



Journeying Together in Uncertainty and Risk

MATTHEW 2:13-18

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

Gather

CHECK IN

Jesus' story begins in Bethlehem, but as a child he is forced to make new homes in Egypt and then Nazareth, as that is where Joseph feels the family can be safe. Later, in Jesus' adulthood, Capernaum becomes his home (Matthew 4:13). "Home-towns" can be tricky to name or define. Like Jesus, many of us have lived in more than one place: city or township, state or province, even country. Is there a place you call "home"? Do you have more than one? Share with the group where that is and why it is "home" to you.

OPENING PRAYER

God of grace, you know us each by name. Gather us together by your grace, that we may learn to listen to your voice, recognize your presence in one another, and serve in your Son Jesus' name. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Group Covenant

- ♦ We agree to love and respect one another as beloved children of God.
- ♦ We agree to balance our listening and speaking so that all voices may be heard.
- ♦ We agree to treat conversations in the group as sacred, meaning that what is shared helps build community and strengthens the faith of others.
- ♦ We agree to pray for one another as a caring community in Christ.
- ♦ We agree to invite and welcome others to join us on this journey.
- ♦ We agree to _____.
- ♦ We agree to _____.

Dwell

DWELLING IN THE WORD

Matthew and Luke are the only gospel authors to recount Jesus' birth. The more familiar story comes from Luke 2:1-21. Matthew 1:18—2:18 shares similarities, including angelic pronouncements, political intrigue, dangerous travel, a virgin birth, and the name Jesus. However, Luke has the angelic appearance to Mary happening in Nazareth, whereas Matthew has the holy family in Bethlehem, and their only travels occur *after* Jesus' birth. While both gospels agree on the fragility and vulnerability of Jesus as a child in the snares of empire, Matthew highlights

the impacts of such vulnerability not only on Jesus but on all the children of Bethlehem who are caught in Herod's crossfire.

Matthew 2:13-18

¹³ Now after [the magi] 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." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 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."

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

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."

CONVERSATION

1. The Revised Common Lectionary appoints this passage for the first Sunday of Christmas in year A. But some worshipers may never or rarely hear it if a congregation opts instead (for example) for a service of lessons and carols on the Sunday following Christmas Day. Indeed, this passage is difficult to read and process.

- ♦ As you look at the picture and hear the text, how do you feel?

- ♦ What are some thoughts or emotions the characters in the text might have experienced? Do your feelings align with a particular character(s)?



*The Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem, 1860,
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld*

- ♦ Are your feelings influenced by something outside the text? Is it difficult to identify emotionally with this text?

2. Matthew 2:18 is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15, in a section called the Book of Consolation. Jeremiah recalls one of Israel's matriarchs—Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob (later renamed Israel), who suffered first from infertility; finally bore two sons, Joseph and Benjamin; but died giving birth to the latter (Genesis 31–35). Given her tragic end, the historical Rachel could not grieve her own children (or descendants), but she is evoked by Jeremiah to embody maternal mourning just as God simultaneously grieves for and offers hope and comfort to the children of Israel. Read Jeremiah 31:10-17 for the context of Matthew's citation.

By Jesus' and Matthew's lifetimes, the names of leaders and political borders had changed and shifted from Jeremiah's experience, but mothers and children continued to suffer from the greed and aspirations of the rich, and they still do today.

- ♦ Why do you think Matthew chose to quote Jeremiah's oracle of consolation?



Study of Grief, 1897, by Szold, Aline

- ♦ How might Matthew have seen it as meaningful for the mothers of Bethlehem during Jesus' childhood? For his own readers toward the end of the first century?

- ♦ How might Jeremiah's oracle provide a word of condemnation and a word of hope for us today?

3. Lutherans talk about the paired concepts of "law" and "gospel."

- ♦ In what ways does this text, especially Jeremiah's oracle, speak as law, helping us to know our own sin?

- ♦ In what ways does it speak as gospel, helping us to know the promise of God's grace?

4. When they fled from Herod, Jesus' family traveled from Bethlehem to Egypt (Matthew 2:14). Alexandria, Egypt, had many Jewish residents at the time of Jesus' birth. Find Alexandria and Bethlehem on the maps located in the back of this book. If we assume that Jesus' Jewish family went to Alexandria (or somewhere nearby), they would have traveled about 420 miles.

