

MOUNT OLIVET ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

2026 DEVOTIONAL



INTRODUCTION TO THE ADVENT DEVOTIONS

The Christmas story we know best is from the Gospel of St. Luke. It's the one we read each Christmas Eve and tells the story of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, ultimately finding refuge in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. It's the story of the baby Jesus in a manger, attended first by barnyard animals, then shepherds, and finally angels. It is a beautiful story, tender and inspiring.

That is Luke. This year, however, we are reading the Gospel of St. Matthew, and Matthew tells things a little differently. For starters, his Christmas "story" is brief, only seven verses. And it focuses not on Mary but on Joseph. There's no trip to Bethlehem, no manger, no choir of angels. There are magi, the one element of our decorations and creches supplied by Matthew, but even that story is not quite what we may expect.

So what does Matthew tell us? Well, before narrating his brief account of the nativity, Matthew tells us who Jesus' ancestors are, tracing forty-two generations of Israelites from Abraham to Jesus. And after his seven-verse Christmas story, he tells of the visit of the magi, characters we know and love but who are embedded in a dark and violent story of political power and rivalry.

Yet as different as Matthew's account is, it is still worth our attention. For amid his concern for demonstrating Jesus' impeccable Jewish lineage, we'll find a curious attention to "outsiders," reminding us that the Jewish Messiah has come to save all. And in the story of Jesus' flight to Egypt to escape the evil plans of King Herod, we gain a deeper understanding for what it means to call Jesus Emmanuel, "God with us." For this God enters into the mayhem and chaos of our lives, embraces all that is dark and difficult, and in all these ways demonstrates that, in Jesus, God has taken on our lot and life fully so that we may know God understands and accepts us fully.

So as you read this set of Advent devotions, be prepared at various turns to be puzzled and surprised by Matthew's peculiar story. But also be prepared to learn more about, and trust more completely in, the promises made by the God we know in Jesus, the one who is, truly and fully, God with us.

–PASTOR LOSE

First Sunday of Advent

NOVEMBER 29, 2026

WORSHIP:
MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:
LUKE 1:26-38
"GABRIEL VISITS MARY"

PRAYER OF THE DAY:
Dear God, grant us the faith of Mary to believe that you can and will work through us for the sake of others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2026

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
MATTHEW 1:1

Why in the world does Matthew start his story this way? With a genealogy of all things? I mean, talk about an archaic literary device? If you've ever heard this passage read from the King James Version, you'll remember all the "begats": "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas…" and so on and so on until you were lost, confused, bored or all three.

So what in the world is he up to?

Well, as a matter of fact, he's up to something rather grand. Matthew, you see, isn't trying to write a novel, or even a history – not as we might think of them, anyway. Rather, he was writing a *gospel* – a story that is told not with an eye toward the profitable goal of catching the reader's interest or even toward the noble goal of historical accuracy, but rather is told with the goal of sharing news – good news! – that is bigger and better than any story ever told.

Matthew, that is, is telling us the story of how God sought to keep all of God's promises to Israel – and through Israel to the world – by coming to us in the person of Jesus. And to know who Jesus is and, even more, to understand how he stands at the center of the larger story of God, Israel, and the world, we need to know where he came from. That's why Matthew begins his story by telling us about Jesus' ancestors, because only by knowing the story of his family will we really understand Jesus.

Aren't we all a little bit like that? It's only as friends see us with our family that they really understand us. So also, Matthew seems to say, with Jesus. To know and understand his story, you need to know a bit about the story of the folks he came from.

And, as we'll see, that story contains some rather colorful characters!

Dear God, reveal to us the depth of your love through the story of your Son. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2026

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

MATTHEW 1:1-17

Did you make it through the whole of Matthew's geneaology? Good job! :) As we said yesterday, Matthew includes all these names because he believes that in order to know Jesus, you need to know his family. In this case, his extended family, all the way back to the patriarch Abraham.

Because we think of genealogies more as something that should go (preferably unnoticed) in the back of a family album, we tend to skip over this part or at least run through it as quickly as possible. But if you slow down a little, you'll notice two things. First, ancient Israel is a patriarchal culture and so traces its lineage through the male line. (This is why, by the way, that even though both Matthew and Luke stress that Mary becomes pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit and not by Joseph, Jesus is considered Joseph's son and therefore a descendant of David.) Given this way of tracing family ancestry, it probably shouldn't surprise us that the people who get mentioned are the fathers.

Except – and this is the second thing to notice – sometimes mothers are mentioned as well. Not often – of the forty-two generations named, women are mentioned only five times – but, as when reading any good story, it's important to pay attention to exceptions. And so over the next several days, we'll do just that: slow down to ask why Matthew includes these women and how they help us understand Jesus.

But not quite yet. First it's important simply to note that Matthew does indeed make these exceptions. Sometimes Matthew has been described as more "legalistic" than the other three gospels because of his stress on Jesus' teaching of the law and his role as a "new Moses." While there is some validity to this description, it's also important to note that in the very first verses of his story, Matthew defies convention and breaks the rules, as it were, to include these five remarkable women. By doing so, he challenges our preconceptions of who Jesus is and greatly expands our possibilities for imagining what God accomplishes through him.

Because that's the thing when reading the Bible: you never quite know who God will use and are regularly surprised by how people are shaped, even transformed, by their encounter with the living Lord. It happened to these women. It happened to Matthew. It may even happen to us.

Dear God, surprise us again and again by your determination not only to save us, but also to use us to care for others and share the good news of your love and mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2026

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram…

MATTHEW 1:1-3

How much do you know about Tamar, the first woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy?

I'm guessing it's not much. And if you do know enough about her to have an impression, it's probably not favorable. Artists throughout history have portrayed Tamar as something of a seductress because she disguises herself in order to become pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah.

