

Title: When God's Love Breaks In  
12/28 Sermon – 1st Sunday after Christmas (Year A)  
Rev. Lindsey Odom  
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 63:7-9  
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 2:13-23

It is tempting, especially in the days just after Christmas, to linger at the manger and the peaceful, picturesque nativity sets we possess as reminders of the Christmas story. We are drawn to the quiet holiness of the manger scene, comforted by the idea that all is calm and all is bright. We find peace in singing familiar Christmas carols like “Silent Night,” “Away in a Manger,” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Yet Matthew will not let us stay there. Matthew 2:13–23 is a story we are often tempted to rush past, unsettled by the violent resistance that greets our newborn King. But it carries a depth and gravity the Church must not ignore.

Almost immediately, Matthew pulls us into the darker side of the Christmas story, but this darkness does not mean that God is absent. In fact, it reveals something true and reassuring about God that God always enters a broken and dark world not to endorse the world as it is, but to redeem it. The passage we read from Matthew 2 is set immediately after the birth of Jesus following the departure of the magi to their own country. It unfolds in three movements:

1. The flight to Egypt in verses 13-15
2. The slaughter of the infants in verses 16-18

### 3. And the return from Egypt in verses 19-23.

Herod the Great, the king of Judea, (who ruled 37-4 BCE), hears of a newborn “king of the Jews” named Jesus and feels threatened. The political and social context here is important: Herod was a client king under Roman rule, known for his ruthless reign, even killing members of his own family to maintain power. Herod had to fight for several years (40-37 BCE) to take control of his kingdom, so he never felt secure in his reign. His fear leads him to order the slaughter of children in Bethlehem.

Three times within our passage (Matthew 2:13, 2:19, and 2:22), an angel appears to Joseph in a dream with an urgent message. The angel says to Joseph that Herod is out to kill the new-born child and he has the authority and the means to do it. The angel comes to Joseph in these dreams, not to remove danger, but to direct Joseph through it. The angel says to Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt” and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” A dream like this becomes a nightmare. How many of y’all have ever experienced a nightmare? Raise your hand. (pause). Joseph has just experienced a nightmare, terrifying enough to “make any human break into a cold sweat, to set the heart beating furiously, to constrict the breath, and to make the

whole body quiver with the question: will we even escape in time? (*Feasting on the Word Year A Commentary*, pg. 165)

Joseph moves from ancient promises fulfilled to sudden terror in a single dream. If we look at this scripture passage in the larger context of the Christmas story, baby Jesus had just received extravagant gifts from the Magi. The meaning of his birth was so full of life and love, and the promise of his life seemed, in that bright and shining moment so momentous, so filled with hope and joy, and now this nightmare comes upon the holy family.

There is now a frenzy of activity happening as Joseph arises in the middle of the night to flee across borders to Egypt, stuffing together whatever they have, departing out the gate onto the main road to get to Egypt as fast as possible with the Christ child crying, Mary who is exhausted, and Joseph's heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a Roman soldier (*Feasting on the Word Year A Commentary*, pg. 165). Unfortunately the nightmare does not end when they get to Egypt, their place of refuge.

Instead, it grows greater, spreading beyond Joseph and the holy family, pervading their region through the slaughter of the innocent children in the small village of Bethlehem due to a tyrant named Herod who fears any potential challenge to his power and authority. Two more dreams given to Joseph finish the dream sequence

in this passage, but the second dream is a dream of relief as Herod is dead, which means the immediate threat to the holy family is now removed and they can head home. However, when they return, they are told that Judea is now under the rule of Archelaus, who is Herod's son, who takes after his father's cruelty with his reign, and is later removed from power by the Romans. So, it ends up not being any kind of homecoming for the holy family, especially since Joseph is told in his third dream to take the Christ child and Mary and head further north to Galilee. The holy family is on the move again. Matthew 8:20 says, "foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Our scripture passage from Matthew 2 confirms this as it shows us that the infant Jesus has nowhere to lay his head from the day he is born and that the holy family is a refugee family, a family constantly on the move needing protection, due to the turbulence and terror of a violent history and reign.

