



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas Isaiah 61:1-3 & St. Matthew 2:19-23 Fr. William Klock

January 4, 2026

Today's Gospel lesson picks up where last Sunday's left us with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Egypt. St. Matthew tells us:

After the death of Herod, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. "Get up," he said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who wanted to kill the child are dead." So he got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. After being advised in a dream, he went off to the region of Galilee. When he got there, he settled in a town called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what the prophet had spoken, "He shall be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 2:19-23)

The Gospels of Christmastide tell us the Nativity story from St. Matthew's perspective. They jump around a bit, so we don't quite get the story in order—the part about the wise men, of course, is saved for this coming week—for Epiphany. But our Gospel today picks up towards the end of Matthew's second chapter.

Matthew 2 begins with the wise men arriving in Jerusalem, following an unusual star—some think it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. In those days the planet Jupiter was associated with kings and many people associated Saturn with the Jews. Seeing their conjunction, the wise men—astrologers from the East—concluded that a great king had been born in Israel. They naturally went to Herod, and were probably surprised to find he knew

nothing about any of this. Herod sent them on their way, but he was troubled. Like I said last week, I doubt Herod saw a serious threat here, but he was evil enough to think to himself, "Hey, if this kid exists, I might as well kill him...just in case." So he asked the wise men to stop on their way home to tell him what they had found. When they returned by a different route, Herod just decided to murder *all* the baby boys in Bethlehem, two years old and younger.

And so Herod's soldiers marched to nearby Bethlehem and did just that. For Matthew's Jewish readers, this sure called to mind their own story—how long ago Pharaoh had tried to stamp them out by having all their baby boys drowned in the Nile. Now it's happening again, and that's Matthew's subtle way of telling us that God is getting ready, once again, to visit and to deliver his people. It shows us the depth of the darkness of a fallen world full of sin and death, but it also says that the light is about to break through. Or as Mr. Beaver puts it in the popular children's book as he sees the snows of winter melting and flowers beginning to blossom: "Aslan is on the move."

When St. John opens his Gospel by talking about light coming into the darkness, this is what he has in mind. This is why Jesus had to be born right in the middle of it. Jesus didn't come to deliver his people from the outside. He came in such a way that he identified with them, he became one of them—one of us—and he knew their suffering, he knew their pain, he knew their tears. He knew the deep, deep darkness. He was touched by the demands of Caesar, demanding and pushing his people around: Go here! Go there! So that I can count you, so that I know what's mine. He was touched by the wickedness of Herod. A true King of the Jews would have known that his people belonged to God, but Herod saw them as his. He could kill them at will. Jesus experienced the darkness.

Why?

Consider the names that the angel revealed to Joseph before Jesus was born. Joseph was understandably upset when he found out Mary was pregnant.

He was prepared to quietly divorce her. But then the Lord spoke.

"Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

And Matthew comments on this, saying:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23)

You shall call his name Jesus. Jesus was a common name. It's a variant of "Joshua" and it means "Yahweh Saves", "The God of Israel Saves". And it was a common name precisely because of the darkness in which the people lived. They were desperate for the Lord to save them and we know that especially in the time in which Jesus was born the people were particularly expectant—the worse things got, the stronger their hopes became—and things were horrible. And so, as Joshua led God's people into the promised land, Jesus was sent to lead his people in a new and bigger and better exodus into a new and bigger and better promised land. In the first exodus the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, declared to be God's son, and entered into a covenant with him. "I will be your God and you will be my people," he had promised. He took up his dwelling in their midst. Matthew wants us to understand here that in Jesus, a new exodus is about to take place. Not from Egypt, this time, but from sin and death. He will, in Jesus, establish a new covenant and through that new covenant he will make a new people—a people in whom he will dwell, not just in their midst, but actually in them.

