

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas  
12.28.25

**Matthew 2:13-23**

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.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “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.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly 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 seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over 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. 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 Nazorean.” (310)

This story is always a rude awakening on the Sunday after Christmas. We only hear it once every three years since it only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. This new church year being Year A, we’ll be following the Gospel of Matthew all year, so here we are, with a young family whose first couple of years were unsettled, fleeing from Bethlehem to Egypt, returning from Egypt but not back to Bethlehem, rather to a third place where the politics might not so terribly endanger the baby’s life. Judea, Nazareth, to live small for many years.

It’s impossible to hear this story and not reflect on the year we’ve had when it comes domestic political terrorism against the unsettled in our midst, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, even students here with student-visas. The numbers aren’t what was promised, thank God. The current regime hasn’t managed the million deportations every year: far from it. But the theatrical quality of rounding people up, grabbing them off the streets, masked men who may or may not be agents of the state operating with a level of thuggishness that does, or should, shock the conscience.

It’s been really bad this year. But this story should always unsettle as it lands, an interrupting to what might have otherwise been Christmas merriment, or exhausted recovery from all the anticipation and planning and then celebrating, or secret relief that it’s over and we can

back to regular life, which we might rather prefer when it comes right down to it. This story might always feel like an unwelcome intrusion, definitely not featured in any of our Christmas snow-globes.

One of my hobby-horses when it comes to thinking about Christmas, and figuring out what to preach when it comes to Christmas, and especially what to preach on Christmas Eve, which always feels like throwing a dart at a dartboard knowing I most likely won't hit a bulls-eye but there's little option but to try: one of my hobby-horses is Christmas as a holiday all about nostalgia, the chasing after to get back something that never quite was. Which is why I'll never hit that bullseye: because getting people to feel again the gauzy magic of Christmas remembered is really not something a preacher, or anyone else for that matter, can evoke. Nostalgia is deeply personal, and only you know what will activate that sensation. Only you know which candle scent to seek, which Christmas album to put on heavy rotation, which cookies to put in the oven or decorations to put on the tree. So, Christmas as nostalgia: it's sort of a trap, a set up for disappointing.

But this is mostly the case because the holiday itself is a far cry from something gauzy and good-feeling. No, indeed, the storied events that undergird this as a feast day are not totems for magical thinking and fuzzy feeling but are altogether too real, rude and rough, terrifying when it comes to what it reveals about the world and terrifying when it comes to how it reveals it, a tear in the firmament through which God comes to us. It's not for nothing that the scriptural refrain for this holiday seems to be "Be not afraid." That's not something you have to say unless what's happening seems frightening indeed.

And is there anything more frightening, these days pressingly frightening, than parents and child set to flight because of cruel political leaders and their politics of terror?

So it is now. Indeed, pressingly so.

So it is always, if more or less.

Madeleine L'Engle seems to have thought the very same in 1973. American writer of many genres whose life spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> century, L'Engle had this to say about Christmas while the Vietnam War dragged on, so deadly and meaningless, while the Watergate Scandal left Washington DC with a smear that was the worst ever until the Trump Era, which has it now seem quaint. In "The Risk of Birth," she writes:

This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war & hate

And a comet slashing the sky to warn  
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn —  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by a comet the sky is torn —  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

Its three stanzas are perfect, but truth is you could add a new stanza every year. It's never a good time for a baby to come. The world is never ready for such tenderness, such vulnerability, one so in desperate need of care. But every year: Christmas.

And every three years, the Slaughter of the Innocents.

Esau McCaulley wrote in a column for the *New York Times* on this story about a decade ago. Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and an Anglican priest, Dr. McCauley defends this story as a crucial part of Christmas celebrations.

First, of course, he acknowledges that this is this a “bloody story.” But it’s crucial because it’s one “out of which hope fights its way to the surface.” And Christmas as much about hope as it is about happiness, as much about the flickering insistence of hope as it is to be the hap-hap-happiest time of the year.

He admits, “Scholars debate the historicity of the event—[this so-called Slaughter of the Innocents]—because it was not recorded by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, who provides an otherwise detailed description of Herod’s reign. Nonetheless, Josephus does tell us that Herod had three of his sons killed because he saw them as threats to his power. Commanding the slaughter of children would not be beyond the pale for Herod...”

McCauley continues, “The Bible story, then, depicts Jesus as a refugee fleeing a nation marked by political violence and being displaced within his own country even after some of the violence settles down. And though he avoids murder by Herod, he does not escape death by the state altogether — [no, of course, as we well know] three decades later, Pontius Pilate, an official of the Roman Empire, pronounces Jesus’ death sentence. Like Herod, Pilate does so to maintain power and remove a threat.”

Just so, “The church calendar calls Christians and others to remember that we live in a world,” according to McCaulley, “in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the

innocent on the altar of power. We are forced to recall that this is a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children. More than anything, the story of the innocents calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate.”

Christmas is a gift to us; and a challenge, a call to conscience. It is a lullaby for us amidst a clamoring, anxious world; and pealing bell as if to focus our attention, to put it to worthy matters. It is joy and dread, fear and saving grace—and also just the beginning.

Thanks be to God.