Instead of the manger scenes we envision where all is calm and all is bright, and the holy family finds themselves welcomed and secured, the holy family had to flee, just the three of them, all alone, in a world of terror, fear, and violence, with no visitors, no sheltering barn, no cuddly looking sheep, no friendly oxen, but nevertheless the infant Jesus is delivered from Herod's murderous intentions. What we may not recognize that makes this possible is our providential God whose love breaks in during the most desperate times.

The lyrics of Liz Vice's song titled, Refugee King, give voice to this flight made by Joseph and Mary for the sake of baby Jesus and to God's divine intervention and constant presence as it says: "Away from the manger they ran for their lives, the crying boy Jesus, a son they must hide, A dream came to Joseph, they left in the night, and they ran and they ran and they ran.... No place for his parents, no country or tribe." Then comes the Church's prayer carried across generations in the closing lyrics of this hymn, "Stay near me Lord Jesus when danger is nigh, and keep us from Herods and all of their lies. I love thee Lord Jesus, the Refugee King, Hallelujah."

The Messiah's story begins in displacement, but it doesn't end there due to our providential God who guides a devout, faithful, compassionate, dreaming, and trusting father named Joseph so that the Christ child will be able to grow to become the Savior of his people and of generations to come. We do not tell this story as a Christmas add-on, but from the standpoint that it conveys a central truth that we worship a Savior who does not allow fear, borders, state violence, or injustices to have the final word; rather, we worship a Savior whose kingdom is built by divine dreams and a defiant, all-encompassing love. Even our hymns, like Liz Vice's song titled Refugee King, confess what the world often forgets: that God's love breaks in when it is needed most, shattering fear's claim to the future,

and that God's kingdom will not be shaken by fear, injustice, or any human impulse to grasp for power or dominion.

So, this movement from the ancient promise of the birth of Christ to fear is not a disruption of God's plan; rather, it is a disclosure of God's heart, of God's love breaking in. Their flight fulfills ancient prophecy, yes, but it also reveals a truth for every generation: God's redemption does not wait for a situation to be "all is calm and all is bright" before beginning to redeem the world. Rather, God intervenes, God speaks, God guides, God preserves God's promise through ordinary people who obey God's call even when fear surrounds them.

Throughout Scripture we see this same testimony through people like....

- Shiphrah and Puah defying Pharaoh to preserve lives
- Miriam guarding her brother Moses at the Nile River
- Rahab sheltering God's servants in Jericho
- Ruth and Naomi crossing into an unknown land sustained by God's covenant loyalty
- Esther rising to protect the vulnerable
- Daniel standing firm amidst exile
- Jeremiah speaking truth when empires raged
- Disciples who left nets, homes, and safety to follow the call of Christ

God protects when the empire and world powers begin to threaten. God guides and leads when fear, terror, and injustice uproot us. God preserves the promise through ordinary people who obey God's call. God protects the vulnerable and defenseless through divine intervention. This is not only a story from the past. It is the way God still works in the present, and we see it most when the world shakes beneath us. Our providential God still speaks, guides, preserves, and shelters God's own people today, often not by removing danger, but by carrying us through it.

And we have seen this in our own community. When hurricanes like hurricane Helene swept parts of the Southeast and devastated Asheville back in 2024, homes were lost and lives were uprooted, and neighbors became first responders offering food, shelter, and care to those whose plans and possessions were washed away. One of our own church families, Donna and Russ Wenner, were among them – without water, without power, unsure what came next after the devastation of Hurricane Helene. In what they called a *God-wink*, longtime friends from this very congregation, Pat and Rodney Young, opened their home in Waxhaw and welcomed the Wenners and their dog, Baylor to stay with them for three weeks while they waited for things to settle. They shared meals, conversation, evening fellowship, and hospitality that restored not only shelter, but hope and community. Each Sunday during that time, Donna and Russ returned to worship, met by hugs and tears that reminded them they belonged to a community of faith determined to

hold onto hope, even when life feels unsteady. In the confusion of displacement and change, SMPC became their home again, not because the crisis had ended, but because God reminded them they were not alone.