But that's not the whole story, and tarrying for a few moments to give attention to the more complex narrative of Tamar will help us understand Matthew's reason for including her as part of the descendants of Jesus.

Tamar was originally married to Judah's eldest son, Er. But because of Er's wickedness, the Lord puts him to death. Then Judah gives Tamar to his second son, Onan. This all seems rather odd and unfair to us, but it was a practice called "levirate marriage" and was meant to ensure that when a man dies his widow will not lose their inheritance, as the child of this union will be treated as the heir of the deceased brother. Onan, however, doesn't want to have a child who will ultimately displace him as chief heir of Judah's wealth, and so he refuses to cooperate. For this disobedience, he, too, is put to death. Judah has a third son, Shelah, but he is reluctant to give him in marriage to Tamar, fearing that he might also die, maybe thinking that Tamar is cursed. So he instructs Tamar to stay in his household as a widow on the pretense that Shelah is not yet old enough for marriage.

But over time – we don't know how much – Judah never does give Shelah to Tamar, which means that she is increasingly at risk, as she has no claim to a future with this family. So after Judah's wife dies and after the period of mourning is over, Tamar hears that Judah is traveling to another town called Timnah. She goes there first and disguises herself with a scarf hoping to conceive a child and secure her place in the family and thereby secure her future.

Judah presumes she is a local prostitute and goes with her, giving her his staff, family seal, and cord as a pledge that when he returns home he will bring her a goat in payment for her services. (Yes, this really is all in the Bible; you can find it at Genesis 38.) But when he later returns to make payment, he cannot find her and, indeed, no one in the town knows about her.

Three months later, word reaches Judah that his daughter-in-law has been "playing the whore" (yes, that's just the way it's put in the Bible – Genesis 38:24) and is now pregnant. Judah proposes that she be burned to death. But she then produces the staff, seal, and cord, and Judah confesses both that the child she is carrying is his and that he has treated her unfairly by not giving her to his third son. Six months later, Tamar bears twins, Perez and Zerah, who become Judah's heirs…and Jesus' ancestors.

So back to our opening question: why does Matthew include this detail? If this were our family tree, we might skip over the details for fear of embarrassing the family and even refuse to mention this particular female ancestor at all, since there was no particular need to. Yet Matthew does. And that matters.

I wonder if, by including Tamar, Matthew pays homage to a woman who was mistreated but refused to be a victim; to recognize a woman who, when the odds were definitely not in her favor, was resourceful enough to find a way into this family; to remember one woman who represents so many people who are not blessed by the world but are blessed by the child who will grow up and call blessed all those the world names as cursed.

And maybe Matthew includes Tamar simply because she deserves to be in this story. Because her story is part of Jesus' story, and his story will also be simultaneously difficult and wonderful and will be large enough and grand enough to catch all the other stories of the world into his. Judah's story. Tamar's story. And ours.

Dear God, remind us that no one is beyond your recognition or care and that you sent your Son to confirm in us – all of us! – our status as your beloved children. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2026

…and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab…

MATTHEW 1:4-5a

And then comes the story of Rahab.

Rahab lived in the city of Jericho during the time that historians often call "the conquest of the land." This is the period of history after Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, had brought them the Ten Commandments from the Lord, and had guided them to the Promised Land. And then something went terribly wrong, as the Israelites, afraid of the tribes that lived in the Promised Land, did not believe the Lord's promise to give them this country and did not want to go any further. In response, the Lord granted their wish – after a manner – and had them wander in the wilderness for forty years until every member of the disbelieving generation died.

Moses then led their children, now grown to adulthood, to the edge of the Promised Land. After Moses' death, Joshua, Moses' companion and lieutenant, was chosen by the Lord to lead the people. But those tribes and clans the Israelites feared were still there, and so the book of Joshua is one of unrelenting battles, sieges, and bloodshed. One of the great sieges happens at Jericho, the city whose great walls "came a tumblin' down" after Joshua sent the army of the Israelites around it once a day for seven days, each time carrying the ark of the covenant with them and blowing their mighty horns. (The next time you are in the Minneapolis sanctuary, look at the windows surrounding the pews and see if you can find the one depicting Joshua; it will feature both a horn and the walled city!)

Before taking the city of Jericho, however, Joshua sent in spies to see what kind of resistance they might face. And this is where Rahab comes in (Joshua 2). Her home is built into the wall of the city and is the place the spies seek refuge when they are being pursued. In fact, when the Jericho soldiers come to Rahab's house and demand that she turn over the spies, she hides them on her roof under some sheaves of flax set out to dry, and lies to the soldiers, telling them that the spies had already come and gone and sending them on a wild goose chase into the hill country to seek them.

In exchange for her collaboration, Rahab asks that when the Israelites come to sack the city they spare her and all of her family. Rahab, you see, has heard the story of God rescuing the Israelites from Egypt and believes the Lord will continue to deliver towns and cities to Israel. The soldiers gratefully agree to Rahab's request, telling her to tie a red cord from her window so that the invading Israelites will mark her household and spare her family. She then lets the Israelite spies down the wall by a rope and sends them back to Joshua by a different route than she'd sent their pursuers.

And that is the story of Rahab. Except for one more thing: she is described as being a prostitute. Quite honestly, I'm never quite sure how much that detail should matter. It's usually the detail that is given significant attention in later stories and art about her. And I suppose it matters in that to do Rahab justice we should know and honor all that we might learn about her. But I don't think that should define her, and I don't think Matthew remembers her because she's a prostitute but rather because she, a foreigner to the Israelites, nevertheless risked herself and her family because she believed in the Lord.

Think about that for a moment. The previous generation of Israelites – the people God had delivered from Egypt and brought across the Red Sea – did not believe that God would keep God's promises. But Rahab, who was not herself an Israelite and had only heard these stories at a distance, nevertheless trusted and believed. That's faith. That's courage. That's someone who you'd want to remember.

