Sermon copyright © 2026 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Lord, you deemed it good to be born among a people in an occupied land, amid war and strife, where tyrants raged and soldiers ravaged with weapons of violence. As we marvel at the mystery of your incarnation among us, give us grace to see all the ways you journey beside us, sharing our pain and bending our sorrow toward the hope of resurrection. Amen.[1]

The scene, on many levels, could be ripped from today's headlines.

- Anxious refugees leave their homeland for fear of what might happen if they stay.
- Innocent children become victims of a madman.
- Tyrannical leaders take violent action to preserve power.

We've watched these scenes play out in Palestine, Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and in too many other places to count.
123 million in 2025 alone—displaced and forced to flee.[2]

And this morning, <u>days</u> after gathering around the Christchild's manger with shepherds and angels, and **<u>moments</u>** after a visit from the **<u>mysterious Magi,</u>** <u>a TORTUOUS SCENE</u> comes into view in our two part gospel reading.

One that's become <u>so common</u> in our time we've <u>ceased to be surprised</u> anymore.

It's as though the JOY we celebrated last week at his birth has suddenly been <u>ripped away</u> from us by the reality of the perils of this world.

And it's tempting to just <u>shake our heads and walk away…</u>
or <u>turn the channel</u> and find something <u>more palatable</u> to think about.

But if we did so, we'd miss <u>a central point of this gospel</u>: that in Jesus, God enters the <u>full reality of human life</u>—even its <u>most bleak</u> aspects.

From the very beginning, the life of Jesus is a mixture of joy and sorrow. The revelation <u>both</u> of God's <u>compassionate love</u> and the <u>terrible price</u> that attends that kind of love.

---

[1] Based on a prayer by William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource,* Vol.26:4, 1998, p.55, edited by epk.
[2] Source: Norwegian Refugee Council https://www.nrc.no/global-figures

Sermon copyright © 2026 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

With the maniacal HEROD poised to snuff out the life of the newborn king, Joseph, a man who (as we've observed) LISTENS to his dreams and has the courage to ACT on them, packs up his family and flees south to Egypt. And so the babe and his parents are, for the moment, safe.

But we have learned something crucial to understanding the meaning of God with us:

- While to the poor and outcaste Emmanuel represents HOPE.
- To those in power Emmanuel represents THREAT.

And the evil forces of this world—the corrupt leaders and dictators and violent men—are not going to lay down their arms and walk away.

They will RESIST God's promised one with every fiber of their being.

Matthew's nativity reminds us that Emmanuel has come to the same world in which WE live and work and struggle—with billions around the world in circumstances MOST DIRE compared to ours.

The One born in Bethlehem does not remain above the fray, but enters into it in order to be GOD-WITH-US.

But there's something else also operating in this story that I'd like to notice with you this morning, and it has to do with Matthew's understanding of prophecy and fulfillment.

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew seems the most intent on connecting the dots for his readers between the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and the life of Jesus.

To make sure we get those connections, he'll say something like:
"This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet..."
and then he'll quote the verses of scripture he has in mind.

Now, sometimes his technique may strike us as a somewhat wooden or even fatalistic formula for understanding how things work. But for Matthew it's really a statement about the dynamic nature of God's word, which, though it was spoken first in the past, finds new fulfillment in Jesus.

Take the story of the Holy Family's Flight to Egypt, for example.

> For Matthew, this escape is not simply an expedient move or an accident of history. Instead, scripture foresaw this geographical detour… God chose this path in the distant past.
>
> Citing Hosea 11:1, Matthew appeals to a prophecy that originally focused on the people of Israel but now refers to Jesus. Matthew's claim then is that Jesus, in a significant way, embodies the people of Israel.
>
> He is the recipient, bearer, and fulfillment of the promises made to Israel by God.[3]

The focus on Egypt as the location of the family's temporary exile, also evokes memories of the cycle of stories about Jacob and his sons we find in Genesis.

They sought refuge in Egypt during a time of famine…a refuge that was possible only because Jacob's exiled son, Joseph "the dreamer," had risen to a position of authority under Pharaoh.

At the point in the story where Joseph is reunited with the *very brothers* who'd sold him into slavery, he tells them *not to fear*…

for though their intentions toward him had been evil, God turned the situation around, using what first was Joseph's loss, to achieve a greater good: the preservation of a whole people.[4]

There's an important distinction to be made here.

It's NOT that God WILLED that Joseph be sold by his brothers into slavery. RATHER, it's that GOD was able to take what began as evil intent, and use it, transform it, and reshape it, so that, ultimately, it lines up with God's redemptive purpose.

[3] Eric Barreto, Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=772
[4] Genesis 45:4-8 & 50:15-21

Exile and death, violence and abuse, and other losses we experience are NEVER God's WILL for us.
They are the starkly real consequence of a human realm that is in bondage to sin.

But God can take even such horrible experiences as these, and turn them, so that, finally, they move us toward a greater goal, turning what is death-bound toward resurrection.

There's one more prophetic element evoked by our text from Matthew I'd like to mention: the story of Moses.

Today's gospel story of innocent death parallels the Exodus story about Pharaoh's genocidal command that all male offspring of Hebrew slaves be killed.

Through the ingenuity of his mother and the watchful eye of his sister, one of those boys, little Moses, survived that purge. He grew up in Pharaoh's own household and ultimately became God's chosen instrument for leading God's people out of bondage.

Like Moses in the exodus story, Jesus will be presented by Matthew in many ways as the new Moses, sent by God to lead both Jew and Gentile alike into a new covenant which recasts what it means to be people of God, loving both God and neighbor.

As we can see now, more fully, these brief verses of Matthew are chock full of allusions and connections that knit together the ancient story of liberation with the new chapters of the salvation story that are coming to life in Jesus.

While Matthew wants us to know that God in Jesus has come to the same world where we live and work and struggle, he also wants us to know that there is a deeper history to the struggle of humankind…
and that in, with, and under Jesus, God will see the story through to a final, hope-filled end.

To the question, "What kind of God-with-us does the world need?" this gospel answers:

> **The kind who, fully cognizant of the long, complex, and dimly tempered human narrative, <u>enters</u> this world fully, without turning away, flinching, or backing down.**

Dear Siblings, this is the God-with-us we've been given in Jesus Christ.

> "The mystery of God's love," writes Henry Nouwen, "is not that he takes our pains away, but that he first wants to share them with us. The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pain and participates in the fullness of the human struggle."[5]

How do we respond to Matthew's story this morning?

<u>First</u>, <u>we trust</u> in God's presence and in the story God is bringing to fruition—even at those times of tumultuous change or personal loss; even at those times when we cannot discern the way forward with our own eyes.

<u>Second</u>, we resolve by the grace God has sown in us, to become a community in which <u>violence is not an option</u>…
…a congregation which provides a <u>safe place</u> for children;
…which <u>welcomes refugees and strangers</u>,
…which <u>protects innocent ones</u>;
…which <u>advocates for a reversal</u> of federal policy, to make room for the "least of these," whether they live across the ocean or across the street.

For by doing so, we protect and welcome the Lord himself.

Amen.

[5] H. Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).