



HEROD'S HORRIBLE HATRED

MATTHEW 2

News about Jesus's birth spread quickly. But the news didn't stir up some grand celebration like you might expect. Instead, three little-known wise men made the journey to sunny, lush Jerusalem from deserts of the East.

Apparently, a special, never-before-seen star rose in the night sky just as soon as Jesus was born. These wise men followed the star, which led them straight to Jerusalem. The wise men asked those in the city, "Where's the baby who's now the King of the Jews?"

Herod heard of the wise men's arrival and grew quite upset. Wait a second! Who's this Herod guy?

Herod, you should know, is a very important person in this story. He was the king of the Roman empire at the time (which included Jerusalem). His empire was enormous, which only fed his overstuffed ego.

Anyone else who dared to call themselves "king" in any way, shape, or form was put to death (which was why Herod was quite upset when the wise men called Jesus the "King of the Jews.")

Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes (who were sort of like his advisors) and asked where Jesus was to be born.

Because the chief priests and scribes knew the Bible much, much better than Herod, they were able to tell him that Jesus was to be born in the town of Bethlehem. An Old Testament prophet named Micah wrote years ago:

Bethlehem, from you will come a ruler, but not just any ruler. He will shepherd my people.

A ruler who was gentle and not greedy?! That really was good news!

Herod then called the wise men, demanding, "Go to Bethlehem and look for the child (notice that Herod would never call Jesus "king"). When you find Him, come find me so that I too may come and worship Him."

Worship Him?! Well... we know that's a complete lie! But, for the time being, it served as a perfect cover to get the wise men to do just what Herod wanted.

From Jerusalem, the wise men followed the star again until it came to rest over the exact place where Jesus was born. The wise men were so excited, they could hardly contain themselves.

Upon entering the house, they saw Him, a gentle baby, cradled in Mary's arms. The wise men fell to their knees and worshipped Jesus as they gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, weren't the wise men supposed to go back to Herod only to lead him right to the baby Jesus?

Well, this is where the story gets interesting...



In the midst of all this baby finding and gift giving, the wise men had a dream. In the dream, God warned them not to go back to Herod. So, they left Bethlehem and returned to their country another way.

This, as it turned out, was not the only dream God sent to Bethlehem that night. Joseph had a dream as well, and in it the Lord told Joseph, "Take Jesus and Mary to Egypt. Herod wants to kill the child."

So Joseph took Jesus and Mary to Egypt in the middle of the night and remained there until after Herod's death. Of course, God knew this plan all along. Many centuries before, He spoke through the Old Testament prophet Hosea, saying, "My Son will come out of Egypt."

Herod, as you might imagine, was furious. In fact, in his rage, he killed all the boys in Bethlehem who were under the age of two in hopes that one of them would be Jesus. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said this would happen. The Lord spoke through him, saying, "Rachel (the great, great, (and many more greats) grandmother of the people of Judah) will weep for her children. But she will not be comforted, because they are no more."

What a sad, sad day! God's people longed for a leader, but not one with such hair-trigger, horrible, jealousy-filled rage. What their hearts needed was a gentle shepherd.

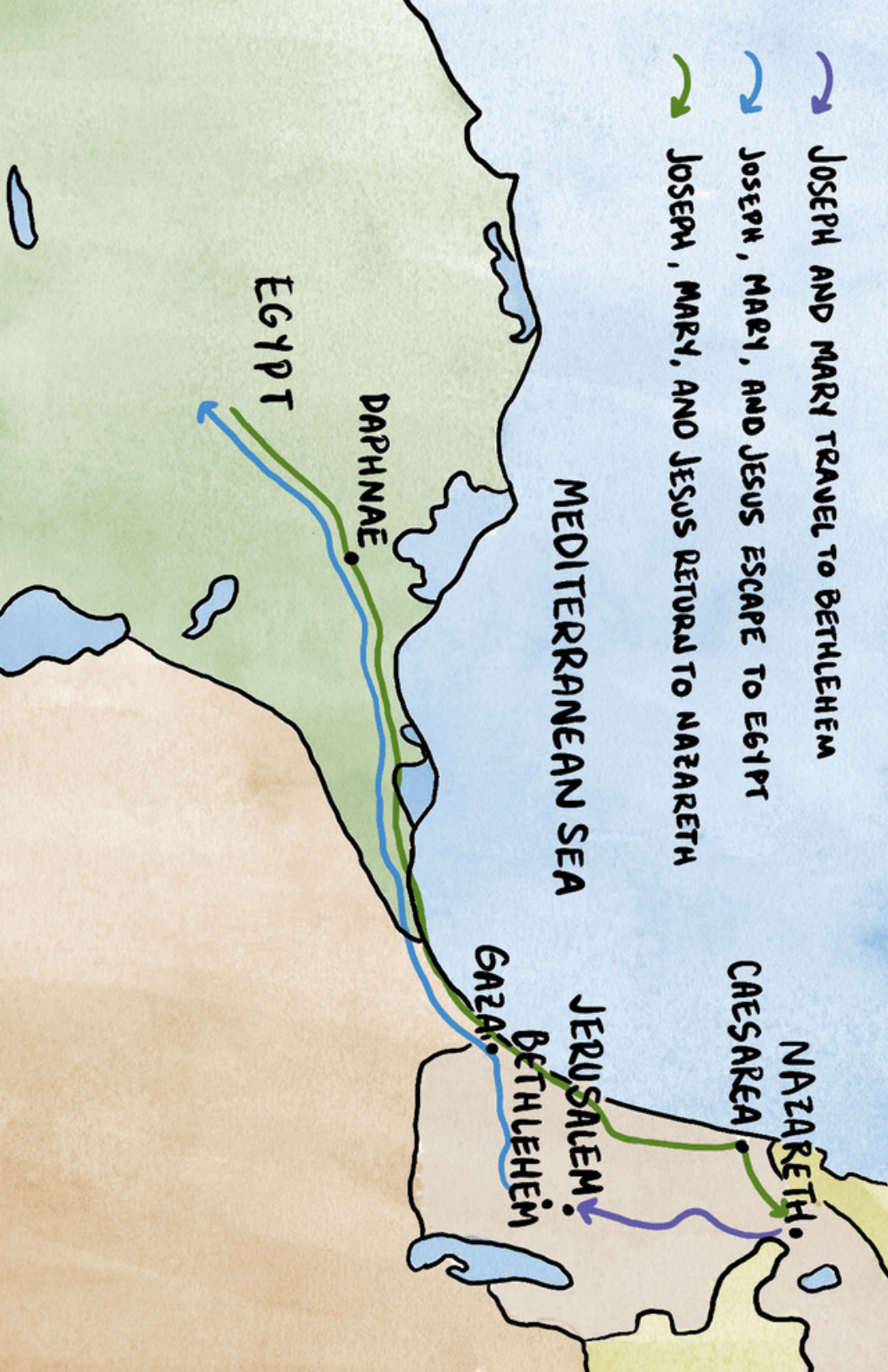
After Herod died, an angel came to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "The coast is clear! Bring your family back to Israel. Those who wanted Jesus dead, are now dead themselves."