Dear God, let us remember Rahab and be inspired by her faith and courage, that we also might risk ourselves for the sake of another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2026

…and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David…
MATTHEW 1:5B-6a

Ruth's story is one of the better known stories of a woman in the Bible, and Ruth is regularly held up as a model of faithfulness…with good reason. But in case we've forgotten some of the details, let's recall her story again.

Between the conquest of the land and the time that Israel becomes a nation, the twelve tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob form a loose confederation, running their own affairs for the most part but banding together in times of trouble. Throughout this period – as, in many ways, throughout the biblical witness – the people of Israel repeat a predictable pattern, beginning in right relationship with the Lord, sinning and falling away, and then being drawn back by some manner of crisis or hardship. The Judges – in many ways like tribal chieftains – are those persons (mostly men but including at least one woman) who provide leadership during times of crisis, exercising military or judicial authority over the loose confederation of tribes until the crisis had passed.

The story of Ruth (told in the book with her name) takes place during this period. When famine strikes the land, a man of the tribe of Judah named Elimelech takes his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to live in Moab, a country on the other side of the Dead Sea from the territory of Judah. While there, however, Elimelech dies. Naomi and her sons stay, and eventually the two boys marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. Ten years go by, and then Mahlon and Chilion die as well.

By this time, the famine is past, and Naomi plans to return to her home. But she urges her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, because she knows that they have no particularly bright future back in Judah. When they protest out of loyalty that they want to stay with Naomi, she reminds them that she has no more sons to give them as husbands and therefore she can offer them no security or future. At this, Orpah relents and turns back to stay with her family in Moab, but Ruth insists on following Naomi: with words that are both moving and beautiful:

'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

And this, of course, is why we esteem Ruth so highly, because of her great steadfastness and loyalty. (These words have become popular at weddings. On one level I understand why a bride and groom might want to say such beautiful words to each other…but on another level, of course, they *are* said to her mother-in-law.)

In any event, Ruth follows Naomi into an uncertain future. But the Lord rewards Ruth with safety, security, and a future when she is wed to Boaz, a wealthy man who is related to Naomi through Elimilech and who is impressed by Ruth's steadfastness. And Boaz and Ruth bear a son named Obed, and in time Obed bears a son he names Jesse, who in time bears several sons, the youngest of which is named David, the one who becomes king over all Israel.

Ruth's story is actually a far more interesting and colorful one than I've been able to summarize, and I encourage you to read it for yourself! For now, I want to point out that the relations between Israel and Moab, while occasionally tranquil, are more often than not quite stormy. Yet first Israel and then Matthew remember and celebrate that the great-grandmother of King David and ancestor to Jesus was a Moabite, a foreigner from a foreign and sometimes hostile land, who was remembered for her loyalty. And so while Jesus comes to be Emmanuel – "God with us" – for the people of Israel, yet from the very beginning of the story Matthew signals that Jesus' ancestry already contains "foreigners" from Jericho and Moab because, ultimately, no one is foreign to God.

Dear God, let us be faithful to others as Ruth was loyal to Naomi, for we never know what great things you may bring from even small acts of fidelity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2026

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.
MATTHEW 1:6b

My first reaction to this verse is that Matthew should be ashamed of himself. He doesn't even mention Bathsheba. Rather, he calls her only "the wife of Uriah." It may be that Matthew is embarrassed by this story. Little wonder. It is the story of David's shameful treatment of a woman of his kingdom and of her husband. The woman is Bathsheba, and the story of David's adulterous affair wih her can be found in 2 Samuel 11. Except calling it an "adulterous affair" actually softens what happened. Because that implies the relationship was consensual, and by the terse wording of the text, and the fact that Bathsheba is married and that David was the king, it is unlikely she had much choice in the matter.

To make matters worse, once Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David seeks to deceive Uriah into thinking the child will be his and, when that fails, has Uriah killed. It is an embarrassing story, a shameful story, a story of the abuse of power that has consequences that ripple destructively through David's reign for years. And so Matthew omits Bathsheba's name, perhaps trying to blunt the force of the memories and history her name evokes.

But even though he doesn't name her as I wish he would, he does include her. And in this he moves well beyond the author of the books of Chronicles, the parallel history to 1 & 2 Samuel, who omits the story of David's abuse of Bathsheba and Uriah altogether. And he even moves beyond Luke, who mentions only David and not only omits Bathsheba but also Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, instead tracing Jesus' ancestry through Nathan, a minor son of David who is barely mentioned in the Old Testament.

So while I'm disappointed that Matthew doesn't name Bathsheba, I am grateful that he at least includes her story. And I know that where Matthew failed, we can choose differently, naming Bathsheba, remembering her story, and honoring her by caring for all women and men who are abused by those in power, mindful, as we do, that God cares for them as well.

Dear God, move us to care for those who have been harmed by the powerful in this world, never forgetting that your Son was descended from just such a person. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 6, 2026

WORSHIP:
MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:39-56

"THE MAGNIFICAT - MARY VISITS ELIZABETH"

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Dear God, inspire us to join your work to care for those most in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2026

…and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam – here skipping many generations since we named them previously (page 4) – *and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

MATTHEW 1:7-16

And now we come to Mary, the fifth woman Matthew mentions. Mary, Joseph's wife. Mary, the mother of Jesus. And to be quite honest, there isn't a lot more to say about Mary in Matthew's story. As we'll soon see, Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is spare, as is his description of Mary. Most of what we know of Mary – cousin to Elizabeth, visited by Gabriel, singer of the Magnificat, attended by animals and shepherds at her delivery, pondering things in her heart – all of this comes from Luke who tells the story from her point of view.

