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HEROES AND VILLAINS

Matthew 2:13-23; Christmas 1A; December 27-28, 2025

How can you tell the difference between a hero and a villain? The hero, the good guy, does the right thing; the villain, the bad guy, does the wrong thing. Traditionally, children's books were written to encourage the good and discourage the bad. Children need heroes to learn good morals and live virtuous lives.

Something insidious is happening these days. Some children's books present morality, right and wrong, as ambiguous or relative. The morals God created us to live by are questioned and undermined. Sinners are made into victims of parents and other authorities who want them to do what is good and right. People with traditional morals are depicted as mean and hateful, not at all likeable or worthy of being emulated. Villainous characters are presented as if they were heroes.

Isaiah five comes to mind. **Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!** (5:20)

Children need real heroes. Children need to learn from clear examples of those who know the difference between virtue and vice and strive to live virtuously. Sadly, too many children – and adults that think and act like children – model their lives after some of the most debased and worthless people on Tik Tok videos or other social media. We need to be able to recognize villains and reject their bad behaviors, while lifting up as heroes those who are models of virtue.

God's Word today presents us with a true hero and despicable villain.

On the fourth day of Christmas, December 28th, the Church commemorates the minor festival of the Holy Innocents, the baby boys in and around Bethlehem two years old and under that King Herod's soldiers murdered and martyred. (The Gospel Reading for the 1st Sunday after Christmas coincides with the festival Gospel this year.) The villain of this account is Herod, who murdered innocent baby boys in his attempt to kill Jesus, the One born the King of the Jews, the Messiah he had heard about from the Wise Men. Herod clearly is the villain of the story. Who is the hero?

We might first consider the Holy Innocents themselves, those slaughtered baby boys, but being a victim does not make someone a hero. Our society has a tendency to make victims into heroes. Too often all it takes to attain hero status is claiming to be a victim. Lawbreakers apprehended for their crimes are called victims and hailed as heroes, and those enforcing the laws are called villains. We live in a mixed-up world. The baby boys Herod the villain murdered were truly victims, but not heroes.

The true hero of this story is Joseph, the husband of Mary and the guardian of her baby boy Jesus. Like most people who end up heroes, Joseph did not want to be a hero, but was called on in a time of need, accepted his call to duty, and did heroic things, not for his glory but for the care and protection of those God had entrusted to him. When those recognized by others as heroes are asked why they did their heroic deeds, the standard response is, "I only did my duty, what anyone else would have done is in the same situation," except not everyone can or does what they did.

Before the account of the Holy Innocents, Matthew gives us hints that Joseph, an ordinary Jewish man of his time, would be called upon to do extraordinary things, heroic things. When his fiancé, Mary, was discovered to be pregnant, he wanted to spare her from public shame. Joseph put her needs ahead of his own, even at the expense of others thinking he wasn't much of a man if the woman he wanted to marry wouldn't be faithful to him. Joseph could have divorced Mary quietly and gone his way, but God's angel told him to take Mary as his wife despite her pregnancy and raise her Child as if his own.

In today's account, when the angel warned Joseph in a dream that Herod wanted to kill Jesus, which put Joseph's own life in danger, he could have said, "I didn't sign up for this," and leave them to defend themselves. No, a loving husband and father puts the needs of his wife and children ahead of his own. Joseph packed up that very night, probably abandoning a carpentry business he had started in Bethlehem among his relatives, and fled to Egypt with the Child Jesus and his mother to protect them from murderous Herod.

When Herod died not long afterwards, Joseph wanted to return to Bethlehem of Judea, but Herod's son, Archelaus, ruled there and was as much a threat as his father, so Joseph brought his family to Nazareth in Galilee. Joseph and Mary's family grew there as sons and daughters were born to them. Joseph cared for them all. He taught Jesus the carpentry trade, which Jesus worked at until He began His public ministry around the age of thirty.

The only places in the Bible we have information about Joseph are in Matthew one and two, and Luke two. (Luke seems to assume we know the details from Matthew and did not repeat them.) The last we hear about Joseph is when Jesus was twelve and went with His parents to Jerusalem for the Passover and stayed behind when they left for home. When they went back and found Jesus, Luke concludes: **And He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man** (2:51-52).

Have you ever noticed that, with all that is written about Joseph, he is never quoted saying anything? Joseph is not a man of words, but a man of action. When called on by God to not divorce Mary but take her as his wife, he did that. Joseph obediently took her to Bethlehem to be enrolled for taxing. Joseph listened to God's angel and took the Child and His mother to Egypt to save Jesus' life, and then to Nazareth to raise Him. When called upon to care for those God entrusted to him, Joseph did whatever was necessary, even when it put his own life at risk. Joseph did not need to say anything to be a hero; his actions, not words, made him a hero.

Joseph's heroics reflected his faith in God. Like his namesake, Joseph the son of Jacob who also went to Egypt to save his family from death, he trusted that what others had meant for evil God would make turn out for good. Herod was an evil, murderous villain, who slaughtered innocent children to hold onto his power. Villains produce victims. Joseph served others and was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of God's Son, a true, Christian hero.

We need heroes like Joseph. Boys and girls need to understand just how heroic he was. Boys need to grow up and become men, aspiring to be husbands and fathers like Joseph was. Girls need to grow up and

become women, who want to marry men like Joseph and raise children with them. I realize that this runs counter to the romantic concept of finding someone to fall in love with and get married. “How can I marry someone I’m not in love with?” How in love with Mary was Joseph when he found out she was pregnant and God told him to marry her anyway? I don’t know; we aren’t told.

What we are told is that **“when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called His name Jesus”** (Mt 1:24-25). Joseph was a faithful Christian man who was willing to do his duty according to God’s will. God called on this ordinary man to become a true hero. That is the sort of man boys and men should aspire to be. That is the sort of man girls and women should aspire to become their husbands and fathers of their children.

There is another hero in the story today, though He had not yet had the opportunity be heroic: Jesus. God’s Son submitted to His heavenly Father’s will and became man, born of the virgin Mary and raised by Joseph. When Luke tells us that **“Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”** it means that Jesus was the sort of young man that every Jewish mother with daughters wanted as a son-in-law.

Have you ever wondered if Jesus would have wanted to get married and have children? Jesus was truly human, a man like other men. We often recognize the sacrifices Jesus made for us during His passion and death on the cross, but do we consider the other aspects of life with which God blesses us that Jesus had to sacrifice to be our Savior? St. Paul reminds us of this in Ephesians five. **“Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that [His bride] might be holy and without blemish”** (5:25-27).

The villain Herod made those baby boys victims. Joseph did his duty, protecting and caring for his wife and her Child. Joseph was a hero, that is, he loved them by what he did for them. Jesus heroically laid down His life to save us, His bride the Church. Amen.