

“Christmas in the Shadow of the Cross”
Matthew 2:13-23
December 29, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pr. Nicoletti

This morning is the first Sunday in Christmas. The four weeks before Christmas are the season of Advent – a season of preparation and focus on the comings of Christ. Then, in the twelve days that follow, from December 25th through January 5th we have the twelve days of Christmas. On January 6th the Church celebrates Epiphany.

And so, this Lord’s Day we will hear from a standard reading for the first Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13-23.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{2:13} Now when they [that is, the “wise men from the east”] had 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 until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, 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 that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning 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. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Most Merciful God,

We have celebrated, this past week, the birth of Christ, your Incarnate Word.

And now, this morning, we come to the Scriptures, your Written Word.

We ask that by your grace and the work of your Spirit, the two would be combined afresh in our lives.

Let our celebration of your Incarnate Word grow in our hearts a renewed desire for and attention to your Written Word.
And may our attention now to your Written Word grow in our hearts an increased depth of understanding and appreciation regarding the birth of your Incarnate Word.
Grant this all, we ask, for Jesus's sake.
Amen.

I came across an article recently titled "How Hallmark Took over Cable Television" by Sarah Larson.

According to Larson, "since 2011, from late October to January, Hallmark has broadcast Christmas movies nearly twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. [...] During this year's holiday season, the programming, called Countdown to Christmas, has made Hallmark the No. 1 cable network among women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four, and, in some prime-time slots, No. 1 in households and total viewers. Last year, seventy-two million people watched Countdown to Christmas."

The films follow a predictable pattern with predictable characters and it all usually unfolds in a certain kind of town. "In Hallmark films," Larson continues, "townspeople care for one another, run viable small businesses, and compete in gingerbread-bake-offs – America as we might wish it were, and as some believe it once was. [...] It also depicts a purple America, without [...] rage. Bill Abbott, the C.E.O. of Crown Media, Hallmark's entertainment company, told me that it's 'your place to go to get away from politics, to get away from everything in your life that is problematic and negative, and to feel like there are people out there who are good human beings that could make you feel happy to be part of the human race.'" [Larson]

I found the article interesting. I haven't watched any Hallmark movies this Christmas, and I have no objection to those who have. There is a proper place for stories that put before us a picture of life that is a bit closer to what it was meant to be – a bit more as we'd rightly wish it was.

And so, in their proper place, the feel-good movies of Hallmark are just fine.

But what I am struck by, as I hear how the C.E.O. of Hallmark's media company describes their movies ... is the fact that the Apostle Matthew would never be hired by Hallmark to write a Christmas movie script for them.

Instead Matthew gives us, in his account of Christmas, the ragings of a tyrannical king, a family fleeing their home in the middle of the night, the frightening navigation of where to live based on fear of additional oppression, and most horrifying of all, the callous slaughter of infant children.

And it's not just Matthew! As I've already mentioned, our reading this morning is a common reading for the first Sunday after Christmas. It's a reading associated with a Christian Feast Day which has been celebrated since the fifth century – "The Feast of the Holy Innocents" – usually celebrated on December 28th or 29th.

Christians, for fifteen-hundred years, have stopped, right in the middle of the twelve days of Christmas, to remember the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem.

It's fine to be warm and sentimental. It's fine to spend a couple hours in a Hallmark Christmas town around the holidays.

But Matthew reminds us in our text this morning that that was *not* the kind of town that Jesus was born into. Matthew reminds us that when Jesus was born, the evils of this world did not fade into the background ... but they almost immediately reared their heads.

Right out of the gate, Matthew makes it clear to us that Jesus Christ was born into the *real* world of *real* evils.

And so, I want to consider two things this morning that I think our text holds out before us: I think our text confronts us first with the fact that we are tempted to avoid reality, and second with the fact that Christ's entrance into the world calls us to engage with what is real.

We are tempted to avoid reality, but Christ's entrance into the world calls us to engage with what is real.

And those two truths come up in three different areas in our text: They come up in terms of the world, they come up in terms of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, and they come up in terms of the Scripture, the written word of God.

Let's consider each of those, and how they come up in our text this morning.