Matthew, by contrast, tells the story from the vantage point of Joseph, through whom Jesus is descended from David. Which means we don't learn a lot about Mary from Matthew. Except maybe this. She is described as a virgin or, in the Hebrew of the prophetic text Matthew quotes, a young maiden, which in the first century Near East would likely have been a teenager. Which, in turn, means that she would have no cultural status, would wield neither influence nor power, and would be dependent entirely on her family of origin and soon on her husband.

And yet God chooses her to be the mother of Jesus. Not a princess or a queen. Not a prophetess or wealthy woman. But rather a poor, non-descript teenager of no account who held no power. God chooses her, notices her, uses her as the means by which to bear the child who will save his people and all people. And she cooperates, giving herself over to the will of the Lord and living into this adventure and ordeal by faith.

And in this, she is indeed the daughter of Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba, for God honored each of these unlikely and remarkable women not because of whom they had married but because of who they were, women of faith.

Dear God, let us give thanks for the women of faith who have influenced us, giving testimony to you though their words and deeds. In Jesus' name, Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2026

So all the generations….
MATTHEW 1:17a

Yes, there have been a lot of generations – 42 at least! And while we've focused on the five extraordinary women mentioned, in case you're wondering the men are fairly interesting as well! Abraham who left hearth and home to strike out for a new land in response to God's promise…and then was willing to sell his wife (twice!) because he didn't trust that promise. Isaac, child of promise and laughter. Jacob, the scoundrel and cheat who wrestled with God. David the adulterer and murderer…and Israel's greatest king. And more.

Lots more. Names we recognize, and names we've forgotten. Names of people who did great deeds and some who did dastardly ones, and many who did a bit of each. It's quite a motley crew, these ancestors of Jesus. But maybe that's part of the point. That Jesus really is human. Not an angel, not a demi-god, not descended from perfect stock. But human. For God chose in the Incarnation to become truly human, mortal, vulnerable. Why? Because that is exactly what we are – human, mortal, vulnerable, and for all these reasons in need of salvation.

It's hard for us to imagine, this co-mingling of divine and human which isn't actually a co-mingling at all, but rather that in Christ dwelt two natures, indivisible in one person. Actually, make that not just hard to understand, but nearly impossible. Little wonder church leaders in the first years of Christianity argued for more than two centuries about all this and in the end decided it was best to consider it a mystery!

Mystery, indeed, that God would care enough about folks like those in Matthew's genealogy – or, for that matter, the folks who have been reading it ever since! – to take on our lot and our life. But if understanding fails us, we can at least fall back on gratitude, knowing that God does all of this for us.

Dear God, thank you for your many gifts to us and most especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you have drawn near to us and become one of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2026

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.
MATTHEW 1:17

When Abraham Lincoln first met Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the 19th century best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he reportedly greeted her by saying, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war." Stowe's book, you see, illustrated the horrors of slavery and kindled the resolve of Northerners to enter into the Civil War. So while Stowe's book is *fictional* in that she made up the characters and incidents that drive the story forward, the story she told was also *true* in that it faithfully depicted the abomination of slavery.

This distinction between truth and factual accuracy is helpful to keep in mind. In the ancient world, stories about people and events – what we often call "history" – was always written with an aim to instruct. The emphasis was on telling the *truth* about those persons and events, not on achieving the kind of factual accuracy we who live in a post-Enlightenment world expect today.

In today's passage, for instance, Matthew's division of Jesus' ancestry into three groups of fourteen generations is likely an organizing feature with more symbolic value than historical intent. It might be that, because seven is the perfect number, fourteen was perfection doubled, and that was repeated for each of Matthew's three divisions. Maybe. Truthfully, we don't know. What we *do* know is that Matthew's account differs significantly from Luke's and differs as well from the historians of Israel.

We also know one more thing. Matthew didn't care. He wasn't trying to work out the lists of Jesus' ancestors to post on ancestry.com, but instead he wanted to make a point: that this child, born of Mary and Joseph, was descended from David and before David from Abraham, and that for this reason he is the child of both promise and of prophecy, the one in whom God comes to be with us.

That much, we confess, is true.

Dear God, thank you for St. Matthew and the other Evangelists, as through their faith and artistry you tell us the truth about the good news of your love for us and all the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2026

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.
MATTHEW 1:18a

Oh my goodness, but could you start your depiction of the birth of the Messiah in a more matter-of-fact way? I mean, this has to be one of the great understatements of all history! And, as we'll see, Matthew's story of just how the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place will follow suit. Most of the account, actually, briefly describes the complicated and undoubtedly awkward situation leading up to the birth itself, and how that situation is resolved. Jesus' actual birth, however, gets just a sentence. A single sentence. If you sneezed, you might miss it.

But while I miss the fuller description Luke gives – with mangers and shepherds and angels and all the rest – there is something fitting about Matthew's spare depiction. Because, truth be told, most people *did* miss it. The local news team didn't follow Mary's pregnancy the way they might a sports playoff, presidential election, or celebrity wedding. There was no gaggle of first-century paparazzi awaiting the birth. There were no baby showers beforehand or Christening invitations afterward. From all we can tell from Matthew's story, just about no one noticed.

Which is why Matthew wrote, of course. He lifts his pen to record, if only in a few sentences, the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, and in this way bears witness to an event most of the world ignored. Except it wasn't as if the world actively ignored anything. It was just a birth, like billions of others, unremarkable in every possible way.

Which is, once again, the point. Jesus came as one of us. Jesus was born like we are, lived as we live, loved and laughed and suffered as we do. And died a mortal death as we will one day die. And on the third day, God raised him from the dead, that we may no longer live in fear of death.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. For now, we should wait, content with Matthew's spare story. As, indeed, this is how the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, took place.

