

Sermon for Sunday, December 28, 2025
Rev. KJ Wester, First Presbyterian Church of DuPage
Matthew 2:13-23

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redemer. Amen.

There is an old story that goes like this:

There once was a mighty river. The great waters surged and swept branches, animals, and yes, even people downstream. A church near by the river realized how very dangerous the waters could be and so they set up a rescue team.

Volunteers would go out day and night to save people from the mighty river. They devised a whole series of ropes along the river for pulling people out. They had members standing along the shoreline working tirelessly in the rescue efforts. And others who provided warm clothing and food for those who were saved.

The church was given many well-deserved accolades for their work. And they earned high praise for their efforts made a great difference in the lives of those who had been in the river and now were dry.

One day a reporter came along to interview the church about their work and was amazed by the stories of valiant rescues. But no one could answer her most pressing question: Why were all the people in the river in the first place?

Today we read one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, in my opinion. There are stories that challenge our faith, of course, and letters that invite us to a different kind of living. There is poetry that makes us see God differently. And prophets who stir our compassion.

But this story. This story is just horrific. There is no other way around it.

A political leader, Herod, felt threatened. He wanted to hold on to his power. He was known at that time as the Lord and Savior, and he relished in that title.

He wanted to be the “lord”--to be the one in charge of everything. To be the one who made decisions without the counsel of others. To be the one to dictate how decisions were made; how money was spent; how lives were lived.

And more than that, he wanted people to honor him as their savior. To see him not just as a political leader but as the one who turned the world around. To do that he had to help people understand that they had enemies. Enemies living among them. Enemies who may have been their neighbors, people who they may have even been friendly with.

Herod understood that to show you have power—to prove you have might—you have to have an enemy. People need to be afraid so that you can show them how tough and mighty you are. People need to be afraid so that you can be the one to save them from their fears.

Sound familiar?

And when people are afraid, when people believe that they have an enemy who is out to harm them. When people think their own safety is at risk, they will do almost anything. Including, it seems, believe their leader, Herod, when he tells them that the only way to stay safe is to kill their enemy. To kill people from a certain ethnic group. To kill them without trial, without specific evidence, without officially declaring war.

Specifically, in Herod's case, to kill children under the age of 2 who lived in and around Bethlehem.

Like in so many times before and in so many times since, people flee for their lives. They are forced to leave their homelands because the choice is life or death. Either they lose their lives or the lives of their children. Or they flee and live. They try to begin again in a new place. Perhaps a place with a new language. A different culture. A different way of being.

It's happening in the Sudan as we speak. Syria. Palestine. Afghanistan. Venezuela. People fleeing for their lives and the lives of their family.

Perhaps it doesn't sound like the Christmas Story, but it is.

I think that is really important. It was only three nights ago that we sang: "Peace on the Earth, Good Will To Man." And "Joy to the World," but here, with the other stories of Jesus as a wee baby Mixed in with the beautiful images of the manger scene is the stark reality of genocide.

Jesus did not enter a world of peace. He did not enter a world of justice. He did not enter a world where human beings could be lords and saviors. He entered a world that proclaimed might made right. And he came with no might at all.

As the Theologian Howard Thurman so brilliantly explained: Jesus came as one with his back to the wall. (See Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 1976). Jesus had no power. No prestige. No financial wealth. No legal status. No privilege at all to be spoken of in the world's standard. A child of a promise, yes. God's promise. But by earthly standards: weak. Marginalized. Other.

Friends, this is who our God is. There is a popular comedian right now who invites Christians consider the ridiculousness of the symbol we place around our necks and build large homage to in the front of our churches—the symbol of the cross.

The comedian points out, rightly, that this is an incredibly insane thing to do. We literally wear a torture device around our necks. A device that was meant to show the power and gruesomeness

of the Roman empire. To teach people that if they went against the will of the empire, they would die in the most brutal way humanly possible.

This is who our God is. God is not one who shies away from the suffering of the world. God is not one who calls us to only sing the warm songs and look at the twinkly lights at Christmas. God is the one who not only sees our suffering. Who not only hears our cries. Who not only knows those who call out to God in the dead of the night and watch for the morning, losing hope day by day. God is one who enters in. God is the one who knows our pain because God bared our pain in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not come in power and in might. He did not live his life with a silver spoon in his mouth. He did not seek power for himself. No, he came in what was weak in the world to prove the powerful wrong. He came to show us that true love means standing with the poor and the outcast and the downtrodden and the refugee.

And for those in our congregation who have experienced all those things—having to flee your homeland for whatever reason or having days when you have to choose between food on the table or medicine in your belly. For those who feel like your backs are up against a wall for whatever reason, you are not alone. God knows your pain. And God enters in.

And God teaches us to enter in. If we are children of God. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, and I know we are. Then we, too, enter in to the places of hurt in our world. Then we, too, are called to follow God to the margins. To the hurting.

Perhaps that is easier said than done, though. So... today, I want to do something different than we usually do. Today, instead of me just giving us some ideas of things to think about, I want to invite us all to enter in.

And yes, I know, this can be scary. It is difficult to face our fears. It is difficult to name places of hurt. And it is even more difficult to take on a willingness to stand in those places of hurt.

Today, I want to encourage you to do two things. First: To think about those who are drifting down the river.

What do you see as the places of greatest hurt in our world today? Where do you see harm being done? Who is suffering? Let's name that. Let's be real about the world around us.

And then two—Mr. Rogers, who you may love from his TV show growing up, but who was also a minister and a brilliant theologian in his own right, he would often say: Look for the helpers. Who are the helpers? Let's celebrate them. Who is actively already entering in and being God's hands and feet in the world?

And three—let's take some time to think about us. What about us as a congregation? How can we be like Jesus and enter in to a world full of suffering? And yes, I am thinking about ways in

which we can pull people out of the river—or pull ourselves out. How we can collectively work to grab the ropes.

But I'm also thinking about ways that we can think together about looking upstream. How can we name why people are in the river in the first place? How can we help keep one another from falling in?

You have a handout with three questions on it and our sermon time is usually 20 minutes. I've only preached for about ... (10 minutes?)

So together, let's take 5 minutes—I know it's not nearly enough, but it's just a starting point. Let's take 5 minutes and turn to your neighbor and ask one another:

1. What would you name as one of the biggest areas of hurt in our world today?
2. Mr. Rogers often said, “Look for the helpers”—how have you seen individuals or organizations making a difference in this area?
3. Where and how do you see our congregation making a difference in the world? Where can we grow in this next year and the years to come?

I want to close today with a quote from Elie Wiesel—the writer, truth-teller, holocaust survivor—who said these words in his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. He said:

“And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.” –Elie Wiesel in this 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, [Quote taken from the Children's Defense Fund Website](#)

Let us be a people who enter in to the hurts of the world. Amen.

** Sermon inspired by materials from [A Sanctified Art “What Do You Fear?” Series](#).