

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
First Sunday after Christmas
December 28, 2025
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
He came to earth to die.

After the Wise Men were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream. He said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, because Herod will search for the child in order to kill him.”

¹⁴ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵ He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious. He issued orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under. This was in keeping with the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men. ¹⁷ Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:

¹⁸ A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more.

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. The angel said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to kill the child are dead.”

²¹ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus, Herod’s son, had succeeded his father as ruler in Judea, he was afraid to go there. Since he had been warned in a dream, he went to the region of Galilee. ²³ When he arrived there, he settled in a city called Nazareth. So what was spoken through the prophets was fulfilled: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

—Matthew 2:13-23 EHV

The Scriptures tell us that Mary pondered all the events of Jesus’ birth and treasured them in her heart. You certainly can imagine this new mother taking in every event, praying about it, wondering about it. She certainly cannot forget that memorable night of the birth of her firstborn. Shepherds. Angels. A barn. A manger.

When Jesus was just a little over one month old, 40 days old to be exact, Joseph and Mary took the six-mile trek to Jerusalem. It was time for the consecration of her firstborn at the temple. This was after Jesus’ circumcision. This was after Mary’s purification time. It was required by God to redeem the firstborn son at the temple. This was the time when Simeon spoke such astonishing words as he held Jesus in his arms. **“Lord, you now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”** (Luke 2:29-32).

But Simeon spoke other words that day. He spoke dark, ominous words that loomed as clouds brewing over Jesus’ life. Words that penetrated deep into Mary’s heart. She could not forget them. Old Simeon prophesied, **“Listen carefully, this child is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”** And I imagine he looked in Mary’s eyes as he said, **“And a sword will pierce your own soul too”** (Luke 2:34,35).

Mary must have pondered those words as she cradled her baby in her arms. She gazes down into his dark eyes, wondering what all this meant. “How can this little child cause such a stir? Why would anybody ever speak against this innocent child?”

I picture Mary studying his face, her mind still trying to grasp the wonder of it all. Here is God incarnate. Here is the fullness of God in bodily form. Here are all the promises of God wrapped in flesh. Here is the hope of the world. Here is wrapped so much mystery. As she cradles him in her arms, she wonders, “What is God’s plan with this child?”

Some time has passed; perhaps more than a year has passed. And one day there is a stir in Jerusalem. After the long and treacherous journey, wise men from the east reach the outskirts of Jerusalem. It’s daylight. The star they were following is no longer seen. They enter the capital city. Certainly, this place of the temple, this place of royalty, this place of Judean significance would be bustling with celebration. Certainly, thank offerings would be overflowing

the temple because the promised King was born. Certainly, the people would have the right focus, the right worship, the right direction as they follow their newborn King.

But as the caravan threads through the outer gates, it's just another day in Jerusalem. Shopkeepers are minding their stores. Women are picking over produce. Priests are attending to the daily rigors of religion.

The only thing that creates a pause in the morning routine is the presence of these foreigners. So, they ask, **"Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him"** (Matthew 2:2).

People stop in their tracks. Their language is different, and their questions are disturbing. "King? Be careful with talk like that around here. Herod is on the throne." A stir starts in the city.

Word reaches the imperial palace. Every step of Herod's ascent to the throne has been stained with the blood of his rivals. He even axed family members so that he could be crowned king.

The rumor came to his ears. Another one? A king? He does everything he can to cover up his paranoia. But down deep he is greatly troubled.

And all of Jerusalem is troubled with him. Over the years, the Jews' relationship with the king has been tenuous at best. But over the years the people have learned to cope with it. Herod gave them a temple, and in return, they gave him their allegiance. It was a convenient relationship between synagogue and state. It was a relationship they needed. And a relationship they didn't want to upset.

That's why the words of the wise men troubled them. Herod gathers the chief priests and scribes together. "When your Messiah comes, where will it be? I mean, what city?"

"In Bethlehem of Judea." The religious leaders are quick to cite chapter and verse. But their search for the Savior ends there.

"Bethlehem," Herod thinks to himself, "City of David. *King* David. I cannot let this rumor go on. I must put an end to it before it flares up into rebellion."

Herod questions the wise men, careful enough not to arouse their suspicion, but cunning enough to play them into his hand. He encourages them on their quest and sends them on their way. "Come back and tell me what you find so that I too can worship him," he encourages. His words say one thing, but they only cover his true murderous intentions.

By nightfall the star rises, and so do their hopes. Once again the mysterious twinkling messenger goes before them, this time leading them southward. It stops at the quiet village of Bethlehem and rests over a small house.

