

Sermon - 28 December 2025

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Date: 28 December 2025

Preacher: Ife Ojetayo

[0:00] F*** and Redeemer. Amen. Please be seated. Beloved in Christ, this first Sunday of Christmas, still wrapped in the light and garlands of the season, the church sets before us, the church sets before us, the church sets before us.

And uncertainly remembrance. I know you've noticed sort of that even in our song this morning, it's sort of in the minor key. There's a little bit of somberness that comes right after Christmas. The holy innocent, the children of Bethlehem, slaughtered by King Herod in his vain attempt to destroy the Christ. It is a deliberate choice in that the church refuses to let sentimentality overtake truth.

These truths follow immediately in the heels of Christmas Day. The first, the second day of Christmas, we remember St. Stephen, the church's first martyr.

His blood spilt because he proclaimed a crucified Messiah who rose from the dead and ascended as man and God. On the third day of Christmas, we remember St. John, apostle and evangelist, bearing witness to the word made flesh in a hostile world.

[1:34] And today, on the fourth day of Christmas, we remember the holy innocence. Children who were swept up into the violence aimed at the Christ.

Who became the first fruits unto God and unto the Lamb. We're meant to remember that although the light has come into the darkness, redemption hasn't been consummated yet.

We still live in this world that's broken and fallen and full of tragedy and injustice. And so I think it is right and good, proper remembrance, even in the festivity of Christmas, to remember the reality, the truth about the world we live in.

But we don't do that in despair. From the very beginning, the church teaches us that Christmas is not escapism from the fallenness of our world.

The incarnation is God's entry into the world's brokenness and pain. One of the most daunting expressions of this truth comes to us in the old English carol, Lule, Lule, Lule, Dal, Lutitani, Cha, which we just sang as the gradual hymn.

[2:47] It's a lullaby sung in the shadow of death. And beneath its gentle repetition lies the ancient cry of scripture for a rescuer to save us from the consequences of our rebellion against God.

Our slavery to sin and to save us from the death that results from it. That is precisely what Matthew gives us in today's gospel reading. So I do invite you to open your Bible to Matthew 2.

We'll be looking at verse 13 to 18. It's on page 960 in your pew Bible. Matthew tells us that after the visit of the Magi, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee.

The verses before recount the visitation of the visitors from the far east, the nations coming to pay homage to the king.

We will look more closely at that at the Feast of Epiphany. But following their departure, here in Matthew we see the angel come and the call for the holy family to escape into Egypt under the cover of night.

[3:59] To be refugees carrying the Son of God, the hope of mankind, away from the serpent-like figure of Herod. Because Herod, realizing that he has been deceived, erupts in rage, moderate rage.

He orders the slaughter of every male child in Bethlehem, two years old and under. Now, Herod, if you read some historical accounts about him, you will know that this isn't particular, this is part of the cause.

He was known to be, he's Herod the Great. He was actually just, he was a vassal to the Roman Caesar in the ruling that area. He was instrumental.

He was a great administrator, supremely wealthy, man for his age, and powerful. He built the temple that Jesus and his disciples know as a temple now, the second temple.

He built that. And it was magnificent. It's one of the wonders of the world. He was an Edomite, though. He was not a Jew. And he was a paranoid ruler.

[5:16] Towards the end of his life, he was actually known to have killed his wife, his close associates. He killed two of his sons because he thought that they were a threat to him.

So this is nothing for him to send messengers, his enforcers, to the little town of Bethlehem to kill innocent lives. This is not an aberration.

This violence, Herod's violence, is our fallen reason, sharpened by fear. This is how it operates.

This is how it still operates in our world. He is a ruler whose power rests on his security. He worships his own throne. And when threatened, he responds as fallen humanity always does. He sacrifices the innocent to preserve himself. Still, still, Matthew makes clear that this atrocity is not outside God's redemptive story, but squarely within it.

[6:28] He links this occurrence, he links this story deliberately to Old Testament Scripture. First Matthew quotes Hosea, chapter 11, verse 1, Out of Egypt, I called my son.

Matthew tells us that the Holy Family remains in Egypt until the death of Herod. And he says to us that this was to fulfill what the Lord has spoken to the prophet.

Out of Egypt, I called my son. And it is right here at verse 15 of Matthew that many readers tremble. I'm sorry, many readers stumble because at first glance, as you read that, it seems like a stretch.

Hosea 11, if you were to go to Hosea 11, it's clearly about Israel, about the Exodus. When Israel was a child, Hosea began, I loved him.

And out of Egypt, I called my son. This is God speaking regarding Israel, the nation, as his son. Hosea is remembering that moment when God delivered his infant nation from slavery, carried her in his arms, fed her, led her with cords of kindness, only to watch her, that is Israel, to watch her wander into idolatry and rebellion, breaking a father's heart.

[7:56] So how can Matthew then say that Jesus' flight to Egypt and return from Egypt somehow fulfills that text in Hosea?

You may be thinking that he's forcing the connection. But I don't think Matthew is doing that. Matthew will not do that because he's far too careful, particularly in his gospel, far too deliberate in handling the Old Testament.

