

SERMON
for
Sunday December 28 2025
First Sunday of Christmas – Matthew

Too soon. This reading, I mean. It comes too soon. We have, after all, just celebrated Christmas. If your Christmas Eve was spent worshipping at Zion, it was filled with songs about the “holy infant so tender and mild” and the “little town of Bethlehem” that sheltered him. The story you heard Luke’s depiction of a young mother giving birth to her firstborn child and angels greeting shepherd with words of peace on earth and good will to all. It was, I’m sure, a beautiful and hope-filled evening and celebration.

Which is what makes the transition to this harrowing reading from Matthew so jarring. Had I been putting together the lectionary, I would have tarried a bit longer at the nativity. Given that this is the year of Matthew, I would at least have inserted the first part of the story we read today, the part we know so well, of the magi making their way to Jerusalem to present their gifts to the baby Jesus. That would have extended the “Christmas feeling” a week longer and given us the chance to sing “We Three Kings” to boot.

But not so. Instead, we skip the more familiar and enjoyable part of story to get to the scenes we would rather forget: the flight to Egypt and slaughter of the innocents. In some ways, when I come upon this passage – even though I know it’s coming! – I feel just a little cheated, that Christmas has been abruptly shortened and that we have been shortchanged.

At the same time, you may feel that the biblical story chosen for this week, though abrupt, jarring, and even harrowing, rings oddly familiar and perhaps corresponds more closely to the world in which we live than some other parts of the biblical narrative.

The horrors the world are experiencing are not new. (Nor were they new in Jesus’ day either, for that matter, as Matthew’s story of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents deliberately calls to mind Pharaoh’s execution of Jewish children in Exodus 2.) Which is, I think, part of Matthew’s point. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, and so the God we meet in Jesus is not exempt

from the tension, fear, violence, and horror of our fallen world. And God's full-on embrace of the most difficult parts of our story reminds us that this world is not just fallen but also beloved.

David Lose tells the story that when he was ordained, a retired pastor and parishioner gave him a print made from a woodcut depicting the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. What made this particular rendition distinct is that they were not alone. Instead, they were surrounded by a group of refugees, reminding us that in this story of forced flight, God-in-Christ identifies with all who have been driven from their homes by the threat of terror, all who are displaced by violence, and all who flee in fear with hopes for, but little assurance of, a better future.

When you think about it, Emmanuel – God-with-us – wouldn't really mean all that much if it was only God with us during the tender moments, during times of celebration, during the Christmas Eve services of our lives. Yes, those moments of joy are gifts from God and it's right to give God thanks for them. But if we're glad that God is with us in times of rejoicing, we're desperate to know that God is also with us in times of grief, loss, and fear. Yes, this reading is tough to hear a week after Christmas, but for this reason it is also important.

And Matthew goes even further. For God is not only with us, God is also *for* us, promising to bring us through difficult times to the other side, if not unscathed, nevertheless still victorious. Matthew structures this passage around prophecies, demonstrating that even the darkest portions of Jesus' story turn within a larger narrative of God's providence and protection. This is not to say that all these events are simply part of some larger, if rather dark, "plan," but rather to remind us that nothing that happens to Jesus – or, by extension, to us – is beyond the bounds of God's love and activity and cannot be redeemed and even used by God.

God is with us, even in the darkest times. And God is also for us, promising not only to accompany us through difficult times but also to bring us to the other side that, in time, we might know the fullness of joy that is life in Christ. Not a bad message to hear on this last Sunday before the New Year and, in this sense, perhaps not too soon after all but indeed coming to us in just the nick of time. **Amen.**