

## This, This ...

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, December 28, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 2:1-12](#) and [2:13-23](#)

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The first part of our reading from Matthew is kind of cute you don't listen too closely. Foreigners from the east arrive in the Jewish capital, Jerusalem, because they think a new king of the Jews has been born.

Apparently, these foreigners were somewhere between astronomers and astrologers. Like astronomers, they watched the night sky, paying attention to what they saw. Like astrologers, they thought that what they saw could be interpreted in a way that would help them understand what was going on here on earth. These skywatchers saw a star that made them think that a new Jewish king had been born, so they journeyed to Jerusalem to pay homage to this new king.

All of this is very sweet, especially if you gloss over Herod's emotional reaction. If you jump right to Herod's ignorance of his own religion, you can enjoy how Matthew is insulting him. You can take some delight in his needing to ask religious scholars where the Messiah was to be born. Unlike most of Judaism, Herod obviously wasn't concerned about the coming Messiah, or he would have known. He was doing just fine with the status quo, so he doesn't want a Messiah messing with things.

But that is why Herod is "disturbed" by the announcement the skywatchers bring. A new king means his position of comfort with the status quo is threatened. Thus, we know that, when Herod tells the visitors to report what they find in Bethlehem, he's lying when he says he wants to pay this child homage.

When the skywatchers get to Bethlehem, they find Joseph and Mary's home. They bow before the child, who might be an infant or as old as a young toddler, and present their gifts. It's the sort of thing you'd expect ambassadors to do.

And then they go home by another way. They avoid Jerusalem and Herod.

When I was a child, my grandfather would read a blended nativity story to the family on Christmas Eve. He would read Luke's version of the birth of Jesus, and then he would turn to and read these first 12 verses from the second chapter of Matthew's gospel. He would stop reading where the skywatchers go home by another way.

I think he would stop there because the next six verses tell a disturbing story. While there is no historical evidence that any of what is described in our scripture reading happened, we know the wanton disregard for the lives of children of Bethlehem was very much in keeping with the historic Herod's personality. It is believed he killed some of his own children and his wife to protect his throne. Ordering the slaughter of all the male children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem is totally in keeping with his character. Herod's order, Matthew says, is why the Holy Family must escape. Their lives are threatened, and so they run. They run to a foreign country. They run to Egypt and seek refuge there.

I can't read this story without thinking of the poem "Home" by the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire,<sup>1</sup> the poem that starts:

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well  
  
your neighbors running faster than you  
breath bloody in their throats  
the boy you went to school with  
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory  
is holding a gun bigger than his body  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.

The way Luke tells the story, Mary and Joseph were unhoused when Jesus was born. "His first vulnerable days of life [were] not [spent] in a home or a hospital but in an improvised, makeshift shelter."<sup>2</sup> The way Matthew tells the story, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were refugees. "And this was no accident, no minor detail in the Christmas story."<sup>3</sup>

Matthew begins his story with the Holy Family becoming refugees. And then the *last thing* Jesus teaches in Matthew's gospel before his arrest, is a parable. Jesus tells "a story that puts the premium not on any particular confession of faith but rather on whether we serve 'the least of these': 'feeding the hungry,' 'clothing the naked,' and also and in particular 'welcoming the stranger' (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus explicitly takes up solidarity with those who need the basics of food, clothing, and shelter in this parable, as if to say, 'If you're looking for me, you'll find me among the most vulnerable.'"<sup>4</sup>

Matthew starts his gospel by saying, "Jesus was a refugee," and he concludes his gospel by saying, "Jesus still is a refugee."

This story echoes in contemporary America so profoundly – and on so many fronts. The cruelty of the Department of Homeland Security, particularly through the actions of ICE and CBP, are an obvious place where this story echoes. If the administration truly embraced Christian values, ICE and CBP would be seeking ways to welcome and protect the people who come to this country seeking refuge. Instead, they act like Herod's troops rounding up children in Bethlehem.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., also plays the part of Herod "as he upends decades of established vaccine practices and puts infants and young children at risk."<sup>5</sup> Ignoring the

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<sup>1</sup> Warsan Shire, "Home," *Best Poems Encyclopedia*, <https://www.best-poems.net/warsan-shire/home.html> (accessed 22 December 2025).