But Joseph heard that Herod's son, Archelaus, was now ruling over Judea. He worried that if his family left Egypt now, they would surely die. (You know what they say... the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!) But the Lord cared for Joseph and met his fear in another dream, saying, "Go to the region of Galilee. You'll be safe there." And so, Joseph went with Jesus and Mary to a city called Nazareth.

→ JOSEPH AND MARY TRAVEL TO BETHLEHEM

→ JOSEPH, MARY, AND JESUS ESCAPE TO EGYPT

→ JOSEPH, MARY, AND JESUS RETURN TO NAZARETH



CRAZY MAN JOHN

MATTHEW 3

There's a few things you should know about a man they called "John the Baptist." First of all, he said strange things like, "Turn to God, the kingdom of heaven is near," when it just looked like a normal everyday kind of day.

John also wore funky clothes made of camel's hair and for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, he ate bugs (yes, bugs!). Gross!

You could say that John stood out among his friends. But, the curious thing is that people actually listened to him and came from all over Jerusalem and Judea to the Jordan River to confess their sins and be baptized by this bug-eating crazy man.

But not everyone who came to John was quite as kind. Some people, from groups known as the Pharisees and the Sadducees (those who thought they could follow ALL of God's laws plus a bunch of laws they came up with on their own to try to make God love them), grew suspicious.

John spotted the big, important Pharisees and Sadducees hiding in the shadows and scowled, "You bunch of no-good vipers! Get out of here! God's wrath is coming for people like you! You think you're something special because you're a son of Abraham... but do you really think God looks at you any differently?"

"No! God has cut off the roots of that tree. Instead, He's looking for those who bear the good fruit of faith. Every other tree will be cut down and burned to ashes.

"I baptize with water. This water shows you're in God's family, not because you do all the right things, but because you know you're helpless without Him.

"But the good news doesn't end with me. Far from it! God is sending someone stronger than me. I won't be worthy enough to even carry His stinky sandals! He will baptize as well... but not with water. Instead, He will baptize those who believe in God with the Holy Spirit and those who don't believe with deadly fire."

Some time passed until the one John spoke of, Jesus, came from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized. But when John saw Jesus, he refused to baptize Him (remember the whole "not worthy to carry his stinky sandals" thing?). But Jesus would have none of that!

And so it was that John the Baptist baptized Jesus. But this was unlike any baptism in the history of the world. Suddenly, the sky split open. The Spirit of God came down and rested on Jesus.



And then, a voice called from heaven. This voice knew Jesus. It was His dad, after all. "This is My Son. I love Him. He makes Me so, so glad!"

This man, born to two ordinary parents in an ordinary town, was, in fact, extraordinary. He was a man, but He was also God; perfect in His goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, kindness, and humility.

In Jesus, heaven was bending low to live with mankind. But would people see Jesus for who He was, or would they turn their backs on Him... or worse?



This map shows some of the most important places in Jesus's life. Nazareth is where God told Joseph to bring his family to live after hiding in Egypt. Jerusalem was the capital city. The Sea of Galilee is where Jesus did most of His ministry later on in Matthew. John the Baptist baptized in the Jordan River, which flowed down from the Sea of Galilee and formed the eastern border of Israel.