And yet it's in Matthew's commentary that we see the "how" of it all. This he says is to fulfill what Isaiah spoke: "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son and

he shall be called Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’” Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7:14. Now, no one before Matthew ever seems to have understood this passage as pointing to the future Messiah. Isaiah had spoken these words over seven centuries earlier and he spoke them to King Ahaz of Judah during another very dark time for the Lord’s people. The king of the northern tribes of Israel had made an alliance with the king of Syria and they laid siege to Jerusalem. King Ahaz and his people were scared, but through the prophet the Lord exhorted them to stand firm in faith. They were to trust him and he would vanquish their enemies and this promised child was a sign. A young woman, perhaps Ahaz’s wife or daughter or Isaiah’s own wife, would bear a son and before he’s old enough to know the difference between good and evil the Lord would make good on his promise to deliver his people. The child was to be prophetically called “Emmanuel—God with us”, giving assurance to the people that the Lord had heard their cries from the darkness, that he would visit them, and that he would deliver them.

Just as the exodus in the days of Moses became an image of the ministry of Jesus leading his people out of sin’s bondage, the baby—Emmanuel—born in the reign of Ahaz became another image of Jesus’ ministry. In him God once again had heard the cries of his people from the darkness—the darkness of Herod, the darkness of Caesar—in Jesus he visited his people, and in Jesus he delivered them. Even more so, Jesus is *literally* “God with us”. In him God took on our human flesh, becoming one with us. He was born not in some privileged palace to wealthy or noble parents, but to a humble couple just as they were being submitted to the indignity of Roman rule. Almost immediately he was made a refugee by the wicked and murderous King Herod. In Jesus, God is truly with us in every way imaginable, sharing our nature, sharing our life, sharing our pain, sharing our griefs, sharing our humanity—sharing our everything. Jesus has come into the darkness and

into the pain and into the grief. This is how the Lord saves.

Joseph and Mary’s flight to Egypt underscores just how Jesus came into the midst of the darkness and not just that he’s come and joined us in it, but that he’s *found* us in the darkness, so that he can lead us *out*. After telling us about the angel warning Joseph to flee to Egypt, Matthew tells us that this took place to fulfil what the prophet Hosea wrote: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” But Hosea wasn’t looking forward to the Messiah—to Jesus—when he wrote those words. He was talking about Israel. She was the Lord’s son and the Lord called that son and rescued that son out of Egypt. And now Jesus is constituting a new Israel where the old Israel had failed. He is the Lord’s Son and the Lord will call him from Egypt as he once did Israel. Matthew points to Jesus as the fulfilment and the culmination of Israel’s story.

And then as Matthew writes about the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem, he quotes from Jeremiah’s prophecy:

**“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because
they are no more.”** (Matthew 2:18)

It might seem like an odd passage to quote. When Jeremiah wrote those words he was writing to the people of Judah during their exile in Babylon. It’s a passage, first, of mourning. The children of Rachel had lost everything. Think of the darkness of the world. Israel had lost it all: her land, her prosperity, her temple. Everything that the Lord had promised and everything that reminded them of their status as the Lord’s people had been taken away. Had the Lord forgotten them? That was what they asked as they wept by the river of Babylon. But Jeremiah then wrote about the Lord renewing his covenant with Israel. When she had repented he would restore her to the land he had promised and he would make her prosperous again. Eventually the Lord did restore Israel. She returned from exile. She rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt

the temple. But the darkness remained. And so Matthew recalls the time of the exile, of Israel in mourning, and he does so to say that in Jesus, the Lord is acting once again to rescue his people from the darkness, from their exile, and to restore and renew his covenant with them.

And, finally, at the end of today’s Gospel we’re told that when the family returned from Egypt and heard that Archelaus was in power, Joseph decided to settle the family in Nazareth—about as far from Archelaus as he could get. And Matthew says in verse, 23, that this was “so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”

Again, Matthew doesn’t use or quote the prophets the way we might expect him to, as if there’s a one-to-one equation between Isaiah or Jeremiah and the events surrounding Jesus’ birth. Verse 23 continues to raise questions after two thousand years, because there is no mention of Nazareth anywhere in the Old Testament. None of the prophets says anything about Jesus being a Nazarene. The most likely explanation is that Matthew was making a word play. In Isaiah 11:1 the prophet wrote about the Messiah:

**There shall come forth a shoot from
the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall
bear fruit.**

They key word is the word “branch”. In Hebrew the word is *nazir*, which sounds like Nazareth or Nazarene. It’s not the sort of thing we would do with an Old Testament text, but it’s just the sort of sounds-like word game that was common then. The point is that Jesus has a royal lineage. The Lord had established a covenant with David that his house would be established forever. In the course of history, David’s house eventually fell. No descendant of David ever returned to the throne after the exile, but the covenant was still there. A shoot from the cut-off and seemingly dead stump of Jesse—David’s father—would one day come forth and that branch—that *nazir*—would bear fruit.