First, we are tempted to deny the evils of the real world.

And we each can have our own ways of doing this.

Some of us are tempted to gloss over all that is bad and to only see the good – to deny the brokenness of this world by simply ignoring it.

Others of us do the opposite – we see only evil and brokenness. We see only the grit. And we tell ourselves that we are realists. But we too are avoiding reality because reality is more complex than that. And ironically, by flattening out the world we not only reduce the heights of what is good in this world, but also the depths of what is bad. This perspective too ignores the painful complexity of this world.

In other cases we can be selective – we see some evil, but screen out the rest. We see the evils we want to see and ignore the evils we don't want to see. And as we do this, we create in our minds not an accurate representation of the real world, but a caricature of it.

But Matthew, in our text this morning, will not let us settle for any of those options. What Matthew shows us in these verses is that Christ's incarnation calls us to face the real world, with all its evils.

And Matthew shows us this by showing us the fates of children.

We begin, in verses thirteen through fifteen, with the image of the infant or toddler Jesus having to flee, in the dead of night, from his home.

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, becomes a child refugee, on the run from a murderous king.

The strong, who are charged by God to serve and to protect those under their power, are instead focused so much on protecting their power that they think little of destroying the weak in order

to protect themselves. And Jesus, a little child, who has done nothing wrong, must flee for his life. The world is not the way it is supposed to be.

And that truth is heightened even further in verses sixteen through eighteen. Herod, realizing the wise men had tricked him, and in an attempt to eliminate the Christ, orders that all the male children in the region of Bethlehem that are two years old and under, be killed.

Shockingly, this was not an unusual act for Herod. He ordered the execution of many, many people, including members of his own family. [Green, 71-72] In the catalogue of Herod's atrocities, the murder of these twenty or thirty children was so inconsequential that it goes unnoted in other histories.

But none of that takes away from the tragedy of what is described here. None of that lessens the pain and anguish of the twenty or thirty mothers whose children were murdered before them.

Mothers throughout Bethlehem wept, because their helpless little children were murdered by their own king. The world is not the way it is supposed to be.

Finally, in verses nineteen through twenty-three, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph return to the land of Israel. But again, danger looms. Archelaus reigns over Judea. Archelaus was known to have followed the policies of his father Herod. And so even with Herod dead, Jesus is not safe. He and his family must withdraw to Galilee. Jesus, the little boy, must continue to live in hiding, for fear of his life. The world is not the way it is supposed to be.

As we hear these stories, we may find ourselves giving thanks that we don't live in the same world that Matthew chapter two describes.

And in some ways that is true.

And in others it is clearly a delusion. Because at least in some respects, that response comes from averting our eyes. In some ways that response comes from a denial of the world as it truly is.

We can see that even if we just stick to the categories that Matthew has given us.

All around the world today, people are under threat from those in power. All around the world today, people are fleeing as refugees from their homeland. Many in the dead of night. Many with young children. Many for fear of their lives, or the lives of their loved ones. Many like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

And yet ... I wonder how often we as Christians really see that ... and how often we avert our eyes and avoid the reality.

The Pew Research Center did a poll in 2018 on the perspectives of different demographics regarding our country's responsibility towards refugees.

In that poll 68% of white evangelical Protestants said that the U.S. has *no* responsibility to accept refugees into our country. [Hartig]

Now ... immigration and refugee resettlement are complicated issues when it comes to the details. A lot of wisdom comes into play. Christians can, in good conscience, disagree over the details of the right policy for responding to refugees.

But the poll didn't ask about a specific policy. It simply asked if we had a responsibility to accept refugees in general.

And 68% of evangelical Protestants said no.

I would imagine that if we asked white evangelicals whether the U.S. has a responsibility to defend marriage, or combat child abuse, or protect the unborn, a majority would say yes. They would say yes to the principle, even if they disagreed on the details of the policy. But when it comes to caring for refugees, the majority said no.

And that perspective is being put into action – including in regards to *Christians* fleeing persecution.

From 2015, under the previous administration, to 2019, under the current administration, the number of Christians fleeing religious persecution who have been accepted into the U.S. has dropped 67%. The numbers are set to drop even further in 2020. [Casper]

Maybe there's a good rationale for that perspective ... Maybe.

