

“Safe in the Middle of God’s Plan”

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Another 365 days are in the books. Did 2020 go according to plan for you? I’m confident I know the answer to that! 2020 was filled with some fun, exciting, and fulfilling experiences for you, but also plenty of unexpected, difficult, and stressful experiences. And Covid-19 affected all of it! But it’s a new year and with new vaccines there seems to be light at the end of the Covid-19 tunnel so maybe 2021 will be different? Will 2021 go according to plan? Let’s consider that question based on the life of Mary and Joseph.

The year is 5 B.C. (I won’t go into much detail but based on a comparison of dates in Scripture and what we know from history, historians have figured out that our current calendar is off by roughly 5years). Mary and Joseph were engaged. They were busy making preparations for their wedding day. Excitement was in the air for them and their families. The plan was to get married, get settled as a married couple, enjoy married life, possibly even start their family. However, 5 B.C. didn’t go according to Mary and Joseph’s plan. The angel Gabriel changed all that with his announcement to Mary that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Savior of the world. Imagine what it must have been like to explain that to Joseph and to her family! Imagine the whispers and gossip flying around Nazareth! Things were not going according to Mary and Joseph’s 5 B.C. plan, but that was just the start. Mary takes an unexpected trip to see her cousin Elizabeth and finds out that she is pregnant as well. What joy! There was the angel coming to Joseph in a dream telling him not to cancel the wedding so the wedding got moved up. What relief! Then 8 months pregnant Mary and Joseph walked 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem so they could be counted in the Roman census. How inconvenient, scary, and

stressful! And the whole point of being counted by the Romans was so they could pay their fair share of the taxes. What a pain! And when they arrive in Bethlehem there isn't a proper place to have the baby. You've got to be kidding! After settling in the stable and having a safe delivery (A Christmas miracle!), shepherds show up happy and excited to celebrate with them, share their experience with the angels, and worship their baby, Jesus. Unbelievable! 40 days later Mary and Joseph go to the temple in Jerusalem to follow God's Old Testament religious laws in connection with having a child and two kind elderly strangers named Simeon and Anna have some uplifting and thought provoking things to say to them about Jesus. What next? Then a few days or months or even a couple of years later wise men, who traveled a great distance from the east following a special star, arrive in Bethlehem to worship Jesus and bring him gifts. Amazing! 5 B.C was filled with some fun, exciting, and fulfilling experiences for Mary and Joseph, but also plenty of unexpected, difficult, and stressful experiences. It's pretty safe to say that 5 B.C. didn't go according to plan for Mary and Joseph! Yet while it didn't go according to their plan, all the Scripture prophecies that were fulfilled by the events of Mary and Joseph's life are a clear reminder that 5 B.C. went according to God's plan. And the safest place to be is in the middle of God's plan. 4 B.C. would be much easier, less eventful, and less stressful for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – right? Listen to Matthew 2:13-23.

“When they (the wise men) had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’

After Herod died, 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 to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.’

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”

Three of the most stressful things that a person can experience in life are having a baby, changing jobs, and moving. Mary and Joseph did all three in 5 B.C. No doubt they were planning on having a less “eventful” 4 B.C. That didn't quite happen. An angel warned Joseph in a dream about King Herod's unconscionable plan to kill the Bethlehem babies in an effort to kill Jesus. This sad event was a reminder of the many sad events that happened in the area (Ramah – 10 miles north of Bethlehem) – Rachel dying

while giving birth to Benjamin, Civil War fighting between northern and southern Israel, and the Babylonians had a prison camp located here when they took Judah into exile. King Herod's behavior is shocking behavior from a government leader, but not shocking when you consider that Herod killed one of his wives, two of his sons, and other family members in his "no matter what the cost" effort to remain the King of Israel. It seems that Mary and Joseph were open to the idea of possibly remaining in the Judean/Bethlehem area, but King Herod's actions forced them to relocate at least 40 miles south to Egypt which was still a Roman controlled area, but not under the control of King Herod. They probably weren't in Egypt all that long, less than a year, but the wise men's gifts and the fact that many other Jewish people had moved to Egypt to escape King Herod meant that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus would be well provided for physically and spiritually while they were in Egypt. King Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C. which cleared the way for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to return to Israel. Unfortunately, King Herod's son Archelaus took over as ruler in Judea and he was just as bad if not worse than his father Herod on the cruelty scale. Moving back to the Bethlehem area was not the best idea, so the 120 mile trek back to Nazareth it is! Just like 5 B.C., 4 B.C. didn't seem to be going according to plan for Mary and Joseph. Yet while it didn't go according to their plan, all the Scripture prophecies that were fulfilled by the events of Mary and Joseph's life are a clear reminder that 4 B.C. went according to God's plan. And the safest place to be is in the middle of God's plan.

Will 2021 go according to your plan and mine? If Mary and Joseph's lives are any indication, and also from our past life experience, we know that the answer is no. This year like the rest will be filled with some fun, exciting, and fulfilling events and also some unexpected, difficult, and stressful events. And Covid-19 isn't gone so that will continue to affect things too. Some things we want to change might not. Some things we don't want to change will. Who will play the problem causing role of King Herod in our lives this year? Who will play the encourager role of the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the wise men in our lives this year? What events in the world or in our lives this year will make us grieve like many events did that took place in Ramah many years ago? What events in the world or in our lives will make us smile and feel blessed like the healthy birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world, our Savior? What unexpected "Archelaus is reigning in Judea" information will unexpectedly lead us to change our plans in 2021? None of us knows what the plan is for our lives in 2021, but be at peace today and rest easy tonight and every day and night this year because God knows what is going to happen and he has a plan for each and every one of us. The God who orchestrated history so that Jesus would be born to save us from the punishment of Hell we rightfully deserve for our sins is the same God who will be our Egypt, our source of daily refuge, in 2021. The God who sent the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the wise men to encourage and support Mary and Joseph will provide people like that in our lives this year and will also give us opportunities to be that person to others this year. The God who chose us before the creation of the world to be a part of his eternal family will orchestrate all things this year in a way that has our eternal future in Heaven in mind. I don't know what good, bad, or same old normal or new normal moments are in store for you and me in 2021, but I do know this, the best place to be is in the middle of God's plan. Through faith in Jesus, that's exactly where you and I live daily. Amen.