

Second Sunday after Christmas Day 2026

January 4, 2026

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Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

This Sunday is the Second Sunday after Christmas Day and the eleventh of the twelve days of Christmas. So, if we look back on the anticipation of Advent and the beautiful, glorious celebration of the birth of Christ, we have some lovely stories from scripture to contemplate. We could start with angels coming to the parents of Jesus to reassure them that even though his birth was to be, shall we say, unconventional, God was with them.

Then there of course is the story of the birth itself. There are more angels. There are shepherds and their flocks. There is the manger in the cattle shed and wise men on the way. We should know that this birth was anything but easy—it must have been difficult and fraught, but we still tend to settle on the peacefulness, glory, and the wonder.

But now we are on the other side of Christmas, and just eleven days after our sweet celebration of the birth of the Savior, things take a turn for the dark and ugly.

The Gospel reading this morning comes from the second half of the second chapter of Matthew. The first half is the story of the Magi, the wise men who travel a great distance to pay homage to the newborn king of Israel. The Magi interact with King Herod and come to his royal court in Jerusalem for directions on how to find this newborn king. This is the first that King Herod has heard of a potential rival appearing. A rival who might very well threaten his power and wealth.

Herod tries to enlist the Magi in the search for this new king. The wise men have more than likely run across a tinpot despot or two before, but they take the advice of the king's advisors and proceed to Bethlehem to find the child. Afterward, they avoid further contact with the dangerous and frightened King Herod.

The reading that we've just heard from Matthew 2 is the other side of Christmas. The story falls into three sections: first, the call on the Holy Family to go to Egypt, second, what happens back home while they are in Egypt, and third, their return to Israel.

And because we are in the Christmas season it's tempting to focus on just the first one of these because Jesus and his parents are the focus here. And this part of the life of Jesus is important, of course, and especially for Matthew who is the only Gospel writer who tells it. Because in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the New Moses; the giver of the Sermon on the Mount like Moses brought the Commandments down from the Mountain; the liberator of the people of Israel like Moses liberated them by crossing through the Red Sea. So it suits the purpose of Matthew to have Jesus go into Egypt so that, like Moses, he can come out of Egypt to free his people.

And as we focus on this aspect of the life of Jesus, we are reminded that Jesus himself was a refugee and that he understands the plight of refugees in our own time and he has compassion on them. Our Lord was a refugee, displaced from his homeland by politics, greed and power and we need to remember that this is integral to the story of the God whom we worship.

In fact, among the commandments that Moses brought down from that mountain is: "When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." So, the flight of Jesus into Egypt is a very important part of the story that happens the other side of Christmas.

On this other side of Christmas, we are thrown immediately into a quite horrific and cruel scene—the part of the story that takes place while Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are in Egypt. You may have noticed that the particular Gospel reading we heard was missing a few verses. I suppose the editors of the lectionary were trying to spare us from the full brunt of the other side of Christmas. Verse 16 tells us: "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.”

What an unspeakable evil this is, to execute innocent children in the village in the hope of ridding the world of the Messiah.

When we read of the deranged acts of Herod, we are reminded that in the world today, many children experience the same barbarity and cruelty. Children caught in the destruction and chaos of war. Children separated from their parents by immigration enforcement agents. Children abducted and trafficked as slaves. There is much barbarism and cruelty still meted out on children today in the name of politics, power, religion, and empire.

The third scene from this story is the return of the Holy Family to Israel. But again, this is a journey fraught with danger and fear because Herod's son Archelaus has now succeeded Herod to the throne in Jerusalem. His reputation for nastiness is almost as horrendous as his father's, so the Holy Family settles in the remote town of Nazareth in Galilee instead.

This is the other side of Christmas, the other side of the angels and shepherds. Just as we celebrated joy and wonder in the lead-up to Christmas, so we contemplate vulnerability and chaos and danger and frailty on this side of Christmas.

On the one side we have joy and confidence.

On the other side we have vulnerability and fear.

And happening in the middle of the two is the birth of the Messiah, our Savior.

And what a wonderful metaphor that is for our lives. On the one hand, we experience joys and wonders and amazements and peace. But on the other hand, we experience pain and suffering and loss and vulnerability.

How can we possibly make sense of the see-saw of emotions that life brings?

We can only make sense of it if we put Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in the center and allow the see-saw of life's experience to pivot around him as the very source of our Being.

If Jesus is at the center of our lives, we can make sense of our joys and wonder and peace.

If Jesus is at the center of our lives, we can make sense of our vulnerabilities and fear and frailties.

Take Jesus out of the center of our lives and we are just left with a see-saw of emotions and experience and we are tossed around like a little boat on the stormy waves of the sea.

But if Jesus is at the center, if Jesus is our pivot, if Jesus is our anchor, then we will have something, someone, to hold onto in the ups and the downs of life.

We all want Christmas to be meaningful and not just a nice story we tell before we celebrate with feasts and gift-giving. But if we just stay with the angels and the shepherds and the awe and wonder, we have a very lop-sided Christmas and we don't get the whole story and its meaning. Ironically, we need the other side of Christmas. We need the ugliness of the story so that we can realize the totality of humanity and human experience that the Christmas story conveys.

There is awe and wonder in life.

There is loss and fear and vulnerability in life.

And in the midst of all this stands Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour.

And at this point in the Christmas season, we embrace the whole story in the sure and confident knowledge that Jesus embraces us in our totality: all that is good and wonderful, all that is fearful, frail and vulnerable.

Jesus Christ stands in the very center of our lives, in good times and in bad. Our Lord has been there. Our Lord is with us now.

And ***that*** is the wonderful message of Christmas.