

SERMON: "JESUS THE REFUGEE"

TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 63:7-9
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 2:13-23

December 28, 2025

Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

I was visiting Pat Taylor at Western Home a few weeks ago

She was in hospice care. I wanted to read scripture to her. Say a prayer

The music therapist came while I was there. What a wonderful ministry

I think the familiar songs she played for Pat spoke with the same clarity
as scripture – able to connect even when someone is unconscious

Listening to her play her guitar and sing a mix of Christmas carols, hymns

and old favorites from many decades ago, I could not help but be impressed

What a wide range of songs she must know ... from the favorites of yesteryear

that would connect with her audience there to the songs I'd guess this
young woman with blue and purple hair would have on her own playlist

Got me thinking about what the playlist or musical score of each gospel might sound like

Preachers are always thinking about the next sermon. For me that next sermon

was, planning ahead, this one for the Sunday after Christmas. This passage

about Herod's brutal response to word of a child born a king, and a family
that has to flee to another land, another language to save their newborn son

These are the interconnected stories that immediately follow the story of the wise ones

coming to visit (and worship) the child born a king. You can almost hear the carol

in the background "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Then this ...

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." 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."

That gifted young woman offering music therapy probably doesn't have a song

in her wide-ranging repertoire for this. Wouldn't get many requests for a song

about Jesus and his family having to become refugees, cross the border

run for their lives. I wonder what the soundtrack for this would sound like.

You know how important music is in the movies, in the telling of a story.

The music shifts, you can sense something coming.

WHY SUCH A SHIFT

It reminds me of the comedian talking about going scuba diving
He paused to let the audience in on something. He said, "You know
when you're actually in the water, there is no music letting you know
a shark is headed your way looking hungry."

What does the music sound like now? Joseph and Mary hurriedly packing
what little they can take for their long walk to a foreign land – to Egypt.
Now with those quite somber tones of warning swirling about in the background,
Matthew gives us more detail about why they have to literally run for their lives

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, 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 magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "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."

There is no sugar coating this cold, hard truth. This is how Jesus is welcomed
by the powers that be. And how Jesus, an infant, is saved from this slaughter ...
because Joseph is warned in a dream and told to flee. The other families
in and around Bethlehem were not so forewarned, not so fortunate.

I'm not trying to ruin Christmas. I'm very much of twelve days of Christmas guy
Not counting down to Dec. 25, but counting from it to Epiphany. I want Christmas
carols until January 6. We keep the decorations up until then. I wish people
"Merry Christmas" all twelve days until January 6. I get some funny looks

But this is how Matthew tells the story. It is an abrupt shift
From wise travelers kneeling before a child born a king, bearing gifts
to that same child, now a refugee on the run because the current king
deems him (and every other infant in town) to be a threat

How would you write that into a musical score?
Or to be all the more blunt ... why write it into the gospel story at all?
Why put it in the lectionary readings for preachers to preach?
I'm just asking, you know, for a friend

A couple of possible answers come to mind.
The gospel writers had a challenge in telling the story of Jesus
You've heard people ask themselves out loud as they tell a story
They ask, "It's a long story. Where do I begin?" My answer is to suggest
they start at the beginning. That's what Matthew does

NO SUGAR COATING

Mark, the earliest gospel written, starts with Jesus as an adult
John goes for the cosmic approach and starts “in the beginning”
Like all the way back to creation ... “in the beginning was the Word”
Luke and Matthew start with Jesus’ birth. They are the only two
who tell the Christmas story – just those two

Their unique challenge ... how do you start big with Christmas
We’re agreed Christmas is a big deal, right? Then if Christmas is such a big deal,
a spectacle, with a star guiding three kings bearing gifts of gold ... How is that Jesus,
a child born a king, shows up some 30 years later a relative unknown?

Look at how Matthew tells the story. Yes, there are wise ones from the East,
lands both then and now associated with where Israel’s enemies can be found
Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc. The wise ones went back where they came from
They were the only witnesses to Christmas. Jesus’ birthday didn’t really make
local news. And the local news that followed was a bigger story
a horrible story that would not be easy to forget – the slaughter of infants

Like the wise ones, Jesus and his family also left town, left the country
They fled to Egypt, refugees on the run for the lives from a king so insecure
that he would order the murder of toddlers to keep his hold on power
The sweet sounds of Christmas giving way to the sound of mothers crying
of Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be consoled

The way Matthew tells the story shifting so quickly from good news to horrible news
Jesus, as an adult, could show up year later as a teacher and healer from Galilee
without people really remembering a silent, holy night in Bethlehem
some thirty years prior. Matthew is a good storyteller

I’d go so far as to say that this shift right here in the middle of chapter two,
a shift from beauty to brutality, is also good news. It is good news because
it dares to speak the bad news so honestly. No sugar coating here
Jesus was born into a world that was (and is) both beautiful and brutal
Jesus was born into a world full of ruthless rulers ... and refugees

This next illustration / admission might get me in a bit of trouble with some of y’all
I’m not really a fan of Christian radio. Like I’ve heard some say about sweet tea,
it’s just too sweet. To my ears it sounds a little too polished, too over-produced
It’s just good news to good news to good news. I like music with more
of an edge – like good news running up against the bad news

I know there are some really good songs out there that have that edge, that reality
I like Brandon Lake’s “Hard Fought Hallelujah” with Jelly Roll, especially the line
I’ll bring my hard-fought, heartfelt been through hell hallelujah

SUMMARY

Sure seems that Jesus as his family went through hell soon after his birth
Might this story from Matthew, chapter two (this story the scholars who put together
the lectionary put here on the Sunday after Christmas, Thank you so very much)
might this be one of those hard-fought, heartfelt, been through hell hallelujahs?

The good news here is that there is good news here ... here of all places
on the road running from those who would consider a child to be a threat
on the road to take the risk of crossing the border because you have to
on the road traveled by other refugees, on the road because they too are at risk

Let's not lull ourselves into a sweet tea, sweet songs sleep thinking
that those roads are roads less traveled ... they are not

Maybe you've traveled those roads, the roads leading away from Herod's soldiers
the roads to another land and language. To you, I humbly offer this word
of good news from the stories told by Matthew. From wherever the road leads
please know that you just surviving that journey is itself a victory
it was for Joseph and Mary and child. It is for you as well.

For the people of Gaza and Ukraine and Sudan and too many other places
For those here in our own communities who live in fear
who are targeted, who are bullied, who are labeled as 'other'
You don't have to be a hero. Just survive, keep going. That is a victory!

And to those of us in a more comfortable place ... a quick story
I served on the Cedar Falls Human Rights Commission for three years
We organized a workshop for the community. I was set to be a panelist

Just a day before the event, the state of Iowa became the first state
that had previously granted civil rights protections based on gender identity
to take away those protections. That new law sent a wave of fear through
the LGBTQ community here in our community. A meeting of those concerned
and a few community and faith leaders was quickly called.

The room was packed, people spilled out into the hall. I could feel the fear
And I'm just an ally (a straight, white Christian man). I decided to speak up
I offered my space on that panel to someone who would know that fear
firsthand because the discrimination was addressed to them

Another faith leader sitting just a few chairs away, a lesbian
looked me in the eye and said clearly, firmly ... ('ll remember the straightforward
sincerity with which she spoke for a long time. I'll remember her words of wisdom)
She said, "No. Allies to the front. At a time like this. Allies to the front."
For whom might you step forward and be an ally?