Dear God, thank you for reminding us in the birth of Jesus that no one is too ordinary or mundane or unimportant to escape your notice…or your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2026

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

MATTHEW 1:18-19

A word about first-century Jewish marriage may help clarify these verses. Various texts render this passage differently. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, which we have been following) describes Mary and Joseph as "engaged." The New International Version (NIV) describes them as "pledged" to be married, while the King James Version (KJV) says Joseph was "espoused" to Mary. No matter how you render it, however, it's important to note that the bond between Mary and Joseph at this time was contractual, not merely social, as would be the case when talking about "engagement" in our day. That is, espousal/betrothal/engagement constituted the legal contract and pledge of marriage. What we call the wedding was the time when the bride and groom were accompanied by friends and feasting to celebrate the occasion of actually joining their households. So, to put it most simply, what we call engagement was more like their marriage, and what we call the wedding was the time when they actually moved in with each other.

For all intents and purposes, then, Mary and Joseph were married but had not yet moved in with each other or consummated their union. Hence, the great distress of discovering that Mary was already pregnant before they started their household. For as far as Joseph was concerned, this could only mean one thing: that his espoused wife had been unfaithful. And here is where Joseph is a righteous man, that is, one who lives according to the law. He wants out of this unfaithful union and so had two options – public sentencing Mary to being stoned to death, or divorce. He opts for the latter course, not wishing, as Matthew describes, to expose her to public disgrace and, presumably, punishment.

Some contend that the jury is still out on whether Joseph actually was a righteous man, as they believe he should have explored other options, that he did not need to dismiss her, that such an action would have condemned Mary to poverty, if not death. I don't know enough about first century customs and possibilities to offer a helpful judgment. But for just a moment, I'd invite us to tarry at this point of the story, and imagine the great distress that fell upon Joseph – and Mary, too, if he made his intentions known to her. We're accustomed to thinking about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, and that's both understandable and appropriate. But let's not forget the distress, sense of betrayal, disappointment, and a host of other emotions that Joseph must have experienced

upon first learning of Mary's pregnancy, or the fear and hurt that Mary would likely have also felt as they sorted out their divinely complex relationship.

Why might that be helpful? Because Mary and Joseph aren't merely characters from a stained-glass window but flesh and blood people. And the more we can imagine them as people like us – with ups and downs to their relationships, for instance – the more we might imagine ourselves to be people like them – that is, people who go through all kinds of things, some quite difficult and others even damaging, and yet whom God uses nevertheless to accomplish God's purposes.

Dear God, you chose Mary and Joseph to be the parents to your Son, and you choose us to bear words of mercy and grace to all of your children. Empower and equip us to do just that. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2026

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

MATTHEW 1:20-21

From anger to shock. From hurt to hope. And from disappointment to disbelief…and then to belief. This is how I imagine the transformation in Joseph after the angel visited him. And above and beyond all these transformations of emotion, I suspect there was one other, as Joseph moved from fear to courage.

As we've noticed before, Matthew's story of Jesus' birth differs significantly from Luke's. But on this detail they are the same. When the angel comes – in Matthew to Joseph, in Luke to Mary – the message is preceded by a simple but powerful exhortation: *do not be afraid!*

So much of life, when you think about it, is colored by fear. Fear for our safety. Fear for the safety and wellbeing of those we love. Fear about the future. Fear about our relationships. Fear. It has dominated the human story as long as there has been a human story. It has always struck me, for instance, that once Adam and Eve first ate the forbidden fruit, they became almost instantly afraid, even of that which once gave them great joy: the presence of the Lord.

There is, I believe, no more true measure of the character of the God we worship than that the primary message carried by angelic messengers is the antidote to our condition: do not be afraid. God comes bearing not judgment or condemnation or terror but instead courage and joy and love.

And so the angel comes to Joseph in the middle of his distress and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary his betrothed into his home as his wife and partner, for the child she carries will be called Jesus – "he saves" in Hebrew – and he will indeed save us from the tyranny of sin, the law, death…and fear.

Dear God, send us out as your messengers with words of courage and grace that others may know you and escape their fear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 13, 2026

WORSHIP:
MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:
MATTHEW 1:18-25
"GABRIEL VISITS JOSEPH"

PRAYER OF THE DAY:
Dear God, grant us the courage to trust you even and especially when life is most difficult.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2026

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

MATTHEW 1:22-23

At various points throughout Matthew's gospel, he will quote portions of what we call the Old Testament but might better be called simply the Scriptures – keeping in mind there was no "New Testament" at the time Matthew wrote – in order to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies and promises made to Israel. In this case, he quotes a portion of Isaiah 7: "the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." The back-story of these promises is always helpful to keep in mind.

In this case, this is a portion of a larger prophecy of salvation that Isaiah is delivering to King Ahaz of Judah, who is soon to be attacked by the combined forces of Syria and Israel (which sounds odd, but Judah, the southern kingdom, and Israel, the northern kingdom, didn't always get along). The problem was that Syria and Israel wanted to rebel against the Assyrian Empire, who controlled all of them, and Judah didn't want to join in, so they were going to attack Jerusalem, depose Ahaz, and put someone in his place who would join their revolt.

So Isaiah comes to tell Ahaz not to fear – always a signal of good news! – because the Lord would deliver Judah. But Ahaz seems reluctant to believe Isaiah, probably because Ahaz has already and secretly appealed to the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser for help! So Isaiah says that he will give him a sign that indicates how long it will be before the Lord (and not Tiglath-Pileser) saves him, and it will be about the time it takes for a young maiden to conceive, give birth, and wean her child, or about two to three years.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word Isaiah uses to describe the maiden doesn't necessarily imply a virgin or any kind of miraculous conception. Rather, he's drawing on something fairly ordinary – the birth of a child – to make a point about the time that will pass before the promise of deliverance is kept. But Matthew likely doesn't read Hebrew, but rather Greek, and the Greek Bible Matthew uses (called the Septuagint) translates the Hebrew word for "young girl" as "virgin." So Matthew sees and hears in that verse the anticipation of Mary, the young woman who will conceive through the Holy Spirit.