But maybe the policy ... maybe the poll ... maybe the fact that many evangelicals feel our country has no responsibility to care for refugees in need, is because we are averting our eyes – because we are avoiding reality.

But Jesus doesn't let us. He draws our eyes to the plight of the refugee. He forces us to look.

And the fact is that our world is not so different from the world of Matthew two.

That is true of verse thirteen through fifteen. But it is also true of verses sixteen through eighteen.

Before we give thanks that we do not live in a land where a king can summarily execute twenty or thirty infants and toddlers, we do need to reckon with the fact that we *do* live in a land that aborted 862,000 babies in 2017 alone (which is the most recent year that statistics have been compiled for). [Nash, et al.]

And we live in a land where the majority of adults support a parent's right to do that. [Montanaro]

We live in a land where more and more states, and more and more prominent candidates for president support a position that would allow for abortion all the way up to the moment of birth.

Now, I know many of you here have worked hard to fight against abortion in our country, and to support women who find themselves in crisis pregnancies or who are recovering from an abortion. Many of you have done commendable and important work in this area.

But the fact is that many others of us are somewhat indifferent or apathetic towards the issue. And I imagine that some gathered here this morning support the majority view in our culture.

But let me argue once more that that apathy or that support also grows out of our tendency to avoid reality.

Ross Douthat, in a recent op-ed, discusses the unreality that more people are embracing on the topic of abortion in our culture, as more states and presidential candidates support legalizing abortion up to the moment of birth.

Douthat points out that this position depends on “the most mystical, the least scientifically defensible, of possible positions on fetal personhood.” He goes on to explain that the growing stance that draws a hard line at the point of birth “has nothing to do with fetal development at all, which means it requires a kind of magical thinking about what happens to the fetus when it passes through the birth canal. Or else it requires believing that there is *nothing* that could give a fetus a right to life so long as it lives inside a woman; your unborn child could be reciting Shakespeare to you in sign language and it would still have no right to life.”

This position, he says, depends on a “mystical maximalism.”

In other words, it depends on magical thinking.

Reality has a way at poking holes in this magical thinking. Douthat points out that every time an abortionist – a Kermit Gosnell, or more recently an Ulrich Klopfer – is found to have preserved and held on to a ghoulish collection of hundreds or thousands of fetal remains, everyone – even those who want to claim that a fetus is a nonperson – is reminded of the harsh reality that a fetus can still become a corpse.

Herod killed his dozens. Our country has killed its hundreds of thousands. Our world is not so different from the world of Matthew two.

And the birth of Jesus, and the events surrounding his birth, force us to look.

We could go on. We could catalogue so many other areas of life that show the evil of this world.

But Matthew has already given us enough.

We are tempted, in a range of ways, to deny the evil of this world. To avert our eyes – to avoid seeing it. But Christ’s entrance into the world calls us to face the real world, with all its evils.

That’s the first thing our text confronts us with.

The second thing we see here, is that as we are tempted to avoid the realities of this world, we also become tempted to avoid the reality of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

We can in general ... and maybe especially when it comes to how we think about Christmas – we can be tempted to think of Jesus as if he hovers above the brokenness of this world – as if he is disconnected from it, as if he keeps it at arm’s length in one way or another.

But Matthew reminds us that if we view Jesus that way, we are not seeing him as he is. Matthew reminds us that we need to face the real Jesus – and that includes both who he is and who he calls us to be.

Jesus, as he entered the world, did not bypass any of the evils in this world – but he lived in the midst of them and felt their effects from the very beginning of his young life. What we see in

Matthew chapter two is that Jesus was among those who suffered, and Jesus identified with those who suffered.

Jesus fled from his homeland to Egypt. We don't know exactly where he settled, but there were a considerable number of Jewish refugees in Egypt at the time, and it seems likely that Jesus, Joseph, and Mary would have settled in one of these Jewish refugee settlements. [Morris, 42; Green, 70]

Think about what that means. Jesus did not spend his early childhood in a palace. He did not spend his early child among the powerful or the comfortable. He didn't even spend his early childhood settled in his hometown. Instead, Jesus spent his early childhood among those who had to flee from Israel because of the evil and oppression going on there. Jesus was among those who suffered.

