



## CHRISTMAS

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, December 25, 2011**

(See the Worship Unit for amazing ideas for Christmas celebrations.)

**Linda E. Thomas, Guest Lectionary Commentator**  
Professor, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

**Lection – Matthew 2:13-23 (New Revised Standard Version)**

(v. 13) 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.” (v. 14) Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, (v. 15) 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.”

(v. 16) 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. (v. 17) Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

(v. 18) “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.”

(v. 19) When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, (v. 20) “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.” (v. 21) Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. (v. 22) 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. (v. 23) 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.”

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Only two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, record an infancy narrative. Only Matthew mentions wise men from the east travelling an incredible distance to worship baby Jesus. They followed a star that stood over the place where Jesus was born. The birth of Christ is the culmination of God's design for the salvation of humans in history.

In addition to the story of the wise men coming to greet the babe in the manger on that great morning, angels also visited. Specifically, they came to warn Joseph that this great child was under threat from birth. Christmas is not only a time when we celebrate the birth of Christ, but should also be a time when we remember that he arrived into an unfriendly place in the world, destined and determined to be a friend to the *entire* world.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 2:13-23**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Herod does not forget the destiny of the child, and so decides that all baby boys are to be killed. Fast forward—this sounds like what happens to black and brown boys in many of this country's cities. They are cut down like weeds, mourned by their families, and forgotten by others. The families of these slain children cannot be comforted; they cry uncontrollably at their babies' senseless deaths. Yet our society does not consider this a threat to national security. Lawmakers do not call for an emergency session, and no blue ribbon committee is established to study the slaughter of black and brown children. They are dispensable. Moreover, African American children are far too often caught in the web of a new Jim Crow—the cradle-to-prison pipeline that fills the cells of our prison-industrial complex. See Michelle Alexander's new book The New Jim Crow<sup>1</sup> for astounding information on what this means for the Black community and America. But instead of just getting angry, let us get creative and wise like our God, who wisely and creatively presents Godself to the world as a vulnerable baby who comes through the body of a girl living in poverty. God is not threatened by Herod's decree. God is not scared. But guess what? We ought to be scared of any God who comes in the world as a baby.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

In the African American community, following a star has great significance. We remember our ancestor Harriet Tubman leading many enslaved Africans from slavery to freedom by following the North Star to freedom in Canada. Likewise, the birth of black children is usually a moment of joy no matter the circumstances—the children born of enslaved Africans were honored beings even with the knowledge that they might be sold on the auction block. Even now with black girls/women giving birth without the support of the boy/man, the baby is loved powerfully in our communities. So the story of a teenage girl, Mary, having a baby before being formally married speaks to the circumstances of many families in our churches.

The Negro Spirituals “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” and “Mary Had a Baby,” as well as the notion of Jesus as “Mary’s baby,” offer us an intimate knowing of Mary’s situation as the story of many young women in our congregations who may be pregnant with or without a public announcement of marriage being in place.

The physical virginity of Mary may be played down, as historical records about apostolic preaching in the early church do not include reference to Mary's virginity.<sup>2</sup> And the interpretation that Jesus's birth in a stable signified dire circumstances is also questionable. What is questionable is not that Jesus was poor, but that his being born in a stable with animals is an indication of poverty. Quite the opposite is true. To give birth in a stable during those days meant that Jesus was born in a warm and comfortable setting.<sup>3</sup> Yes, there were what we now understand as "farm" animals—with all the attendant smells and sounds that our contemporary society marginalizes to the farm or the "country." But in this time, the smells and sounds of animals were familiar. People's everyday lives took place in spaces inhabited by animals, and people depended upon animals for transportation and labor as well as food. Thus, in the historical/cultural setting of the Gospels, being born in a place with animals was similar to a contemporary child being born in a place with cars. From this perspective, the preacher is challenged to update/correct the story to new generations of listeners so we can struggle with the interpretation of the birth of Jesus in light of what has been told to us versus the more likely response to Joseph and Mary in their time and context.

Ultimately, for contemporary Christians, the birth of Jesus means that salvation comes into the world through a woman's body. God comes to us as a vulnerable baby. All babies need devoted attention—love, tender care, and rearing. In the African American culture, as in most others, child rearing is the domain of women. Thus, God's choosing to come into the world as a baby means not only does God presents Godself as a vulnerable baby, but also that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and always present God surrenders to a woman for mothering. Joseph, being a holy man, heeds the voice of God's angel and does not abandon the woman to whom he has publicly indicated he would marry, but instead stays by her side as protector, guiding the holy family to Egypt and, after the death of Herod, back to their hometown of Nazareth.

The God who tells Moses, "I AM who I AM" initiates the destiny of Jesus who, like the baby Moses, took flight from an authority threatened by the birth of a baby who will change history. Thus, Joseph taking Mary and baby Jesus to Egypt brings to mind the safeguarding of the infant Moses by his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter. Similarly, Herod's order to slay innocent children mirrors the massacre of the Hebrew children by Pharaoh. Finally, the return of the Holy family from Egypt is explicitly linked to Israel's Exodus from Egypt. For Matthew, Jesus replicates Moses as the original lawgiver to the people of Israel. As Moses led the Israelites to freedom, so Jesus will do likewise for us.

## Celebration

At Christmas we celebrate our greatest gift—our gateway to life, to life eternal and to a fulfilled life here on earth. No matter what we did or did not get under a tree or wrapped tied with a bow, we are the happiest we have ever been because of the gift of the child born wrapped in swaddling cloth amid the smells of farm animals. This birth make us forever thankful and grateful. It also sends us into action on behalf of children who are massacred by acts of commission and omission. Thanks be to God for the child who came to save us all and to show us the importance of all children.

## Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sounds:** An angel talking to Joseph in a dream; the scurrying sounds of a family fleeing by night; a prophecy being spoken; the sounds of children as they are massacred; wailing and loud lamentation; a mother weeping inconsolably for a child;

**Sights:** The birth of a child; farm animals in a stable; the sight of an angel; a family fleeing with a child; the anxious look on the face of Mary, the mother of Jesus; the look on the face of King Herod as he realizes he has been tricked; large numbers of children under age two being massacred; the fearful face of Joseph; a family arriving at their new home; and

**Smells:** The odors of a new born child; the smells of farm animals; the odors of a barn; the scent of blood.

### **III. Other Materials That Preachers and Others Can Use**

- “African American Carols.” Available at [http://www.familychristmasonline.com/music/african\\_american\\_carols/african\\_american\\_carols.htm](http://www.familychristmasonline.com/music/african_american_carols/african_american_carols.htm).
- Charlotte Mecklenburg Library Catalog, s.v. “African American Christmas.” Available at <http://catalog.plcmc.org/?q=African+American+Christmas&searchType=catalog>.
- “Black Nativity.” Available at <http://www.lib.neu.edu/archives/voices/aa-theater1.htm>.

### **Notes**

1. Michelle Alexander. The New Jim Crow. New York, NY: The New Press, 2010.
2. Fred B. Craddock. Harper’s Bible Commentary. James L. Mays, ed. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1988, pp. 1014–15.
3. See Shimon Gibson, *Nightline*, 23 December 2010; Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/wise-men-ancient-text-differs-bible-tale-magi/story?id=12460820&page=2>