When Jesus' family returned from Egypt, they set out to return to their home in Bethlehem, but because of a new political danger, they were diverted to Nazareth instead (Matthew 2:19-23). Find Nazareth on a map. The walking distance between Bethlehem and Nazareth is about 90 miles, making the travel from Alexandria to Nazareth over 500 miles total.

Based on Herod's calculations, scholars assume Jesus was between one and two years old when his family fled Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16) and between two and five years old when they returned.

- ♦ What might these journeys and subsequent resettlements have been like for the young Jesus? For his parents? For those in their communities?
- ♦ What memories from that time do you think Jesus would have had? How do you think this experience impacted his life? How do you think it impacted the family's thoughts about the Roman Empire?

- ♦ The Gospel of Matthew had not been written yet, but how might their Jewish Scriptures, including Jeremiah's Book of Consolation, have comforted or encouraged them?

Engage

WORD AND SERVICE

Who are some of the migrant families in your community? Where are they from? Why did they have to move?

This week, learn the name(s) of a migrant family or community near you. Consider taking the next step to learn more about their experiences and how you can embody hope by listening to and honoring their stories or by advocating for migrant protection and well-being. To do more, visit ELCA AMMPARO Migrant Ministry (www.elca.org/AMMPARO).

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Prayer concerns: _____
_____.

God of hope, you know your children's names and hear each one of our cries. In times of joy and times of sorrow, be our guide. Help us to hear your voice when you call to us and to follow you in all your paths as we seek to serve and be faithful to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SESSION RECAP

Jesus' early life and those of his peers were plagued by political and social unrest. Because of the fear and ambition of King Herod, Jesus' life was threatened before he was even two years old. And while Joseph was able to get his family to safety, many infants and toddlers in Bethlehem were killed. Even though the Holy family was physically safe in Egypt, they experienced loss of culture, identity,



and connection to their homeland. And when they finally left Egypt, they still could not return home. Herod had died but was replaced by his son. According to Matthew, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were forced to settle in Nazareth instead. In our world greed and ambition continue to haunt us. Mothers still lose children. Children still lack security. People still weep and mourn. But through it all, God is with us. God speaks words of hope and consolation in and through Scriptures such as Jeremiah and Matthew, and God speaks these words to and through us too.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GOING DEEPER

- ✦ There are approximately 2,000 steps in one mile. Use a step counter to track your walking. Can you travel the distance between Bethlehem and Egypt? From Egypt to Nazareth? Both?
- ✦ On a map, trace your journey from your birthplace to where you live now, marking each stop along the way. Calculate the number of miles you have traveled between places. How long would it take you to walk that route?
- ✦ Journal about your experience of place and identity. How has where you live and where you call home shaped your identity? Your identification with God?
- ✦ Jeremiah's description of Rachel weeping for her children is symbolic of maternal grief across time. Matthew applies it to Herod's first-century slaughter of infants in Bethlehem. Contemporary artists also see, in Rachel's grief, God's lament for the more than 11 million people slaughtered in the Holocaust. Con-

sider this artistic representation of Rachel that serves to memorialize victims of the Holocaust:

- ♦ “*Rachel Weeping for Her Children (Jeremiah 31:15)*,” Jacob Steinhardt (1960s), thevcs.org/rachel-weeping.
- ♦ Political and social realities continue to contribute to the preventable deaths of children. Consider who are the children Rachel weeps for today.

🔥 Read more from the book of Matthew. Feel free to pick and choose from this list or read one passage a day.

- ♦ Matthew 1:18-25
- ♦ Matthew 2:1-12
- ♦ Matthew 2:19-23
- ♦ Matthew 3:13-17
- ♦ Matthew 4:12-17
- ♦ Matthew 4:23-25

Take a few moments to think and wonder about what you experienced in this session. Here are a few prompts you might use to reflect or journal.

- ♦ Return to your original feelings when you first heard this text. Take note of what surfaces for you this week regarding those or similar feelings.
- ♦ For what do you weep (personally, communally, globally)? What (if any) words of consolation, hope, or grace is God speaking to you in these places of heartbreak?
- ♦ Can tears be a form of strength? Of hope? How so?

LOOKING AHEAD

This week, Matthew introduced Jesus' childhood, grounded in God's word. He illustrated the hope Jesus' family (and Matthew's audience) drew from Hebrew Scriptures—even in the face of heart-wrenching loss. Next week, we will enter into Jesus' adult ministry and learn from him the importance of these same scriptures for ministry and life.

