

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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December 28, 2025

Today's Gospel would be an incredibly hard text to hear at any time of the year, but reading it just a few days after Christmas? It's especially jarring! On Christmas Eve we read about a baby boy lying in the manger, about the angels and the shepherds, and Mary treasuring each moment and pondering them all in her heart. And when we hear this story, it's easy to gloss over the reality, to hold onto a romanticized depiction of the beautiful baby Jesus lying safely in the manger, this incredible image of Jesus coming into the world to bring peace and love to all of God's people.

So today, just a few days later, when we read that this beautiful baby boy and his family are now being forced to flee for their lives from a violent ruler, when we hear that all the other beautiful babies in Bethlehem are brutally murdered by this same violent ruler, it feels like a gut punch. The violence in our gospel today can feel like an interruption to the Christmas story. We might hear it and think, "oh, let's get back to the peace and hope we were feeling a few days ago."

But the truth is that the Gospel today, as difficult as it is, does not interrupt the Christmas story at all. Instead, it's a natural continuation, uncovering the reality that from the beginning, the Christmas story has always been a dangerous story.

From the beginning Mary was always an unwed teenage mother giving birth to a savior amidst poverty, into a world that was not at peace, into an empire that viewed Jesus as a threat to be exterminated. And today as we see just how far that empire was willing to go to exterminate that threat, we are called not to sanitize and romanticize the Christmas story, but to really imagine the reality of it. Imagine the terror Joseph must have felt after waking up from that dream, the frantic fear Mary must have felt as she was shaken awake, as she realized she would go to the ends of the earth, do whatever was necessary to protect the baby she held in her arms. Imagine what it must have felt like to flee in the night, to run toward an uncertain future without knowing if they'd ever see their loved ones again. Imagine Mary's exhaustion and pain as she traveled hundreds of miles, newly postpartum, knowing that at any moment Jesus could be ripped away from her. Imagine Joseph's sense of helplessness, his fear that they might not make it to Egypt in time. Imagine the awful combination of guilt and relief and terror they must have felt when they heard about the other children who were killed, when they realized they got out and so many others didn't. Imagine what it must have felt like for Jesus to grow up on the move, to grow up hearing his parents whisper about the ongoing threat, to have to pretend he didn't understand for their sake all while having a child's intuition that they weren't truly safe.

This passage uncovers the truth behind the Christmas story: it reminds us that Jesus was not born into safety, but into vulnerability and violence. It reminds us of the stakes of the Christmas story, of why God needed to come into the world. And it reminds us that the world often responds to God's arrival with violence.

You see, God needed to come into the world not to save us in some abstract way, but because God's people were truly and concretely suffering. God needed to come into the world because Jesus' treatment by the empire was and is not the exception, it's the rule. The same logic of empire that forced Jesus' family to flee and led King Herod to kill innocent babies is the same logic that forces refugee families today to risk everything in perilous journeys not knowing if they'll reach safety, is the same logic that ICE enforces when it separates families, is the same logic that hung Jesus on the cross. The engines of empires will always respond to the mercy and compassion Christ embodies with cruelty. As Pastor Jason named in his Christmas Eve sermon, the power of empires will always push downward, and the cost is always paid in flesh.

And this reality—both in our Gospel today and in our world—can make us feel hopeless. As thankful as we are that Jesus was able to escape to Egypt, we look at the innocent children in our Gospel and wonder, why did God allow this to happen? As thankful as we are for those who have survived the engines of empire today, we look around at every refugee turned away at a border, everyone who has died in ICE custody, everyone who doesn't make it to safety and we ask God, why?

These questions are ones that theologians and philosophers have been considering for centuries, so much so that they have a name for it—**theodicy**—which is the study of how a just, and good, and loving God could allow for evil to happen. And the reality is that even after centuries of struggling, we have no easy answers to this question of theodicy, no meaning-making that can be made from why some people survive the engines of empire and others don't. The truth is that at first glance, it can feel

very hard to find the good news in our Gospel today. I think that sometimes, when we see evil happen—in our Gospel or in the world—the question of “why God?” can even flip into an accusation, can become “God, you allowed this evil to happen,” or even “God, you don’t care when evil happens.”