And though he fled from Bethlehem himself, we need to appreciate that ultimately Jesus did not desert the infants of Bethlehem, but he fled not to avoid the plight of those who suffer, but to embrace it at an even deeper level.

Because Jesus did not avoid the slaughter in Bethlehem so that he could instead enjoy comfort and peace. Jesus dodged the swift sword of Herod's soldiers as an infant, so that he might instead endure the tortured agony of the cross as a man. He was spared the wrath of Herod as an infant so that instead, as a man, he might take onto himself the wrath of a holy God against the many sins of the world. Jesus is not avoiding suffering in order to grasp at safety here – he is avoiding a lesser suffering so that he might one day take on a greater suffering.

And so, even as he fled, Jesus was among those – Jesus identified with those – who suffered.

And he continues to do that today. Jesus is with his people as they suffer.

That means a few things.

First, it means that Jesus is with *us* when we suffer. When we suffer from the evils of this world, Jesus is with us.

Second, it means that Jesus is with *others* when they suffer. And often our calling, as we care for those who are suffering, is to tell our brothers and sisters in Christ that even as they suffer – *especially* as they suffer – Jesus is with them, Jesus understands.

Third, it means that Christ is truly engaged with and at work in this broken world *now*. He cares about what is happening here. And he cares enough to do something. And we must trust that he is still at work.

One theologian puts it like this – he writes: “The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born, then, in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head. [...] This is how Israel's redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people, and bringing justice to the whole world. No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is in misery; no point having an easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice! If he is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be with us where the pain is. That's what this chapter [of Matthew's Gospel] is about.” [Wright, 14-15]

Jesus is with his people when they suffer. Jesus is with us where the pain is.

That's the first thing we are reminded of concerning Christ, the incarnate Word.

The second, is that as his people ... as his Church ... as the Body of Christ, we are called to be with those who are suffering as well.

We are called first to receive Christ as the one who comes to us in our brokenness and sin – yes, that is true. That is primary.

But then, once we have done that, we are to do for others what Christ has done for us.

We are to draw close to those who suffer in this world.

We are to realize that we have something to offer those who suffer in this world, because we have Jesus to offer them.

And then, in the midst of our faithful service, we should not be surprised if we ourselves are called to suffer under the evils and injustices of this world as well ... just as Christ had to.

That is the calling this text places on our lives. That is the challenge.

But how do we do this faithfully? How do we follow our Lord in faith?

And that leads us to our last point ...

Our third and final point is that though we are tempted to avoid the reality of the *written* Word of God, Christ calls us to engage with it as it truly is.

And bear with me for a minute here ... because this *is* going to connect.

Brent Strawn, a professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, put out a book a couple years ago titled *The Old Testament is Dying*. I haven't read it at this point, but I've read a bit about it over the past couple weeks.

Strawn, in an interview, explains that his thesis is that we should think of the Old Testament as a language – or if not itself a language, at least as something very much like a language. It can be used, he explains, “as a kind of grammar through which we perceive, understand, and negotiate the world, just as we do with our native tongues.” It is “a way to understand and evaluate reality or our lived experience.”

The Bible gives us a system of symbols, lenses, and stories through which we can understand and communicate about the world. Both the Old and New Testaments contribute to this system – this language.

But, Strawn explains, “If the Old Testament is (like) a language, a couple of other things follow. One is that it can be learned and spoken well, even fluently, and, as a result, thrive; or it can be spoken poorly, haltingly, and eventually die. Each of those options (and others in between) are possible parts of any language's life-cycle.”

From there, Strawn argues that among Christians today, the Old Testament is most like a language that is dying. Christians cannot speak it with nuance, richness, beauty, and complexity, but it is instead reduced among Christians to a smaller and smaller vocabulary and simpler and simpler grammar.

Strewn produces a range of evidence in support of his thesis. Along with a call to recover this language. If we do not recover it, we will more and more lose our ability to see the world, and think of the world, and speak to each other about the world, through the lenses and symbols and stories of Scripture. [Strewn, et al.]