But I wonder if Matthew isn't also conscious of the issue of time. That is, the "sign" Isaiah gives isn't meant as a demonstration of his authority or power but rather is telling fearful and unfaithful King Ahaz how long it will take before the Lord will deliver Jerusalem. Knowing that, might Matthew also be saying that in the birth of Jesus we have an answer to the question that is regularly asked throughout the Bible: How long? How long until you come to deliver, O Lord? How long until our suffering is over? How long until you rescue us? And to all these questions, Matthew says, "Now! In the birth of Jesus, God is drawing near to save!" For Jesus is Emmanuel, *God with us.*

As Matthew writes, the angel told Joseph to name the child of Mary, "Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Now. Or as the beloved Christmas carol sings,

No more let sin and sorrow grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make
His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found
Far as the curse is found
Far as, far as the curse is found.

Dear God, let us live in the now of your grace, that we might no longer fear sin or death and be encouraged to share with others word of your mercy, grace, and love…now. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2026

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

MATTHEW 1:24-25

And then, all of a sudden, it's over: Matthew's account of the birth of our Lord, that is. Joseph wakes up, does what the angel commands, and Jesus is born. That's it. Again, the absence of mangers and shepherds and angel choruses may strike us as odd and, at the very least, rather anticlimactic. "Is this it?" we may be tempted to ask, "Just one man's obedience?"

Yes, one man's obedience to overcome his doubt, hurt, and fear in order to trust the angel's word and take Mary as his wife. But is obedience, particularly in such circumstances, such a trifling matter? I wonder.

What else has been – or, perhaps more importantly, *could be* – achieved by one person's obedience? One person's willingness to take God's command to care for the poor seriously? One person's obedience to love the neighbor as yourself? One person's obedience to regard all people as God's beloved children? One person's obedience to share the good news of Jesus with the world? One person's obedience to hunger and thirst for righteousness?

We have examples of the obedience of men and women like this. From Martin Luther King, Jr. to Dorothy Day, and from Desmond Tutu to Mother Theresa, individuals who have obeyed the call of the Lord have made an extreme impact on this world God loves so much.

These are the dramatic examples, of course. But think for a moment about the individuals who have made a huge impact on your life. A teacher, coach, parent, pastor, sibling, neighbor, friend…who was simply obedient to the call of God to love you as God has loved you and, indeed, loves all.

Small gestures, perhaps, in the larger scheme of things. But as history and our own experience witness, when it comes to acts of love and obedience to God's call…there are no small gestures.

Dear God, give us ears to hear your call and hearts to obey it, that by being faithful in small things we may change the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2026

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem…
MATTHEW 2:1

The moment we enter the second chapter of Matthew, we have left the Christmas story proper. But because the tradition of the "wise men" or "magi" is so strongly connected with this story, we'll include it as part of our Advent devotions.

Truth be told, we know very little about these wanderers. Matthew gives us only a few details that have been embellished significantly in Christian tradition. Matthew calls them *magi,* a term in Greek that often referred to Zoroastrian priests. Matthew says they came from the East, which would fit with this reading. And we know they followed a star. Again, as Zoroastrians were famed for their knowledge of astrology, that would make sense. We also know that they came after Jesus' birth, and likely quite a bit after, as Matthew refers to Jesus as a child (and Herod searches out and kills all children under two). And we know that the magi visited Jesus and his mother in their home in Bethlehem and gave them extravagant gifts.

That's, really, about it. We actually do not know how many magi came. We assume three because there were three gifts, but it could have been more. Nor do we know their names, though tradition has called them Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. We do not know when they left, what different road they took back, nor what happened to them afterward.

The one thing we do know, however, is that these are the first people in Matthew's story to worship Jesus. Which is interesting, as these wandering astrologers most likely practiced another religion, and Matthew doesn't imply that they converted or returned to follow Jesus, only that they came to pay him homage. And that, I believe, is by design. Matthew will stress again and again that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, come like another Moses to save Israel from oppression. And while this claim will be debated and challenged by his own people, yet at the beginning and end of the story it will be persons from another land – here the magi, at the cross the Roman centurion – who recognize him as the King of the Jews and Son of God.

Dear God, let us give thanks for those strangers and interlopers who see what we cannot and share their vision and gifts with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2026

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

MATTHEW 2:1-4

It is a strange thing, don't you think, that something as small and seemingly insignificant as the birth of a child can strike fear into the heart of a king and all the inhabitants of his capital?

Why would powerful King Herod, known for his political cunning and ruthlessness, fear a child? Because, ultimately, dictators, oppressors, and authoritarians are strangely fragile things. Brutal, perhaps; ruthless, often. But because they stand over and against principles of freedom and dignity and because they exert their rule through force, they are threatened by each and every act of defiance, courage, and compassion.

Most of us inherit such principles from our confidence in and experience with democracy. But I believe they arise from our faith as well. For the God of the Bible regularly sides with the oppressed and stands always for the dignity and worth of all people. So when Martin Luther King, Jr., said that the long arc of history bends toward justice, he wasn't speaking only as an American confident of democracy or as a person trusting in human progress, but also as a Christian who believed that God wanted liberty, justice, and dignity for all of God's children.

What's interesting is that Herod and his counselors apparently already know that a messiah has been promised and would come. So the news that God will send a messiah is not new; it's that the messiah would come *now,* during his reign, that frightens him. And so it should, as all who oppress the poor, take advantage of the vulnerable, and stand against dignity and justice should tremble at the coming of the Lord.

Dear God, let us always stand with you on the side of justice and with and for those who suffer, are oppressed, or are in need. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2026

And calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

MATTHEW 2:4-6

Both Luke and Matthew agree that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, although they get there from different paths. In Luke's account, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth, where Jesus grows up, and must travel to Bethlehem to participate in the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. As far as we can tell, Matthew assumes Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem, and perhaps always have. He mentions no journey there and when the magi come seeking Jesus, they visit the child and his mother in their home.