<sup>2</sup> "Jesus Was a Refugee," *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/12/5/jesus-was-a-refugee> (posted and accessed 23 December 2025).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite, "Herod (aka RFKjr) exposes young children to death," *No Fear Religion and Politics*, <https://susanthistlethwaite.substack.com/p/herod-aka-rfk-jr-exposes-young-children> (posted and accessed 4 December 2025).

science, Sec. Kennedy has made outrageous claims “that the hepatitis B [vaccine] birth dose is a ‘likely culprit’ of autism.”<sup>6</sup> My colleague and scholar the Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite summarized it this way: “The health and well-being of children is being put at grave risk to further gin up conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact.”<sup>7</sup>

She concludes that this is happening to sow fear and distrust. “‘Sowing fear and distrust’ of the government is the point as is frankly killing off poor and underserved young children. Children from low-income families, those without health insurance or who are under-insured, as well as Native American children, have long had access to life-saving vaccines through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program, established decades ago as part of Medicaid. However, that access is under threat by RFK Jr.”<sup>8</sup>

And then there are the direct killings being perpetrated by our government. Trump’s attacks on Venezuelan boats and the homicides of the people on board or clinging to parts of shattered boats are corroding America’s soul.

Writing about the immorality of the Iraq War in 2004, Dr. Thistlethwaite wrote: “The soul of a nation, like the soul of an individual, is the root from which decency arises; it is the basis of any desire to behave according to our collectively expressed values. And we, as a nation, have lost this. We are a nation that tortures prisoners. There is a breakdown between our expressed values of democracy and human rights and the torture of Iraqis.”<sup>9</sup>

More recently, she has pointed out that “the American people have been morally damaged by this torture program as many now accept torture as sometimes justified. Astonishingly, the more you attend church, the more likely you are to believe torture can be justified. According to a Pew study of 2009, more than half of people who attend worship at least once a week, or 54 percent, said that using torture on suspected terrorists was ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ justified.

“Trump and his minions count on the destruction of the American soul (and clearly conservative Christianity is a big help with that) in order to further corrupt whatever is left of our strongest values.

“Sure. Killing survivors clinging to a boat you just bombed is just fine. If you have no soul.”<sup>10</sup>

Our Advent and Christmas worship series has been a look behind the scene, a look beyond the scene depicted in the crèches the decorate our sanctuary and living rooms. We’ve let the Christmas carol “What Child Is This?” call us to examine who we think Jesus is, this Jesus that we say we follow when we declare ourselves to be Christians. We’ve done

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite in an editorial published in *The Washington Post* in May 2004, quoted by herself, “The American Soul is Turning to Dust,” *No Fear Religion and Politics*, <https://susanthistlethwaite.substack.com/p/the-american-soul-is-turning-to-dust> (posted and accessed 6 December 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite, “The American Soul is Turning to Dust,” *No Fear Religion and Politics*, <https://susanthistlethwaite.substack.com/p/the-american-soul-is-turning-to-dust> (posted and accessed 6 December 2025).

this by looking at the reality of the violence, oppression, and injustice of society into which Jesus was born. And we've learned some things, like who this Jesus we follow is.

This, this ... This Jesus is a king unlike any earthly king or tyrant; he is the anti-emperor. This Jesus is a silenced, pleading Word. This Jesus is the child of the justice prophet Mary. This Jesus is one who is enthroned by love. This Jesus is as vulnerable and life changing as a baby. This Jesus is a refugee. This, this is the Jesus we follow.

At the last Monday Afternoon Bible Study, I asked what the good news is in this story. We agreed that there is good news any time a family escapes violence and finds refuge. And we agreed that there is good news in the wise men, the skywatchers choosing not to return to Herod, and to go home by another way. And we agreed that there is good news in the idea that we can be like the skywatchers and resist the tyrants at work today.

Poet John Roedel teaches one basic, Christian way we can resist:<sup>11</sup>

We keep allowing violence to pass as 'normal'  
But every time we choose compassion, we jam up the great war machine.  
Love is not softness.  
Love is resistance.  
And I will step into it.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> John Roedel, in a post on Facebook,  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10172863013230276&set=a.10150195026140276> (posted and accessed 15 December 2025).