The voices of the wise men hush as they enter the humble surroundings that form a cathedral for their worship. They greet the family with quiet respect. When they see the child, they bow before him in humble adoration, murmuring their praise as they tremble with joy. With the humblest of gestures and the fewest of words, they offer their gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh to this child. These dignitaries traveled hundreds of miles to worship the Christ-child. What secret is God keeping with this child?

When the wise men left, an angel visited Joseph with a message. He bolts upright in bed, heart pounding, eyes wide open. He shakes Mary awake and tells her the dream. She throws off her covers and bundles up Jesus while Joseph gathers what little food and personal belongings they have. Thoughts race through his mind as he packs. "Egypt? We have to go to Egypt? We have no money to go to Egypt. And what will we do when we get there? How will a foreigner like me find work? What does all of this mean?"

He gathers up the gifts of the Magi – the pouch of gold, the costly incense, the precious bottle of myrrh. And suddenly he realizes. God has not only pointed the way, but he has also provided the way. They have resources to flee to Egypt and to live. God has taken care of them once again.

Thoughts race through his mind. Their ancestors were once in Egypt. At first they fled to Egypt for safety. Jacob's family went there to find refuge during the famine. But their freedom soon turned to slavery. Held in slavery under Pharaoh's command. But God took care of them. He led them like a child. He took them by their hand, guided them out of that slavery. It was a very vivid picture. Paint the doorpost of the houses with lamb's blood. When the Angel of the Lord comes, he will pass over the houses with the blood on them. A death had occurred. The people were spared. Through the death of another, God rescued his people from slavery. It was a celebration they commemorated every year – the Passover.

God walked them through the waters of the Red Sea. He was their leader who led them through the desert into the Promised Land. It was in the desert that God taught his children how to trust. He showed them that he would take care of them. He provided for them. Gave them food and water.

Thoughts are racing through Joseph's mind. Why do we need to take Jesus to Egypt? Why is God leading us to find refuge and safety there? What is God up to? What is his plan for this child? He recalls the words of the prophet Hosea, **"Out of Egypt I called my son."** God called his Old Testament child, the Israelites, out of Egypt, and now he is calling his only-begotten son out of Egypt, too. What is God's plan for this child? What secret is God keeping with this child?

By dawn, the holy family is long gone. For now, they are safe. Jesus has escaped the sword. A brutal sword executed by Herod on the babies in Bethlehem. Jesus has escaped. But Mary will never escape the memories of that night. Deep in her heart she will always fear that one day that Roman sword will find her son and finish the work it started in Bethlehem. She ponders and wonders when that sword will pierce her own soul, too.

I imagine that as the morning washes over his cheeks, the sleepy Savior wakes and yawns. The first thing he sees is his mother's eyes, eyes that are suddenly misted with tears. He smiles. She smiles back. He smiles bigger. And she blinks away the tears. Unable to understand anything but the language of his mother's face, and already Jesus is an enemy of the state. Unable to talk, and already he is targeted for assassination. Unable to run, and already a fugitive, fleeing for his life.

What is God's plan for this child? It's a mystery that is so terrifying it could scarcely be uttered without causing the heavens to tremble and the stars to fall from the sky. It's a mystery that is so earth-shaking that even angels watch with eyes wide open.

What is this mystery? What is God's plan for this child? On that starlit night in Bethlehem, God came to earth to do the one thing he could not do in heaven. He came to do one thing for all the people of this world, the poor, the rich, the Jews, the Gentiles, everybody. He came to do one thing for you and for me, something he could not do in heaven. He came to make us his sons and daughters. And there is only one way that could happen. Here's the mystery. Even at such a young age, God was making it known that he took on flesh, and **the Son of God came to earth to die.**

My friends in Christ, do you think your life's challenges are so great that no one can understand? Jesus understands. He had challenges, and as the Son of God he can do something about them. Do you think your struggles are so unique that no one can help? Jesus went through some very unique struggles, and as the Son of God he can carry you through your struggles. The prophet Isaiah saw Jesus carrying his people through anguish and struggles. He saw Jesus save and redeem. Right at the end of our first reading for today, he writes, **"In all their anguish he felt anguish, and the Angel of his Presence saved them. In his love and in his pity he himself redeemed them, and he took them up and carried them all the days of old"** (Isaiah 63:9). And as the apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians 4, Jesus came to make you the sons and daughters of God. Whatever challenges you face, you have an inheritance that can never be taken away. Why? Because **the Son of God came to earth to die.** My friends, ponder that and treasure it in your heart. Amen.