As we've seen on numerous occasions, differences like this did not matter to first-century writers. They often relied upon different traditions and wove them together not to record a history in our modern sense, but to tell a story that pointed to the truth of the matters they were describing. And so what matters in this case is that Jesus is born, not in Jerusalem, the capital city, or in Athens or Rome, centers of learning and power, but rather in Bethlehem, the hometown of King David. Jesus' connection to David is significant in the gospels because it fulfills promises God made to David and Israel.

But I think there's another matter as well. For Bethlehem, by all counts, was a city of relatively little account in the larger scheme of things. Yet from this city God drew Israel's greatest king and the Savior of the world. God, that is, regularly shows up in places we would least expect: a backwater town, a teenage girl, a helpless infant, a convicted criminal hanging on a cross. This is God's way: to take what is nothing in the eyes of the world and do something – something quite miraculous – with it and through it.

With that in mind, just think what God may do in, with, and through us!

Dear God, thank you for taking what the world has discounted and using it to reveal your mercy and grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2026

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

MATTHEW 2:7-8

It strikes me as curious that Herod called the magi secretly. I mean, if indeed all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were terrified of the news that a child king had been born, why would Herod need to act in secret? Had he not enlisted his counselors to determine that the king would be born in Bethlehem? Why, then, this suddenly secrecy?

Perhaps by now Herod had moved beyond fear to treachery. That is, it's one thing to be afraid of news of a child king and the disruptions that might cause. It's another to determine to murder the child to avoid that fear and disruption. And, as we'll soon learn, that is exactly what Herod is planning.

And so while Herod may know of the fear of the people, perhaps he is nevertheless nervous that they will not support the horror he plans. So he calls the magi secretly, plots and plans secretly, and envisions a violent solution to his fear secretly.

I've learned from long experience that secrets are usually an early sign of moral decay. Not childhood secrets, but the secrets of adulthood. Discretion in delicate or private matters is one thing, but secrets usually betray the presence of moral rot. Herod acts secretly because he knows his thoughts, plans, and eventual deeds cannot stand the light of open scrutiny. John, the fourth evangelist, writes, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed" (3:19-20).

This, I think, is exactly what we see played out here in the fear and schemes and violence of Herod, a man who was called to care for God's people but instead cared for nothing beyond his own power.

Dear God, keep us clear of secrets and empower us to live that our deeds may be seen in the light of day to care for each other and glorify you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas Communion

DECEMBER 20, 2026

WORSHIP:
MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM
WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:
ISAIAH. 7:10-14, 9:6-7
"EMMANUEL, WONDERFUL COUNSELOR"

PRAYER OF THE DAY:
Dear God, as we see how you kept your promises of old in the baby Jesus, help us trust in the promises you've made to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2026

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

MATTHEW 2:9-11

It's easy to hear this story as an example of our proper response to Jesus. When the star – whether the invitation of a neighbor, a chance reading of Scripture, that little nudge that won't go away – finally draws us to encounter Jesus, we too should bow in worship, open our hearts, and offer what gifts we have.

That's a good way to read this story, taking the magi as our example.

But we might also read the story the other way around, not only paying attention to what we *should do*, but what God has *already done*. For from the very beginning of Jesus' life, God is reaching out to all people. These magi come from another country and return back to it. They are likely astrologers from another religion and presumably remain devoted to their beliefs afterward. They are as different as you can imagine from most of the rest of the characters in Matthew's Gospel. Except in one respect. They are children of God and God draws them to witness the grace and mercy dawning from on high in the birth and life of Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel in many ways is considered the most "Jewish" of the four in that he writes for a Jewish audience, tries to demonstrate that Jesus is God's Messiah from the Jewish Scriptures, and for this reason consciously and consistently makes links between Jesus' ministry and the Jewish law and prophets. But here, in these opening chapters, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus comes for all. Accepts all. Saves all. Loves all.

So, yes, this story of the magi offers an example of how we might respond to Jesus. It also – and I'd argue more importantly – shows us one of countless examples that God loves everyone. Period.

Dear God, let us remember that your love is for all, and knowing that you love us, empower us to love others as you do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2026

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

MATTHEW 2:12-13

There have been a number of dreams in Matthew's story thus far. First, there was the dream in which the angel told Joseph that the child Mary will bear was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he should not fear to take her as his wife. Next, the magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they take another route and thwart the wicked designs of a tyrant. Finally, an angel again appears to Joseph in a dream to tell him to flee with his family to Egypt – no small distance from Bethlehem! – to escape Herod's murderous reach.

That's a lot of important information to come through dreams.

All of which makes me wonder: do we listen to our dreams? Most of us are far too modern to imagine God speaking to us through our dreams, and we would likely get nervous if a friend or family member told us they were making their plans (big or little) based on their nighttime visions.

I'm no exception. But it does strike me that night – especially night in the ancient world devoid of electricity and all the lights and other distractions it provides – was a time of solitude and quiet. A time, that is, where there is room to hear the urging of our Lord.

All of which makes me ask: where do we find the quiet to listen to God speaking to our hearts, whether calming our fears, comforting our hurts, or emboldening our hearts? God may not always come in a dream or send an angelic herald to communicate God's will, but God is still speaking. And I think it's important that we make space to listen, that we find moments or places of solitude, and that we work to quiet our restless habits to create space in our hearts to hear the urging of the Lord.

Dear God, help us to quiet our hearts and still our spirits that we might hear your voice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2026

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."
MATTHEW 2:14-15

I find it helpful to think of Matthew as something of a Jewish scribe, one who knew the Jewish scriptures well and was trying to interpret them for his community and, in particular, making the case that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. This is the reason that Matthew will regularly say, as he does in these verses, that something Jesus said or did or even something that happened to him – like being taken to Egypt as a child – fulfills prophecy. He wants to demonstrate how Jesus' life – and ultimately his death and resurrection – coheres to the story of God and God's people of Israel and fulfills the promises God made to Israel.