Again and again, if you read the gospel of Matthew, he's trying to show that Jesus' life is not accidental, but deeply rooted in Israel's scriptures.

So he's not being sloppy here. What he's trying to be is show that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises. The Greek word for fulfillment there is *pleroo*.

And it just means to fulfill. It means to fill up. To bring to fullness. And this means that what was once partial, what was once a shadow or incomplete has now reached its intended climactic revelation in Christ.

[9:12] In Hosea's case, he was not secretly predicting that the Messiah will one day flee to Egypt. Hosea doesn't have that in mind. Hosea was just remembering the Exodus.

And he was lamenting how Israel, God's son, failed to live as God's son. Matthew knows this. And in turn, he's not rewriting Hosea, but instead he's showing that Jesus fills up Israel's story.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is presented as the true Israel, the faithful son who succeeds where the first son failed.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus as a declaration of a new beginning for the people of God. That in Jesus, there is a new beginning. But in this story comes a jealous king who orders the death of baby boys.

And it's happened before. We read it in our first reading this morning. Another seed of the serpent, another serpent-like king, Pharaoh, did the same thing in Exodus.

[10:27] Just like Moses was spared by being hidden, Jesus, a greater deliverer, the greater Moses, is spared by being hidden from the clutches of this serpent-like king.

Israel went down into Egypt and was later called out by God's mighty hand. Jesus, the true Israel, also goes down into Egypt and is called out as the same beloved son.

After Israel comes out of Egypt, she passes through the sea. After Jesus comes out of Egypt, what does he do? He passes through the waters of the Jordan in his baptism. After Israel passes through the sea, she wanders in the wilderness for 40 years and fails.

Jesus, the true Israel, he also is driven into the wilderness for 40 days. But unlike Israel, he remained faithful.

Matthew is communicating something astonishing to us. He's communicating to us that Jesus is reliving Israel's history in his own person.

[11:42] Jesus is the embodiment, he's embodying the covenant people as the faithful son. Israel was always meant to be. So when Israel turned away, Jesus obeys.

When Israel grumbled, Jesus trusts. When Israel broke the covenant, Jesus fulfills it. This is why Matthew can say, this was to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet.

Oseah's words are being filled up and brought to their true end in Christ. By the way, this is why the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism matters so much.

Remember that story of Jesus' baptism? After the Exodus, Israel quickly fell into rebellion.

Remember that, right? After the deliverance from the Red Sea. But when God looked upon this son, this true Israel, what does God say concerning him?

This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. So we read, let's go back to our text there, the flight into Egypt.

[12:55] This flight into Egypt is not then a footnote in the story. It is a theological declaration that from his earliest days, that is Jesus' earliest days, Christ identifies himself fully with his people.

He enters into their story. He bears their failures. He retraces their steps, not to repeat their sin, but to redeem it.

And he does all of this while the blood of the innocent still cries out from the ground. The child who was called out of Egypt is the same child who will one day lead a greater exodus.

Not merely from a tyrant's rage, but he will lead a greater exodus from sin, from death, and the grave itself. As he leads his people in deliverance, in salvation.

So God sent his son to do for his people what they could never do for themselves. This is how Christ is the true meaning and fulfillment of the promises of God.

[14:04] This is the true meaning of Emmanuel. God with us. It's not an abstraction, that phrase, God with us. But it happens.

God came to us in history, in exile. He comes to us in suffering. And he comes to us in salvation to deliver us and to save and to rescue.

So Matthew reaches even deeper into Israel's grief in this account of this massacre in Bethlehem. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah.

He's quoting Jeremiah 31 verse 15. A voice was heard in Ramah weeping in love, lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children.

She refuses to be comforted because they are no more. Rachel. Who's Rachel? Rachel was the beloved wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

[15:05] And she's been dead for centuries even in the time I was there. Sorry, even by the time of Jeremiah's date, Rachel had been dead. But Jeremiah is doing something here.

At Ramah, where's Ramah? Ramah was the staging ground. Remember that Jeremiah was the prophet of God for the people. He was the one who prophesied just like Isaiah, exile. And he was still alive when the exile began.

And so Ramah is the staging ground where the people of Judah were gathered before being marched off into exile. The prophet dares to imagine Rachel alive in this scene.

Rachel becomes the embodiment of Israel's sorrow. Rachel becomes the mother of the nation, weeping as her children are torn from their land of promise and driven into exile.

It's a haunting image. This old gospel reading this morning is a haunting image. A mother will not be consoled, perhaps because consolation will require denial.

[16:14] A grief is too real, seemingly too final to be appeased by empty words. What words can you offer the mothers in the town of Bethlehem?

For Matthew looks at Bethlehem, Matthew looks at the massacre of her children and hears the same cry that is echoed throughout Israel's history, that still echoes in the face of injustice.

The mothers of that small town lift up their voices. Rachel weeps again. Jeremiah's lament of exile is not merely a geographical one now.

