



SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY

December 26

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 2:13-23

[Refuge in Egypt, the Holy Innocents, and Return from Exile]

When the wise men departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaos reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."



GREEK ORTHODOX
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THE SERMON

After the birth of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew relates His journey to Egypt, the slaughtering of the Holy Innocents, and Jesus' eventual return to live in Nazareth. We see in this narrative the providence of God at work, even in the face of suffering, persecution, and death. As a loving God, He knows all things and brings His grace to bear in all circumstances in order to bring redemption and salvation, even in the most perplexing and difficult experiences of our lives. *Emmanuel* (which means, *God with us* in Hebrew) is another name for Jesus Christ, who came to care for us through difficulty, persecution, and even tragedy.

This passage is always read on the Sunday after the Nativity. We see at the beginning of the chapter that the wise men, after arriving in Jerusalem, asked, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:2). The wise men came from Persia and, after a long journey, they arrived at the house in Bethlehem where the young Jesus then lived with Mary and Joseph (Matthew 2:11). However, nativity scenes in icons often depict the wise men by the cave (sometimes referred to as a stable), not to show an accurate picture of the moment, but to bring together, into one scene, a group of events as a fuller picture of the story. They had come to worship the King, and when they saw the young Child with Mary, His mother, they opened their treasures, presenting their gifts to Him: *gold, frankincense, and myrrh*. Jesus is the *King, the Son of God, and our High Priest*; therefore, the gold, which is fitting for kings, symbolized the royalty of the Child; the frankincense, which was used in religious worship, emphasized His identity as the Son of God; and the myrrh, which was used to anoint priests at their ordination, was offered to indicate of His priestly office.

Herod, the king of Judea and the most powerful person in that region at the time of Jesus' birth, felt threatened on hearing of the coming of the true King. Therefore, once he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes, he asked them where Jesus would be born, they answered, "In Bethlehem of Judea" (as prophesied in Micah 5:2). Herod then sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matthew 2:3-8). Herod, however, was lying, for he intended to kill the Child once He was found. God sent an angel to the wise men and told them to use a different path back to their homes in the East, and so Jesus was kept from danger.

When the wise men left, an angel of the Lord – that is, a "messenger" (ἄγγελος in Greek) of His – appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Matthew 2:13). Therefore, Joseph took the Child and His Mother by night, departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This

fulfilled the words spoken by the Lord to the Prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called My son” (Hosea 11:1). In its original context, this prophecy referred to God calling the nation of Israel, during the time of the Exodus, to come out of Egypt and go to the Promised Land. Matthew quotes this and applies it to Jesus, because He is the fulfillment of *all* the prophecies of the Old Testament, as well as the divine embodiment of the true Israel – that is, an Israel defined not by superficial signs, but by faithfulness to God (Romans 2:28). Jesus embraces and redefines all history in Himself, bringing the divine plan of salvation to fulfillment. Here, just as Israel was delivered from slavery among the gentiles in Egypt and was brought to the Promised Land, the Son of God also embodies all the sufferings of His people and comes to save us from sin and death, bringing us finally into His Kingdom.

When Herod realized that the wise men had tricked him, he was furious, and he ordered all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, who were two years old and under, to be killed. In the fury of this worldly king, motivated by his love of power and inspired by the evil one, innocent children were slaughtered in a cruel and futile attempt to disrupt the divine plan. Herod thought he was killing the true King and safeguarding his power by killing the children. From a worldly perspective, it seems as though the children were murdered in a senseless and evil tragedy. If we look beyond appearances, however, we see that God is always at work, even when evil occurs in this life. Those children perished in the rage of the evil king, but they are still alive in spirit; they are the first Christian martyrs in history, and we commemorate them as the Holy Innocents every December 29th. As infants, they received their crowns and were brought into the presence of God. As Saint Augustine says, “O blessed infants! He only will doubt of your crown in this your passion for Christ, who doubts that the baptism of Christ has a benefit for infants. He who at His birth had Angels to proclaim Him, the heavens to testify, and Magi [“wise men”] to worship Him, could surely have prevented that these should not have died for Him, had He not known that they died not in that death, but rather lived in higher bliss.” While Herod persecuted Christ, he delivered to Him an army of martyrs, clothed in white robes, of the same age as the Lord. As we pray in the Apolytikion of Holy Innocents, “Be entreated, O Lord, by the sufferings endured for You by the Saints, and we pray You, heal all our pain.”