Often, Matthew has particular stories from Israel's history in mind, and one of them is the story of Moses. For instance, if you read through the whole of his gospel, you'll notice that Matthew divides Jesus' teaching into five distinct parts, something that would remind his Jewish audience of the five books of Torah that tradition taught came from Moses. Similarly, Jesus gives the first bulk of that teaching in the form of a sermon delivered from a mountain, again something that would remind readers of Moses and Mt. Sinai.

Here we are reminded of Moses leading the chosen people from bondage in Egypt, a story that the prophet Hosea – whom Matthew is quoting here – also referenced in some of his writing.

Whenever we are reading Matthew – as we will on Sundays through this winter and spring – I think it's helpful to pay attention to how important it was to Matthew and his community to stress that God's work in Jesus was a continuation, and even completion, of God's relationship with Israel. In his mind, that is, Matthew is not writing a new story, but continuing an old – and very important – one: the story of God's redemptive love for all of God's people!

Dear God, let us see and hear Matthew's witness that in Jesus you continued the story of your love for Israel and all the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2026

CHRISTMAS EVE

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through 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 are no more."

MATTHEW 2:16-18

This is the hard part of the story. Actually, the horrific part, and I know it feels especially strange to read it on Christmas Eve. So we'll read it together. Herod, discovering that the magi would not serve as his spies and enraged that they had fooled him by returning home by another route, decides to go to ghastly measures to make sure he has eliminated his potential rival by killing all the children in and around Bethlehem aged two years or younger.

Outside of Matthew's story, there is no historical record that this happened. Not that it couldn't have – Herod was notoriously violent and murdered plenty of people, including members of his own family, in order to protect his power. We just have no other record.

So when people ask me whether a story like this is true, I usually tell them that I have no idea if it happened just as it was described, yet I not only believe, but know from experience, that it is true. For tyrants regularly do awful things to protect their power, and children are far too often the victims. Whether it is the thousands of children who are killed or maimed in wars abroad – the United Nations estimates more than 20,000 annually – or the near weekly school shootings in the United States, we have witnessed too many episodes of violence to have any doubt about the prophet Jeremiah's words that Rachel wept and is still weeping without consolation because so many children are no more.

Which makes all the more incredible what we celebrate on Christmas Eve: that God came to this world not as a king or ruler but as an infant, one of the most vulnerable, to identify with and save all the vulnerable children of the world.

Dear God, your Son came as a child and his life was threatened by those who care nothing for the vulnerable. Grant us courage to stand up for children everywhere. In Jesus' name, Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2026

CHRISTMAS

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

MATTHEW 2:19-23

Another dream. Actually, two. One that it is safe to return from Egypt; another that it is not safe to go back to Bethlehem. Which makes me realize that it's one thing to hear the voice of an angel, and it's another to listen. Once again, Joseph is not just attentive but obedient to the voice he hears. So there are two elements to the life of faith we might glean from Joseph's example. The first is *listening* – making room and space in our lives and hearts to detect the word of the Lord. And the second is *obedience* – heeding that voice; pushing other plans to the side; being willing to grow, reconsider, act, and change in response to the Word.

And along with this act of obedience, another fulfilled prophecy. Oh, not quite in the sense that we think of prophecy as magical predictions about the future coming true. Rather, fulfilled prophecy in the sense of God's promises being kept, even when those who first uttered God's promises, the prophets, and those involved in fulfilling them, in this case Joseph, are unaware. Yet God is there, working always for the good of the world. And when we are caught up in that good, live into the future of grace the prophets announced, then prophecy is fulfilled.

Catching God's dream, following it to the best of our ability, living into God's promised future. Can the Christian life and gospel really be so simple?

Let's see!

Dear God, inspire us with a vision of how you desire the world to be and work through us to make it so. In Jesus' name, Amen.



A PRAYER FOR THE CHRISTMAS SEASON AND NEW YEAR

Lord God, heavenly Father, Creator of all that is and all that shall be:

We give you thanks for keeping the promises you made to Israel and the world through the prophets, as in Jesus you have drawn near to us to grant us the gifts of faith, courage, and hope.

Give us, we pray, the trusting heart of Joseph, who obeyed your command to take Mary as his wife and name their son Jesus, "he who saves"; and bless us with the wisdom of the Magi, who followed your call to seek the infant Jesus and worship him.

As your Son came to heal a broken world, so also send us out to the do the work of Christmas, bringing comfort, help, and hope to all in need, seeing in others your divine image, and sharing the good news that in Jesus, Emmanuel, you are truly with us.

This we pray in the name of your Son, trusting his promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

Christmas at Mount Olivet!

CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING WORSHIP SERVICES

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24

10am: Christmas Carols and Harp

Mpls & West Campuses and livestreamed at mtolivet.org

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICES

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24

1-9pm, Mpls Campus and livestreamed hourly at mtolivet.org

1pm: Cherub and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

2pm: Alleluia and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

3pm: Hosanna and Cathedral Choirs and Orchestra

4pm: Chapel Choir and Orchestra

5pm: Chancel Choir and Orchestra

6, 7, & 8pm: Sanctuary Choir and Orchestra

9pm: Candlelight service with Sanctuary Choir and Orchestra

1-5pm, West Campus

1pm: Cherub, Alleluia, and Cathedral Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

2pm: Hosanna, Chapel, and Cathedral Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

3pm: Chancel and Sanctuary Choirs, String Quartet, and Harp

4pm: Sanctuary Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

5pm: Candlelight service with Sanctuary Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

CHRISTMAS DAY WORSHIP SERVICE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25

10am: Christmas Carols and Harp

Mpls Campus and livestreamed at mtolivet.org



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

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