It is an existential cry. Violence erupts because the world cannot bear the presence of God in its midst. When the light enters the darkness, what happens?

The darkness lashes out. the massacre of the innocent is not an isolated evil. It is another chapter in our long rebellion.

[17 : 26] It is a reminder of a world that responds to God, not in worship, but with fear. Not with repentance, but with bloodshed.

Rachel's tears echo through history. From this ancient tyranny, to every age that follows, to every age that sacrifices the weak to preserve the powerful.

And yet, yet, this is crucial. Jeremiah's prophecy does not end with weeping. If you were to read all of chapter 31, perhaps if Jeremiah, if Matthew stopped at verse 15, or Jeremiah actually, in his prophecy in Jeremiah 31, if he had stopped at verse 15, we might think he was only naming despair.

But Jeremiah does not stop there. The Lord speaks to Rachel in the very next breath, in Jeremiah 31, verse 16. Keep your voice from weeping, the Lord says, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work.

They shall come back. Your children have been driven to exile. They shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord.

[18 : 52] Your children shall come back to their own country. Jeremiah 31 moves from lament to promise, from tears to restoration, from loss to life, as the Lord himself promised to turn their lamentations into joy.

It is in this same chapter that God promises a new covenant written on the tablets, not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts.

A covenant in which sins are forgiven and remembered no more. A covenant that will finally heal the rupture that caused the exile in the first place.

Matthew knows this. In telling us this story, he is not proclaiming despair. He is proclaiming hope, the kind of hope that passes through suffering, not around it.

Rachel weeping. These bereaved mothers weep in Bethlehem. But they weep at the threshold of redemption.

[20 : 11] The children are gone, yes. Their deaths are real, yes. Scripture does not soften the horror, but their blood is shed in the presence of the child who will one day say, I am the resurrection and the life.

and because of the salvation of Mary's child, their children's death will not be in vain. Here is the terrible irony.

Mary sings her child to sleep while other mothers bury theirs. The Christ child rests while blood is spilled because of him.

And that brings us to reflect shortly on the blessed mother of our Lord. You may say, was she the only woman in the town of Bethlehem spared from the grief these other mothers in Bethlehem had to endure?

Was Mary spared? No, not at all. After all, we remember Simeon's words to her, a sword will pierce your own heart.

[21 : 21] The blessed Virgin Mary will endure the agony of seeing a son shamed, tortured, and crucified for the sins of the whole world.

Hers included. She will bear witness from beginning to end as Christ accomplishes our redemption in his earthly ministry.

And so the mothers of Bethlehem do not yet know this, but the restoration Jeremiah promised has already begun. the new covenant is already present in a child in flight to Egypt, cradled in his mother's arms.

Their tears are not ignored, their tears are not wasted, rather, their tears are gathered up into the saving work of Christ. The same Lord who heard their cry at Ramah now hears it again, and this time he comes himself to answer their cries.

Here is the heart of our hope, brothers and sisters. The child for whom these children die will not evade violence forever. He will not escape to Egypt only to hide there.

[22 : 44] He will return from Egypt and he will confront the powers of this world directly, and he will do so not with swords or legions, but with his own body.

The ones sung to sleep in Bethlehem will one day be laid to sleep in a tomb. The violence that lashes out blindly in Herod will be gathered, concentrated, and spent upon him at the cross.

and there what will he do? He will exhaust all of that violence. He will exhaust upon himself all of our sin, all of our guilt, and all the penalty of death that it deserves. He will exhaust it upon his body on the cross. God does not stand aloof from suffering. He enters it fully. That's the beauty.

That's the hope of the story. He takes it into himself. The grief of his mothers, the blood of the innocents, the cruelty of the world around us, he bears it to death.

[24:07] evil does not have the final word. The final word is the word made flesh.

So, knowing this, how shall we sing as Christians in a broken world? How shall we sing? How shall we respond?

How shall we continue in this world of sin and brokenness? we are not called to continue with shallow cheer as we celebrate this feast of Christmas time.

We are also meant to be rooted in reality about the brokenness of the world around us. But we do not face it with willful denial.

We are not called to be in denial about the realities of our world. But yet, we are called to face it with hope forged in truth. The truth that Christ has come.

[25:13] And he's taken our pains upon himself. That's why we can face all that may come and will come and still comes. We know the night is deep.

We know the grief is real. But we also know the child has come. And because he has come, God has already begun the undoing of every evil.

The innocents are not forgotten. Rachel's tears are not wasted. Herod's rage is not victorious.

The cross will answer the massacre at Bethlehem. The resurrection will answer the grave. And at the second advent, when Christ comes as judge of all the earth, the blood innocently shed, the suffering endured for Christ, will be answered before the judge of all the earth.

So the church sings. We sing loudly, we sing triumphantly, and we sing faithfully over the cradle, and over the cross, and over the world, still waiting to be healed.

[26:32] We proclaim Christ has come. He has come in mercy to redeem. He has come to heal all that is broken.

Salvation is found in him alone. And we sing loudly, and we call people to come to him. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.