

Sermon – January 1, 2023
“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 2:13-23

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that continues to transform us into Christ's image and guide us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Happy New Year! I know we already celebrated the Christian new year with a sunrise service, but I do want to wish everyone a happy and prosperous 2023. This morning's service will be a little different as we will include the covenant renewal service found in your bulletins. Before we move into that service, let me speak briefly about wise men, fleeing parents, and covenant people.

The wise men are one of the familiar aspects of Christmas. While we include them in the birth narrative and our nativity scenes, they actually arrive on the scene about two years after the appearance of the star they saw at Jesus' birth. By the time they arrive, Jesus was named and would have been somewhere between one and two years of age. Joseph and Mary were living in a house at this point and are no longer living among animals in a stable. Our wise men have seen a new star at its rising that they have followed, and it led them to Jerusalem. They come with the expectation of joining an ongoing celebration of a new king born to the current king of Israel,

Herod. They come to pay homage to a new king whose birth was heralded to them by the heavens they watch. They arrive to find out there is no newborn child in Herod's family and their arrival brings fear to Herod, the false king set up by Rome and not of David's royal line. Herod's fear is rooted in the challenge to his family's continued rule in Israel that this new king brings. The familiar story continues as Herod meets with the wise men and sends them off to find this new king and report back to him his location so that he also may pay homage to him. The star appears and leads the wise men to the house, and they worship the newborn king giving him gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Our wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and slip out of Israel before Herod can act. Herod's fear turns ugly, and he sends soldiers to kill the boys who are two years old and younger in Bethlehem. During all these moving parts, Joseph is visited in a dream by an angel and told to flee. Not to get out of town soon, but to get up now and flee in the night. Joseph obeys and Jesus is moved to Egypt, most likely to the large Jewish community that was flourishing in Alexandria, a Roman colony some 150 miles from Herod.

We are reminded that God acted through Joseph, Mary, and wise men to recognize and protect baby Jesus, but what do their actions have to do with us today? Let me remind us that one of the key Old Testament books for understanding the Bible is Exodus, the account of God's deliverance of the Hebrews from cruel bondage in Egypt and going with them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Let me suggest that what Matthew is pointing out in this part of his Gospel is that Herod is the new Pharaoh who is seeking to rule in the place of God and God's chosen ruler over His people. Jesus was safely hidden in the midst of the people of Israel and was growing and maturing until the wise men arrived and Herod is tipped off that he has a major problem. The real king, God's chosen one, has been sent to Israel with his birth being testified to by the heavens. These same wise men are able to find Jesus and worship him. Their presence speaks to a new, more universal rescue operation by God to deliver not just Israel but all people from cruel bondage, not bondage to Herod or Rome, but bondage to sin and death. Herod, like Pharaoh, in his fear and misplaced desire seeks to destroy Jesus by killing the young boys in and around Bethlehem. As God drew Moses out of the waters and preserved his life in Egypt so that Moses might be used by God to deliver his people from Pharaoh, so also God acts to move Jesus to Egypt to keep His new deliverer safe. Moses was drawn from the Nile by Pharaoh's family and raised in his house; now Jesus is sent to Egypt to be raised in safety there. Herod's attempt to set

aside God's plan for the delivery of His people and stay in the place of God as king is overcome by God's protection of Jesus through the action of faithful servants. In the right time, God will again call the deliverer of His people to come forth out of Egypt and lead His people out of the cruelest bondage, sin and death, through the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection, ascension to heaven, and his pending return in power all point to a new covenant that parallels the covenant God established through Moses with the Law.

As those who follow Jesus, we are covenant people. We have been invited into a long line of covenant people. God has continued to invite His people into covenant relationships through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and now Jesus. On this first day of the calendar year, it is fitting for us to stop our business and renew the covenant Jesus has invited us into with his life, a covenant where the Law is written on our hearts by Jesus' work and shed blood on the cross. John Wesley liked to gather with other believers on New Year's Eve and watch for the coming of the new year, and when the new year arrived, to begin the year by renewing the covenant relationship we have with God, through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. Our service today will move into a time of prayer over our relationship with our covenant friend Jesus as we seek to pause at the beginning of this new year and focus afresh on what it means to walk with Jesus as our covenant friend. We are seeking to start our year by turning our hearts fresh to Jesus, submitting once again to the covenant relationship he has established through his blood.

When Abraham entered a covenant relationship with God and prepared the halves of an animal for each party to pass through, Abraham did not pass through or cut the covenant as was the norm for the two parties. God alone passed through the animal of the covenant, thereby agreeing that if either party broke the covenant, He would become as the animal that had been sacrificed. Jesus is the one who has walked the road to the cross and by his death established a new covenant, a covenant we enter by belief in Jesus through the grace of God.

You will find in your bulletin a copy of this service that dates back many centuries. You are welcome to sit where you are as we join together to renew the covenant, or you are welcome to come to the altar and kneel there as we progress through the covenant renewal service. If you would like to stand in the back, do so, and if you would like to lift your arms to God, then feel free to do so. Let Holy Spirit lead us. Let me encourage each of us to keep our copy of this service, to sign it as a reminder of what we have agreed to as a covenant with Jesus this day. Put your copy of the covenant in a place where you will regularly see it, read it, meditate on it, and

pray the prayers found in the text throughout the year. Following the renewal of the covenant, we will enter Communion, asking Lord Jesus to come and commune with us as our covenant friend, a friend who will help us live in a manner that honors such a covenant relationship. So, let us move into a time of prayer and reflection as we come together this morning to renew again our covenant relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. The service is based on a 1663 publication by a Puritan, Richard Alleine, titled “A Vindication of Godliness in the Greater Strictness and Spirituality of It.” Wesley used a chapter from the publication titled “The Application of the Whole” in 1755 in the first celebration of the Covenant Service in Methodism. Wesley found the service rich and meaningful. Let me share some of the comments that Wesley recorded in his journal: “Many mourned before God, and many were comforted” (April 1756); “It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing” (October 1765); “It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences . . . I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backslidings” (January 1, 1775). We have been using the covenant renewal service on the first Sunday of the new calendar year for several years and as we do, it is my prayer that we will find comfort and blessings and grow in our understanding of what it means to be God’s covenant people and to have Jesus as our covenant friend. Let Holy Spirit guide us this morning as we move into the next part of the covenant renewal service as found in our bulletins.

Pray with me: Jesus, let our hearts grow throughout this year in the knowledge of what it means to be those growing in our covenant relationship with God and to walk more closely with our covenant friend Jesus into his mission to all people. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.