Now ... why do I bring that up?

Well, I bring it up because the third thing Matthew shows us in our text is that key to understanding the world, the Christ, and Christ's calling on our lives, is seeing and thinking and speaking in the language of the Bible.

Key to enabling us to truly engage with reality and to follow in Christ's steps, is knowing the Bible and seeing the world through its lens.

And we see that in the Old Testament texts that Matthew points to throughout this passage. Matthew means to show us, as one commentator puts it, that "As the incarnate Word [...], [Jesus] lives out the script of the written Word." [Leithert, 74]

And while the way Jesus did that, and the way we are called to do that are not identical, the fact remains that if we are to live faithfully as God's people, we too must know the script of the written Word – we must know the Scriptures.

And we don't just need to know facts about them. We don't just need to know proof texts. What we need is to be fluent in them so that they shape not just our actions and our words, but even our thoughts.

That is what we see in Matthew here in these verses. Matthew gives us three episodes in this text, and he connects each one to the Hebrew Scriptures, and none of those connections are an obvious proof text. Instead, among other things, Matthew is showing us how the Scriptures can and should shape our perception of the world.

For example, Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 in verse fifteen: "Out of Egypt I called my son." But he doesn't quote it when Jesus leaves Egypt. He quotes it when Jesus leaves Israel. And if we pause and think about it, we begin to see that Matthew is saying that Israel has become an Egypt. It is ruled by an evil king who is slaughtering Israelite babies, just as Pharaoh did in the days of Moses. And as God had to rescue Israel from Egypt, so now God must rescue Jesus from Israel. [Leithart, 75]

When Matthew sees these events, he perceives it, he thinks of it, and then he speaks of it, in the symbols and stories of the Hebrew Scriptures.

He does it again in verse eighteen where he quotes from Jeremiah 31:15. Some might look at this bloodshed in Bethlehem at the beginning of Jesus's life, and wonder if God is really in control – if he is really at work. But not Matthew. Matthew sees and thinks of these events in terms of Jeremiah thirty-one.

Jeremiah thirty-one is, over-all, a joyous passage. But “Matthew quotes the gloomiest verse in the entire chapter.” Why does he do this? Because Jeremiah thirty-one gives him the language to know and to say that even the wonderful salvation that Jeremiah prophesied about will only “come through the shedding of blood.” Matthew is telling us about the joyous coming of the Messiah, but then suddenly there is loss and mourning. But Matthew knows Jeremiah thirty-one. And so Matthew is not startled or confused. The Scriptures have already taught him that he should not be surprised by conflict and the shedding of blood in the very midst of the work of salvation.

And the same is true of verse twenty-three. Matthew writes that Jesus “went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.” Here Matthew does not cite a verse of Scripture, but he is making a point by drawing on multiple Hebrew sources, including a couple of Hebrew puns.

Matthew is pointing out how Nazareth sounds like Nazarite – a group that was meant to be set apart as spiritual warriors for God. He is pointing out how Nazareth sounds like “*netzer*” the Hebrew word for branch – since several Hebrew prophets said that the Messiah would be a “branch” of David. He is pointing out that Nazareth is an obscure and unimportant town, and the Messiah is to be a man of humility. In all these ways the Messiah “would be called a Nazarene.” In each of these connections, it seems like all these biblical phrases, symbols, and categories are flowing through Matthew’s head as he considers what has happened, and as he writes about it. [Leithart, 77]

What if we spoke Bible that fluently? What if we were so fluent in the Scriptures that we not only spoke in and saw in its categories, but we thought in its symbols and its stories and even its poetry?

Matthew, in this text, is showing us that if we knew the Scriptures like that, we would understand *the world* much better.

Matthew is showing us that if we knew the Scriptures like that, we would understand *Jesus* much better.

Matthew is showing us that if we knew the Scriptures like that, we would understand what it means *to be the Church* much better.

Think again of those topics we mentioned earlier.

