalm 89:3-4**:

<sup>3</sup> The LORD said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have made a promise on oath to David, my servant

<sup>4</sup> 'I will give you an eternal dynasty and establish your throne throughout future generations.'

So what did this promise mean to the Jewish people, especially to Joseph and Mary, at the time when Jesus was born and during his life and ministry? Historically, in 722 BCE the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and then in 586 the southern kingdom of Judah, which contained Jerusalem and the temple, fell to the Babylonians. During the time of Israel's captivity

under the Assyrians, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a Messiah who would come and rescue God's people from her enemies. However for the time being, it would seem that with no king on the throne, God had failed to protect his promise that there would be a King over the people from the line of David forever. Now, God had a plan to keep that promise, but it wouldn't happen for another 700 years. Remember that the second definition of "protection" is to preserve. God wanted to preserve his people, but he also wanted them to know that it wasn't going to happen in the way that they would expect, through an earthly kingdom, through warring armies and games of thrones. In fact, God never wanted His people to have a king like the rest of the nations; he warned them that if they had a king that they would have to pay taxes, sell their children into slavery, and send their sons into war. And that's exactly what happened, until Israel's kings made too many bad foreign policy deals and were eventually destroyed by much larger, better equipped enemies.

God's long-term plan to protect and preserve his people would come through a king, but not the type of king they expected and it would come not only to the Jewish people but to the entire world. And He would be able to accomplish it still by keeping his promise to David

through making Joseph Jesus' adoptive earthly father. But how would he do that?

Matthew's telling of the nativity story begins in a rather odd and somewhat unexciting way. He begins with 17 verses listing the genealogy of Jesus, all the way back to Abraham. His purpose in this strange beginning, outlined in v. 1, is to connect Jesus directly to David, thus fulfilling the covenant that the Messiah would come from the line of David. What's most interesting about Matthew's genealogy is that he traces from David to Jesus through Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father.

I think that God was making a point in connecting Jesus to David through Joseph, and the point is this. God will use unexpected means to protect his people. Both Joseph and David were unexpected actors in God's plans. When David was chosen to fight Goliath, he was the least likely candidate for the job. He was young, small in stature, and inexperienced in war. But God chose him because through him he could display His glory. In the same way, Joseph might have at first appeared to be a strange choice by God as Jesus' protector and earthly father. Why didn't he choose a priest, or a ruler, or somebody wealthy or important? When God called Samuel to anoint David as king over Israel, he gave

Samuel some pretty important advice. 1 Samuel 16:7  
“But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” In choosing both David and Joseph, God was more concerned with their character and faithfulness than with their appearance. God was going to preserve his people and fulfill his promise to David by bringing a Messiah into the world that would save all people from their sins. But that preservation was going to happen in a way that was so different from anyone’s expectations.

### **Conclusion:**

Poor Joseph, we don’t spend too much time thinking about him during the Christmas season. To the best of my knowledge, we don’t have any Christmas carols that give much if any time to Joseph. Because he was not the biological father to Jesus, and because he probably died before Jesus’ ministry, he becomes a secondary character in the nativity story. But if you really read through Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, without any preconceived notions as to what it’s about and who is important, Joseph is THE main character throughout the two chapters. The genealogy traces through Joseph. The

angel appears to Joseph in order to convince him to marry Mary. Then, when Herod hears that the Messiah has been born and begins having all infant boys in Israel slaughtered, God sends an angel to JOSEPH with the message to leave and flee to Egypt. And after Herod dies and it is safe once again, God sends and Angel again to JOSEPH that they could return to Nazareth. The Christmas story is all about Jesus' birth, but Joseph is given the most screen time; he is the Hero of Matthew's nativity. And God's protection, both in the immediate, temporary sense and in the ongoing endless sense, is demonstrated through Joseph's character, faithfulness, and actions.

So what does that say to us, today about God's protection for us? Firstly, it tells me that God does truly work in mysterious ways that make little sense according to the values of the world. Secondly, it tells me that God keeps His promises. God did fulfill his promise to David; it just didn't happen in the time or the way that the Israelites expected. Most importantly, it tells me that God does protect His people.

Now, where I struggle with this, and where you might struggle as well, is that in spite of God's protection, bad things do happen to believers. So how do we explain

that? Firstly, we have to concede that God's ways and plans are greater than we could possibly understand. Secondly, we need to remember that God sent the Holy Spirit to be present with us in the midst of our troubles, to protect our hearts, our minds, and our spirits, even when our physical bodies or the bodies of those around us aren't safe from the world. Finally, and most importantly, God's ultimate plan to protect his people was to preserve his people, forever, through His son Jesus. That's what we celebrate at Christmas that the Son of God, the savior of the world has been born. And all who would call on him can receive the greatest gift the world has ever known: peace and eternal life with Christ Jesus in heaven with God.

So how do we live in the midst of the immediate dangers of the world, knowing that God is with us and protects us by the Holy Spirit, even though we most assuredly will suffer? I'm encouraged by the words of John Newton in that classic hymn "Amazing Grace." "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." By God's grace, we have been protected forever through Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. I want to close this morning by reading another Psalm of protection, Psalm 46, and encourage us this Christmas

season to look to God's protection through Jesus Christ as the ultimate assurance.

## **Psalm 46**

<sup>1</sup> God is our strong refuge; he is truly our helper in times of trouble. <sup>2</sup> For this reason we do not fear when the earth shakes, and the mountains tumble into the depths of the sea, <sup>3</sup> when its waves crash and foam, and the mountains shake before the surging sea. <sup>4</sup> The river's channels bring joy to the city of God, the special, holy dwelling place of the sovereign One. <sup>5</sup> God lives within it, it cannot be moved. God rescues it at the break of dawn. <sup>6</sup> Nations are in uproar, kingdoms are overthrown. God gives a shout, the earth dissolves. <sup>7</sup> The Lord who commands armies is on our side! The God of Jacob is our protector! <sup>8</sup> Come! Witness the exploits of the Lord, who brings devastation to the earth! <sup>9</sup> He brings an end to wars throughout the earth; he shatters the bow and breaks the spear; he burns the shields with fire. <sup>10</sup> He says, "Stop your striving and recognize that I am God! I will be exalted over the nations! I will be exalted over the earth!" <sup>11</sup> The Lord who commands armies is on our side!  
**The God of Jacob is our protector!**