



## **First Sunday of Christmas, Year A**

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**Gospel Text – Matthew 2:13-23**

### **Matthew 2:13-23**

<sup>13</sup> Now after [the magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

<sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

<sup>19</sup> When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup> "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." <sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

## **SERMON TEXT:**

Hello! My name is Mitch Phillips, and I have the privilege of serving the people of the Northeastern Ohio Synod as the Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership. So I bring you greetings from Bishop Laura Barbins and your siblings in the 143 congregations across our mission territory.

I'm going to start by being honest - I accepted the assignment to prepare a sermon for today without looking at the assigned lectionary scriptures. When I saw what the Gospel text was for today, there was weeping and gnashing of teeth - from me, not just from the people in the story.

I realized that in 35 years of ministry, I had never written a sermon on this passage from Matthew - not because I was avoiding it, but because on the Sunday after Christmas, I was either on vacation to visit family or if I was leading worship, we were continuing our Christmas celebration with a Service of Lessons and Carols that did not include a sermon.

This passage is one of those “Texts of Terror” that we talked about in seminary. How can you describe it as anything else for those people in Bethlehem? And how many people in this day will be triggered by the reading of this passage as it hits so close to home for the lived experience of so many people in this world?

There are many ways to approach this passage, but I want to start with what we know of the author - Matthew - and how this passage fits into the framework and purpose of his account of Jesus’ life.

There are three sections - each with the same structure: there is a command, there are resulting consequences, and it wraps up with a quote from Hebrew scripture.

First - an angel’s command - then a ruler’s command - and finally, an angel’s command again

One of the chief characteristics of Matthew as a Gospel writer is his work to place Jesus in the context of Hebrew scripture - and to show Jesus to be the fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The narrative arc of this passage depicts a departure-return motif from Israel to Egypt and back again.

This parallels the story in the book of Genesis of the Hebrew people as Jacob’s family fled the famine in Israel and found

refuge in Egypt - and then they returned generations later in the Exodus under the leadership of Moses.

Matthew's narration of the story in this way emphasizes Matthew's overall understanding of Jesus as the new Moses, the new and final lawgiver.

Matthew is the Gospel writer who makes the greatest use of Hebrew scripture - and does so to emphasize prophetic fulfillment. In so doing, he creates something of a Christian midrash.

"Midrash" may be a new word for you, so allow me to explain. The Midrash is a collection of writings from Jewish rabbis that includes ancient biblical interpretation, commentary, and storytelling that provides spiritual, ethical, and legal context to the Hebrew Bible. It is a body of literature developed over centuries, often using narratives and parables to "mine" the biblical text for deeper meanings and lessons.

Matthew follows in this tradition of midrash - a tool by an author that is less concerned with "HOW it happened" and more focused on "what it MEANS."

Matthew is piecing together events not like a historian, but as a theologian seeking to uncover God's guiding purposes.

With that in mind, we see in this passage a central theme that God's actions initiate all human activity.

God sends the angel to Joseph - which causes Joseph to pick up and move his family - first to Egypt and later back to Israel and the little town of Nazareth.

God guides the magi to Herod - and their interaction with Herod triggers the actions of that tyrant and his agents of terror and political unrest.

A second theological theme I alluded to earlier. It would have been clear to the early readers of this Gospel that Matthew was connecting Jesus and Moses and the escape to and from Egypt - it would have certainly called to mind the Exodus and all that meant for the people of Israel.

Generations before, God had chosen Abraham - and promised to bless all nations through him.

Generations after Abraham, God chose Moses and went bigger. In the Exodus, God chose not just a family, but a people.

At the very beginning of the events of the Exodus, God says to the Israelites through Moses: " I will take you as my people, and I

will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Ex 6:7)

And then generations after Moses, God sent Jesus - and went still bigger. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has chosen not just a nation of people, but all of humanity. And like Moses and the Israelites before him, Jesus - through his death and resurrection - has led all of humanity through another Exodus by which God has freed humanity from bondage to sin and death.

Early on in his Gospel - just 18 verses into the first chapter - after reciting the genealogy of Jesus - Matthew identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew then works quickly to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures and links him to Moses and the Exodus and being freed from bondage.

That would be a good place to stop - but I can't wrap a bow on this and ignore the utter horror of this story.

Yes, the baby Jesus and the Holy Family survive thanks to the intervention of the angels and Joseph's obedience - but at what cost?

All of the children two years old and under in and around Jerusalem have been murdered. The birth of the One who came to save ushers in a wave of death at the hands of Herod.

This illustrates once again hard-won wisdom that is repeated throughout history: worldly powers do not take threats to their authority lightly.

Good does not go unchallenged by evil - this has been true throughout human history down to this very day.

Terror employed to subdue citizens has never ceased. Examples of this - unfortunately - are too numerous to begin to catalogue.

And we must acknowledge and confess that Christians have occupied both sides of this fence. Sometimes we are solidly on the side of Herod, scrambling to maintain status and power, doing anything to crush perceived threats to our wealth, privilege, and control.

The Crusades, the silence of some German Christians (Lutherans) during the Nazi regime, slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow - Christians have been involved in so many oppressive chapters of human history.

And then on the other side of the fence we have the abolitionists, the Martin Luther Kings and Oscar Romeros, and so many other Christians who have struggled and even been slaughtered in solidarity with innocents.

As we move through these last few days of the year, it would be good for us Christians to examine and confess our own complicity with "Herod" - in his many manifestations in the world.

And then, let us exhort one another to join forces with Jesus, the wise men, and other saints and martyrs of our faith, and to speak and act in solidarity with innocents who are currently suffering and threatened.

It brings us up short to be confronted with a text of terror like this while the strains of Christmas carols are still ringing in our ears.

To find hope in a passage like this means we have to dig deep and lift up the larger narrative context and consider the theological purpose of the author. This is not so much about "HOW it happened" and more about "what it MEANS" from Matthew's perspective.

The infant whom God saves from Herod will eventually be the innocent one who is slaughtered by worldly powers - and through his death and resurrection, that innocent one restores the world to God and overturns every earthly power. Consolation comes for



all creation, for every person labeled as “other,” “less than,” or “trash” - and for us.~

This is the Good News in the midst of the terror and horrors of this world - Good News that we are called to proclaim and champion in the face of such terror and horror.

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