But our Gospel does make a few things abundantly clear today, a few things that we can hold onto as good news even amidst all the sorrow and injustice of Jesus’ time and our own. First, the Gospel makes it abundantly clear that this violence was caused by Herod, not God, and that God does care deeply about it.

You see, Matthew is the only source that describes Herod’s murder of the children in Bethlehem, although scholars agree that this behavior would have been in line with other atrocities Herod committed. Some scholars argue that Herod’s killing of the children wouldn’t have been remarkable enough for first century historians to write down because he committed so many other horrors and because Bethlehem was small enough that it wouldn’t have impacted that many children. Even though this violence may have seemed unimportant to historians, Matthew names what happened, describing it as brutality. By telling their story, Matthew demonstrates that God cares about violence that others deem unremarkable, that God cares when God’s children are killed. By telling their story, Matthew demonstrates that God will not forget any of God’s children, that God mourns and weeps for them and names each and every one beloved. And by telling their story, Matthew demonstrates that God knows Herod’s actions are evil and unjust, that God stands against the engines of empire and will not let them have the final say.

And in the face of those engines of empire, this Gospel makes it abundantly clear that God will remain present with us always, that God understands even the worst of our suffering. We live in a world that regularly responds to God's arrival with violence. God could have easily chosen to turn away from us, to leave such a world behind. But instead, God chose to enter into our world, not as a King with power and privilege, but as a poor brown baby in a manger, as a refugee who lived under constant threat of political violence, as a person who understands intimately what it feels like to flee a country in the middle of the night. God didn't have to and yet God chose to enter into our world and live a life of poverty and marginalization and violence. God didn't have to and yet God chose to endure deep suffering so that we could be saved, so that we could trust that God would love and remain present with us always. God didn't have to and yet God chose to be Emmanuel—God with us—to bring us comfort and hope when all we can feel is despair. This Gospel brings us the radical good news that God stands with the oppressed and the marginalized, that God stands with refugees and migrants because God was one, that God will remain present with us no matter what engines of empire we are forced to confront. Even when we can't explain why the horrors of this world happen, we can rejoice in the knowledge that God does not leave us to face these evils alone. Even when the engines of empire seem to have the final word, we can rejoice in the promise that through Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, no empire or evil can separate us from the love of God.

And if this is true—that God does not flee from suffering but enters into it, that God does not abandon the marginalized, but becomes one of them—

then our Gospel today not only reveals something about who God is, but it reveals something about who we are called to be.

You see, Mary and Joseph and Jesus didn't survive only because God sent angels in a dream to warn Joseph. They also survived because of unnamed strangers who received them along the way. They survived because the Magi's gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh likely funded most of their journey. And they survived because Egypt allowed them to cross the border. If Egypt had closed its borders, if Egypt had demanded papers that Mary and Joseph didn't have, if Egypt had immigration enforcement officers that would have separated their family, Jesus likely wouldn't have survived.

Hospitality saved Jesus' life, and our Gospel calls us to take that reality seriously. Because if Joseph received that dream today, we know what would likely happen, at least in the United States. He would be stopped and turned away at the border. Or he would live in constant fear, hiding from ICE, terrified that at any moment his family could be torn apart, that the child he was trying to protect—the savior of our world—could be taken from him. The same engines of empire that threatened Jesus' life in our Gospel are still at work now. And we still, understandably, look around and ask “why God? Why does such evil happen?”

But our Gospel today shows us that even in our deepest pain, our deepest moments of “why God?” we are not powerless to respond, and we are certainly not alone.

Earlier I named that this text can feel jarring, like an interruption to our Christmas story. But Christmas promises us nothing more or less than Emmanuel—God with us. And our Gospel today delivers on that promise,

demonstrating that God cares deeply about God's children, that God purposefully entered into the world as a refugee so that God could remain present with each and every one of us, especially those most marginalized. This Gospel is the perfect continuation of our Christmas story, because it reminds us of what's at stake. It reminds us that when we answer the call to be Emmanuel to others, when we stand up against the engines of empire that seek to criminalize refugees, when we respond to strangers with radical hospitality, we are participating in the very actions that once saved Jesus' life, in actions that have the potential to save others. And so, as we continue throughout this Christmas season and beyond, may we be brave enough to remember the Christmas story in all its promise and its danger. And may we follow its call, offering radical hospitality and trusting that through it, God will remain present to us and will bring life, safety, and hope to those who need it most. **Amen.**