Do you see what Matthew is doing here? Think of the big picture—the sweep of Israel’s story as it’s told in the Bible. That’s what Matthew is getting at with these quotes from and references to the prophets. Matthew’s putting the great themes of the story of God and Israel in front of us and showing how, in Jesus, the story is reaching its climax. Quoting Hosea he reminds us of the Exodus. Quoting Isaiah 11—the passage about the branch or *nazir* from Jesse—he reminds us of the covenant the Lord established with David. And quoting Jeremiah 31 he gives a vivid picture of Israel’s need for rescue and of the darkness in which the world was lost. Again, Jesus didn’t parachute into history at random. Matthew stresses that Jesus came when the time was exactly right and that he came as the culmination of Israel’s story. In him all the covenants and promises the Lord had made to Israel are brought together and fulfilled. *Jesus is Israel*, which is why St. Paul can talk about gentiles like us being grafted into Israel. John the Baptists warned, as he preached the need for repentance in preparation for Jesus’ coming, that the Lord would lay his axe to the dead wood of Israel while raising children for Abraham from the stones.

Brothers and Sisters, this means that by faith in Jesus, you and I are now part of this story—the story that goes back to God’s covenant with Abraham, to the Exodus from Egypt, and to the covenant with David. All those who are in Jesus the Messiah—all those who have turned aside from everything that is not Jesus and instead have laid hold of him in hoping faith with both hands, who have given him their faith, their loyalty, their allegiance—share in the great story of Israel and of Israel’s God and in his promise to deliver the world from the darkness and to deliver us from our bondage to sin and death. As Jesus came to bring light into the darkness—into the darkness of Caesar’s empire and of Herod’s brutal and murderous cruelty, Jesus has come to bring light into our darkness.

Listen to the words of our lesson from Isaiah 61:1-3. These were the words

Jesus preached from in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry and they were words he claimed for himself. This is what he came to do. This is how he came to be light in the darkness.

**The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to
those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s
favor,
and the day of vengeance of our
God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in
Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of
mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a
faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of
righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he
may be glorified.**

This is Jesus—the Lord’s salvation. This is what it looks like for God to be with us. He has delivered us from bondage to sin and from the fear of death, its wages. There’s darkness all around. Again, all we have to do is turn on the evening news, read the paper, or look on the Internet. And we each have our own struggles with the darkness. We struggle with our own sins. We struggle with our own strained and broken relationships. We struggle to make ends meet. We struggle through pain and sickness and death. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has come into the darkness. He has shared it with us. He knows and he understands. And so Jesus speaks good news to us, he binds up our broken hearts. He takes away the ashes that have been poured on our heads and the sackcloth we’ve been wearing in mourning and gives us beautiful headdresses and garments of praise. He is light in our darkness. He

is God with us. Isaiah says that this is so that *we* will be called “oaks of righteousness” planted by the Lord so that he will be glorified.

Having God with us brings amazing transformation. Imagine the chaos of the world all around, lost in sin, everyone struggling to get on top. Think of our own suffering and pain and grief. And then picture what we become when God is with us. Isaiah says we are oaks of righteousness. Look at those huge oak trees outside the windows. They’ve been here forever. As our building deteriorated in the 50s, 60s, and 70s those trees only got stronger and bigger. The storms come and go. Every once in a while one of those big storms damages the church building, but the trees are there as strong as ever. They’re an illustration of what Jesus has called us to be: light in the darkness, oaks in the storm, standing firm, making him known, providing a place of shelter to any who will come, living as pockets of his new creation, and inspiring everyone around us to give glory to God. He has not abandoned us. In Jesus he saves. In Jesus he has come to be with us—to find us in the darkness and to make us light.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*