

Just about everyone knows how I feel about the Wise Men being part of the Christmas story – we know that they are not part of the Christmas story. When you set up your Nativity Scenes, the Wise Men should be in another room, because they were not there at the birth of our Savior.

Be that as it may, we usually associate the Wise Men with the birth of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that the Scriptures teach us that Jesus was probably about 2 years old when the Wise Men from the east visited him and presented their gifts. In Matthew 2:9-12, just prior to our Gospel lesson from this morning we read: *“When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”*

Notice just a couple of things – the star led to them to where *the young Child was*. It was a young child and not a baby. And then the Wise men went into the house where they worshiped him and presented their gifts – and it is the fact that there were three gifts that led to the tradition that there were three Wise Men, but the Scriptures do not tell us how many there were.

One thing, however, that we don’t hear a lot about is what happened following their visit to Jesus. While today is the first Sunday after Christmas, it is also December 28, which in the Church Calendar is known as “The Holy Innocents” – or, as we read, the slaughter or massacre of the Innocents, as we read in our Gospel lesson this morning. Turn with me to Matthew 2:13-18.

The account of the slaughter is recorded for us only in Matthew, leading some “Biblical” scholars to say that it really didn’t happen, but as we shall see, it was a fulfillment of prophecy – one of the multitude of prophecies that there fulfilled in the birth, life and death of our Savior. It is also proof of the divine inspiration of Scripture, because if mere mortals were writing this, they might have left this out.

We know that the Wise Men had traveled far following a star that they had seen. We read these words at the beginning of Matthew 2:1-12 (READ). It is because they did return to Herod, that Herod issued the decree to kill all the male children two years old and younger, and that is why Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt.

We see a number things in this passage. As we compare Scripture with Scripture, we know that at one point in the history of Israel, as they were in Egypt after the time of Joseph, as the population grew, Pharaoh ordered that all the male children be killed. It was that decree that led the mother of Moses to place him in a basket, and then, as we know, Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s house as an Egyptian. And it would be that same Moses who would lead the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Now we see that Egypt becomes a place of refuge for the Baby Jesus. We also see God’s divine protection as an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to tell him to flee to Egypt. And as the Scriptures tell us, this too was a fulfillment of prophecy from Hosea 11:1: *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.”*

We don’t know a whole lot about Joseph. In fact after Jesus was 12 years old we read nothing more about

Joseph. But he must have been a man of incredible faith. Consider the fact while he was engaged to Mary – and in that day it was the same as being married without living together, he finds out that Mary is with child.

His first thought was to divorce her for being unfaithful. But we know the story, how the angel of the Lord appeared to him in dream, and we read in Matthew 1:20,21: *“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”*

So Joseph, a simple carpenter took Mary as his wife. Then we know that because of the decree of Caesar, that he had to travel about a 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because that was his home town. And that was where Jesus was born, which was a fulfillment of prophecy from Micah 5:2: *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.”* Again, faith and obedience.

And now, once more, because of the threat to the life of Jesus, he had to pack up and leave and travel to Egypt, a journey of over 200 miles. Faith and obedience in action. The Scriptures do not even give us a hint that there was ever any doubt by Joseph – no thought at all of packing it all in and saying this is not worth it. He had great love for Mary and for his God and it was evidenced in his actions.

But as we read, our story does not end there. When Herod realized that the Wise Men would not be returning to him, because they too were warned by God, he ordered all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding districts to be killed. He was not going to let anything of anyone get in the way of his reign.

Herod’s reign was known for its bloodshed. Caesar himself said that it was better to be Herod’s cow than his son. And history tells us that he killed his own son, as well as all the male children in Bethlehem. Historians tell us because of Bethlehem’s size, that the number was probably less than 50.

Again though, we see a couple of important things. First, it was a fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15: *“Thus says the LORD: “A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more.”* This is a prophecy concerning the return of Israel from exile. Commentators tell us that Rachel, the mother, represents all Israel in her weeping, and the departure of Christ to Egypt is like the departure of Rachel’s sons, Joseph and Benjamin to Egypt.

Secondly, we see the great humility of our Savior. Here he was, God in the flesh having to flee like a common criminal. As Philippians 2:5-8 tell us: *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”*

And lastly, and most importantly, these innocent children were the first martyrs in the name of Christ. Persecution against Christ and his kingdom began when he was an infant. Persecution in name of Christ began even before people began to trust in him as Savior and Lord. The slaughter of the innocents is proof of original sin and that the world needed a Savior ... that we needed the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it is in all of this that we see the eternal plan of God beginning to come to fruition. Herod thought he had removed the threat to his throne, but he was a mere pawn in the eternal and perfect plan of God.

Before the foundation of the world, God had planned that a Savior would come, because he would be needed. Now, in the fulness of time, that plan was being fulfilled. From the conception in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, to Joseph still taking Mary as his wife. Then the trip to Bethlehem, the birth, the flight to Egypt and then the slaughter of the innocents. All part of the eternal and perfect plan of God, for us and our salvation.

As Peter tells us in his 2nd letter – 2 Peter 1:16: *“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”*

As we continue to celebrate this joyous season of Christmas, let us remember what a great salvation we have and what it cost our God and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us remember all the prophecies that were fulfilled in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. It should fill us with wonder and awe.