If we knew, and spoke, and thought in the language and symbols and poetry of Scripture – if we thought of the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaping for joy; of the words of David in the psalms about how he knew God even when he was in the womb; of the passionate words of Jesus against any who would cause a little one to stumble – any who would mistreat a child who belonged to him – any who would think he did not care to bless one little child – if those passages and others like them shaped our thinking, could we remain indifferent or apathetic to the horrors of abortion in our country?

And if we saw the world through the lens of Scripture – if we thought deeply of how Abraham was a wandering Aramean, and how God struck those who failed to show him hospitality; of how anxious Abraham himself was to provide for the needs of the three hungry travelers by the oaks of Mamre; of how Ezekiel tells us that Sodom was destroyed in part because of its failure to provide for those in need [Ezekiel 16:49]; of how Israel lived first as sojourners in need of food

in Egypt and how God brought plagues on Egypt for mistreating them; of how God similarly judged the Edomites and the Amorites for failing to let Israel pass through their land when they were without a home of their own [Numbers 20-21]; of how God wrote law after law into the Torah about protecting and loving the stranger and sojourner among God's people once Israel had settled into the land; and on and on down to how Jesus Christ himself was a sojourner fleeing to Egypt for his life – if we had those stories and those laws deep in our bones ... could we remain indifferent or apathetic to the needs of refugees today – those who are Christians and those who are not? [Roberts, et al.]

I wonder.

But the fact is that most of us don't have the Scripture in our bones like that.

In a poll by LifeWay Research a few years ago, 12% of evangelicals polled said that the Bible was the thing that most influenced their thinking on topics related to immigration. [Lifeway]

I've mentioned how this might shape just two issues that Matthew brings up. But I think Matthew has even broader hopes for us than that.

Where do *you* need to be immersed in the Word? How do *you* need to become more fluent in the Scriptures?

The new year is almost here. And it's the time when many Christians begin to think about Bible reading plans for the year ahead.

And maybe this reminder from Matthew can help you think more seriously about how you will engage with the Scriptures in the year ahead.

We have copies of Craig Desjardin's thematic Bible reading program in the narthex. There are of course other reading programs – a wide range of them available online.

Consider choosing one for yourself. Consider choosing something realistic. Consider doing something that will help you grow in your fluency in Scripture in the year ahead.

That said ... many of us fail to complete our reading goals as we strive to do it alone. And so there could be some benefits to doing it in community.

I know some of the women in our Mothers' Encouragement Group, my wife included, have been doing a Bible reading program together using the YouVersion Bible app. The app lets you pick a reading program for your group, then you form your group in the app, and you can track your progress and see each other's progress each day. It's a way to keep one another accountable. It also gives you a way to discuss what you've read with one another through the app. They use the YouVersion Bible app – I'm sure there are others out there.

If you want to become more fluent in the Scriptures, then maybe this year you should ask a few friends, and pick a plan together, and then encourage each other on in your Bible reading in 2020.

Whatever form it takes, our text calls us, as a Church, to pursue greater fluency in the Bible together, that we might see the world as it really is, that we might see Christ as he really is, that we might see our lives and the callings on our lives as they really are.

Our text this morning is a dark one, in many ways. But it is not without hope. Because despite all the threats, despite all the danger, despite all the powerful opposition, Christ and his kingdom march on. And Matthew chapter two is not the end of the story.

What we see in our text is that the cradle of Christ quickly finds itself in the shadow of the cross.

But even so, the cross is not the end. Because even as Christ begins his life-long march to the cross, what lays beyond it is a crown of victory.

We have just celebrated Christmas. Matthew 2:13-23 reminds us that even at Christmas, even as we kneel by the cradle of Christ, we can already see the shadow of the cross over not only him ... but also over us.

But as we look beyond it, we see that the cross gives way to the crown – in this life and the next – for Christ has risen and he will raise all his people.

Let us therefore immerse ourselves in Christ’s word so that we can see this reality more and more – so that we can engage with the world as it truly is, cling to Christ as he truly is, live as Christ’s Body as we were truly meant to, and press forward to the crown of life that we will truly receive.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Casper, Jayson. “When You Are Persecuted in One Place, Flee to Another. But Not to America.” ChristianityToday.com. November 5, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/november/when-you-are-persecuted-in-one-place-flee-to-another-but-no.html>
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