In worship, through prayer, song, proclamation of God's Word, and the fellowship of familiar and new friends, they experienced the quiet but unshakable grace of God gathering them back in. The choir's anthems, the preaching of the Word, and the ordinary conversations before and after worship became God's assurance that home had not been lost, but been renewed and found here at SMPC again. As Donna and Russ later reflected, SMPC gave them a "hug" when they needed it most. It gave them a living picture of God's sustaining care, and a reminder that the church is called to bear that same tenderness towards one another. Soon after, Donna and Russ purchased a home nearby, resettled, and returned to SMPC with deep gratitude, not only for a congregation that reached out in their hour of need, but for a God whose saving work never abandoned them. They were grateful for God whose love broke in through the faithful hospitality of church members who opened the door to them when fear, disaster, and crisis created a desperate situation.

We see this same providential care and love of God beyond our walls too. For example, when wildfires spread across California, whole towns evacuated with

only minutes' warning, families carried children through smoke-dark skies and strangers opened churches and community centers as shelters. It is when storms rage, when fires spread, when injustice trembles that God quietly summons ordinary people to become shelter-bearers of God's steadfast and constant love.

Friends, we live in a world saturated with fear - fear of not having enough, fear of the stranger, fear that tells us to protect what is ours and ignore the suffering of others, and fear of change. But Matthew confronts this instinct. Matthew reminds us that Redemption is God's work, courage is God's call, justice is God's agenda, and the Church is God's instrument, summoned to rise even in the middle of the night, to do God's work.

The Christ child who fled to Egypt will grow into the Christ who says: "Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them, for they belong to the Kingdom of God" He will confront unjust powers, heal the brokenness of the world, welcome those pushed to the margins, gather the displaced, and protect the vulnerable. And by God's Spirit, not our own strength, we are called to follow Christ in the same costly love, reflecting the same level of care and compassion, and ministering to others in the same way that Christ does.

So, in this season, we do more than celebrate Christ's birth. We follow the Refugee King whose kingdom will not be shaken. May we become a group of people who:

- Open doors rather than build walls

- Choose faith over fear
- Trust that God is still at work in redeeming the world
- Follow not by our own strength, might, or determination, but by Spirit-led obedience

The story of the flight to and return from Egypt by the holy family is NOT only about what God did; rather, it is about what God is still doing. May we recognize that when God's love breaks in, the world will not remain the same.

Friends, God's love breaking in is not a distant idea; rather, it is a living hope that we get to be witnesses to, and it is a type of love that refuses to leave our world unchanged. God's love confirms that God enters human history, not to endorse the world as it is, but instead, to redeem it. God's love shows us that God's redemption does not bypass suffering; but, it meets us within it and shelters us. God's love confirms that God's saving work unfolds through ordinary people who act with courage in fearful times, and respond "yes" to God's call.

The promise of God's love breaking in, in our lives and in our world, survives because God intervenes, God speaks into fear and desperate situations, God calls ordinary people to rise, and God's heart is one of unconditional love that protects all of God's children from the reach of modern-day Herods, including rulers, systems of power, and narratives that perpetuate fear, injustice, and crises. The Wenner's and the holy family in our scripture passage from Matthew 2 bear

witness to God's compassion, care, and love that does not allow fear to have the final word.

It is God's love that breaks in the places where love seems most absent. It breaks in when families flee in the middle of the night amidst violence and political fear carried forward by obedience like Joseph's. It breaks in when vulnerable and powerless groups of people are threatened by empires and kings, and God sides with them. It breaks in, when the world trembles under storms, fires, natural disasters, injustices, and uncertainty, and God quietly moves ordinary people to become shelter-bearers of God's divine love and grace.

So, may we become the people who rest NOT in certainty, but in the God whose love breaks in, whose mercy and grace shelters the vulnerable and powerless, whose vision challenges the priorities of the empire, whose power confronts unjust powers, and whose kingdom will not fail. May we follow Christ NOT by our own strength, but by the Spirit's leading, until God's peace, God's justice, and God's grace fill the places where fear and fractured power once reigned. To the God whose love breaks in, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all glory, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.