



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

Quick prep

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.

SUPPLIES

- ♦ Large piece of paper or posterboard and markers, or whiteboard and whiteboard markers
- ♦ Pens and pencils
- ♦ Items to create a simple worship space, such as a plain cloth or banner, a candle, soft music
- ♦ Copies of *All Creation Sings* (ACS) or *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

- ✦ Greet and introduce yourself to participants as they arrive. Begin learning the names of those whom you don’t know.
- ✦ Be the first to introduce yourself so you can demonstrate the appropriate length of sharing.
- ✦ If you have a hybrid group (some participants meeting in person and one or more joining online), make sure those online are included throughout the session. You might invite them to introduce themselves after your own introduction.

Gather (15 to 30 minutes)

- With large groups, to give everyone a chance to speak, invite participants to share in partnered dyads first. Then, as time permits, select a few representatives who want to share an abbreviated form of their story with the whole group.

- Ask for a volunteer to pray the opening prayer aloud, or set the tone by pausing for a few moments and then praying this prayer yourself.

- If your group is entirely online, whenever you read from a whiteboard or chart paper, use a virtual chat feature or share your screen with an editable Word document to achieve the same effect.

- If your group is hybrid, consider how best to make these brainstorming visible to all participants simultaneously. Most webcams will not clearly pick up your writing on a whiteboard. A smartboard that can be written on and seen by on-site and online participants is ideal, but other work-arounds may be inviting one on-site participant to use a virtual chat feature or Word document to copy in real time what you are writing in person.

- Invite participants to address any concerns they may have about the covenant guidelines and/or to suggest additions or revisions. Seek assent to the final covenant by consensus.

CHECK IN

Today's scripture picks up just after Jesus is born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:1). But Jesus' family does not remain there long—they are forced to move first to an unknown city in Egypt, and after Herod dies, they return to Judea. Upon learning Herod has been replaced by his son, Joseph takes his family to Nazareth in Galilee, where he feels they will be safe. Throughout his life, Jesus moves. Many participants may relate to this transience and, even more, to the feelings evoked by *home*. As participants introduce themselves, invite them to share about their hometown.

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

The word *covenant* comes from the Bible and is one of the most frequently used words in the Hebrew Scriptures. At its most basic, a covenant is a promise or agreement between people, but more than that, it is about building and sustaining relationships. As we study scripture together, we will make a covenant to grow and sustain our relationships as a community of trust and respect.

In large letters, where everyone can see easily, write the following:

- ♦ **GATHER** together regularly, building and strengthening relationships with one another.
- ♦ **DWELL** in God's word together, seeking what it means for us, our faith community, and the world.
- ♦ **ENGAGE** faith together, loving and serving God and our neighbors in daily life.

Ask participants to share in one or two words what is significant to them about each word. For example, for "Gather," a participant might say "community" or "seeing friends."

In order to achieve these purposes, share the 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 (20 to 40 minutes)

DWELLING IN THE WORD

In Matthew's account of the Nativity, sometime after Jesus is born, magi from the east come to visit and pay him homage with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, who had asked them to report back once they'd found the child. And so they return to their own country by another route.

This text is about the child, Jesus, but it is also about the other children of Bethlehem. As the text is read aloud, invite participants to circle or highlight each reference to a child or children and to notice how prevalent children are in this text. If time permits, encourage participants to read the text again silently, paying attention to actions or emotions associated with children, underlining action/feeling words or highlighting them in a different color.

✿ This text can be difficult, especially for participants who have experienced infertility, the death of a child, or forced migration. Before reading the text, name this and give permission during the reading of this text (and at any point in your gatherings) for people to take care of themselves—no questions asked.

✿ Dwelling in the word is at the heart of each session. Don't rush it. Set the pace by reading the text yourself today, followed by 10 seconds of silence for reflection.

Matthew 2:13-18

¹³Now 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." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt ¹⁵and 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."

¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷Then 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."

✿ A more interactive option (or addition) to underlining/highlighting would be to pause between readings and ask participants to list out loud the actions/feelings that they hear. Write these words on chart paper or a whiteboard.

✿ Note the importance for the group to allow people to share their thoughts without judgment and to keep personal information confidential.

Some people come from a background that assumes one right answer to every question. Create a space where they can appreciate different angles on a theme under discussion.

To save time, skip the map activity in question #4 and simply share the distances between cities. Or if time permits and your congregation has a set of large classroom maps or can easily project these on a screen, use these visual aids to discuss each location and draw participants into the conversation.

Your congregation or larger community might have a variety of volunteer opportunities already available. Research these ahead of time and be prepared to present appropriate options to the group.

This need not be elaborate but should symbolically mark a shift. Transitions might include: placing a plain cloth or banner over the whiteboard/smart screen, lighting a candle/changing lighting, playing soft music, etc. For online or hybrid groups, encourage participants to do what makes sense for them in their own space to achieve a contemplative atmosphere: dim lights, light a candle, or simply close their Bible and/or workbook to signal a shift in focus.

CONVERSATION

In a new group it may be easier to focus on the text rather than one's own experiences and life of faith. If participants are hesitant to share or draw connections about themselves at first, encourage observations and inferences about the faith and feelings of characters in the story as an entry point. For example, participants might describe Joseph as frightened, brave, faithful; Herod as frightened, willful, insecure; Rachel and the Bethlehem mothers as powerless, grief-stricken, angry; etc. Humanizing these characters as people who feel deeply and wrestle with their faith in God just like we do today may help participants more readily speak to their own lives. Remember that there are no wrong answers to questions of faith.

Questions #2 and #4 are more textual in nature. The background information provided in the introduction will help. Pay attention to political factors and social realities related to empire and forced migration. Note especially that despite Jesus' naming in Matthew 1:25, in our text and throughout the account of Jesus' childhood in exile, he is identified only as "the child." Encourage connections with participants' own social and political lives while being careful to avoid anachronistic assumptions about the world of the biblical text.

Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

WORD AND SERVICE

Remind participants that your time together is intended to be a beginning, not an end. Encourage, but do not require, participants to utilize this and other sections in the "Engage" portion to continue their faith practice throughout the week.

While introducing this week's service, make space for group collaboration (formally or informally). Offer to help plan a group ministry or outreach activity if there is interest.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Uplift the power of prayer, especially in community. Invite prayer concerns, while reminding participants to get permission before sharing another person's name or concern with the group. If it seems wiser to pray simply for a "friend," God still knows who is on our hearts.

As participants write prayer concerns, transition the space to signal worship.

When all are done writing prayer requests, invite participants to join you in a time of prayerful silence and/or a hymn.

For this session, appropriate hymns may include:

- ♦ “Peace came to earth” ELW 285
- ♦ “Sometimes our only song is weeping” ACS 1050
- ♦ “Gentle Joseph heard a warning” ACS 1060

Pray together:

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.

LOOKING AHEAD

Refer participants to the “Looking Ahead” preview in the participant guide, and encourage them to invite someone to join them for one or more of the remaining sessions, highlighting the gift of new voices for the group.

- ✦ This is a convenient time to include any additional announcements about time, place, etc. related to next week’s session.