The death of those children is also a symbol from the Old Testament, for many children were likewise killed by Pharaoh when Moses took the people of Israel out of Egypt to bring them to the Promised Land. Christ is the new Moses, and He comes to take the new Israel – everyone who believes in Him – to the Kingdom of Heaven. As Matthew continues to emphasize the Old Testament connections (highlighting that Christ had come as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets), he quotes from the Prophet Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they

are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15).

The context of this Old Testament passage refers to Israel being taken into captivity in Babylon because of their sins. Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel, is presented poetically as the mother of the nation, weeping for the destruction of the kingdom of Israel, for the people killed and taken in captivity. However, in the same chapter, the Prophet Jeremiah goes on to say, "Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own border" (Jeremiah 31:16-17); and later in the same chapter we read, "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:31-33). That Child who was in Egypt is the One who brings light to the Gentiles and the new covenant to His people, and writes His love in their hearts; He is our God, we are His people.

In the Old Testament, the land of Egypt was symbolic of the evil world and, therefore, Jesus' journey to Egypt shows us that His mission of redemption and renewal was for all the world. After the death of Herod, Jesus leaves Egypt and, through the direction of the angel who appears to Joseph, returns to Israel. Once again, Joseph is obedient in his virtue and faith. They journey back to Jerusalem, but when they hear that Archelaos reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, they are afraid to go there (for he was notoriously cruel). Being warned in a dream, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph went to the district of Galilee, to the north, where Nazareth stood. There the Child was raised, and eventually became known by some as Jesus of *Nazareth*. Matthew states that this was also to fulfill what was spoken by the Prophets, "He shall be called a *Nazarene*." In this third reference to the Old Testament prophetic tradition, Matthew quotes from a general Old Testament idea, rather than a particular passage. The Prophet Isaiah says, "There shall come forth a rod [or "shoot"] from the root of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1), by which he meant that the Messiah would be descended from the lineage of Jesse. Matthew, therefore, might be referring to this passage since, according to the holy tradition of the Church, he initially drafted the gospel in Aramaic, Jesus' mother tongue, and then decided to write it in Greek (the international language of his time). Matthew recognized that Jesus did not come only for the Jews, but to save the whole world.

More importantly, however, Matthew might be making a connection between *Nazareth*, a small and unimportant town in Israel, and being a *Nazarene*, that is, a humble person from a backwater country. Nazareth was a place of no esteem, and neither was the rest of Galilee, for that matter. Recall that when Phillip invited Nathanael to go meet "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph," he replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45-46). Also later, when Saint Paul was being tried by

the Roman authorities (in Acts 24), he was accused of being “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes,” which, given the context, was clearly intended as an insult.

In other words, Matthew is emphasizing that the *Messiah* (which means, *Anointed One* in Hebrew) of whom the entire Old Testament spoke was coming in a humble manner: of poor parents, born in a manger, fleeing to Egypt, and returning to live in an obscure town in the north. As Saint Paul says, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:8-10). In this way, as His people, we are also Nazarenes, as some Christians in the Middle East are called even today. Therefore, we should not pride ourselves either in a privileged birth, or in wealth, nor should we be discouraged by poverty, but rather we should seek the wealth that comes from faith, virtue, and good works.

As Saint Chrysostom says, “Should you in the beginning of your spiritual career seem to have tribulation, you need not to be discouraged, but bear all things manfully [or “courageously”], having this example.” Our Lord Jesus came as a Child into a world where He experienced threats, violence, rejection, and persecution; He did not even have a place in the inn and was born in a stable. As an adult, He says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20). He gave an example of a martyric life for those who follow Him until He comes again in glory. Yet, we know that “not one [sparrow] falls to the ground apart from [our] Father’s will” and that we therefore should not fear, since Christ assures us that we “are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31). When we look at the lives of all the saints, we see a common thread of martyrdom, sacrifice, rejection, and persecution (even in modern times, as seen in the life of Saint Nektarios of Aegina). They were willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of Christ. They are confessors of truth and willing martyrs, living the faith, and sacrificing themselves in the hope of making this world even a little better. As we know, following Him is not an easy journey – not always a smooth path – but most definitely a worthwhile one.

As this Gospel reading further demonstrates, we have every reason for hope, even in the middle of adversity, for we have a loving, compassionate, and mighty God. One Who is capable of bringing benefit – and even triumph! – out of tragedy. Let us, therefore, in a spirit of responsive love, open ourselves to Him. As the earth offered Him a cave (as depicted in nativity icons), so let us offer Christ our hearts in which to reside; so that as the shepherds and the Magi encountered Him in the cave, others might encounter Him in us.