

We have reached the last Sunday of 2025. Last week, we held two worship services: the Sunday Christmas service and the Wednesday Christmas Eve service. Unfortunately, the weather was rainy on both days, but we are grateful that we were able to celebrate the birth of God's Son together with many people. Moreover, it was a joyful event that newcomers attended both services, visiting our church for the first time.

Today, the Sunday following that Christmas service, the Scripture passage read during worship is Matthew 2:19 and following. Here, the events following Christmas are recorded. At the beginning of chapter 2, it was written that the wise men from the East had traveled a long way to the land of Judea, guided by a star. They met with King Herod and asked where the Christ had been born. Herod had his scholars investigate and was told it was Bethlehem in Judea. He said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him." But these words did not reflect Herod's true intentions. He had no desire whatsoever to worship the infant born in Bethlehem as a king. On the contrary, he planned to kill this child. He could not accept the idea of a new Jewish king being born who might threaten his position. The Magi found the place where Christ was born. There they encountered the infant Jesus, opened their treasure chests, presented costly gifts, and bowed down in worship before the Savior. Yet after this act of worship, the Magi were warned in a dream, "Do not return to Herod." So they returned to their own country by a different route than the one they had come. Herod's plot did not succeed. The infant was preserved under God's protection. Following this adoration of Christ by the Magi, the Gospel writer Matthew records in the passage beginning Matthew 2:13 a tragic event hardly fitting for Christmas. This was the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem ordered by King Herod. Many preachers might wish to avoid this passage, to skip over it, because this event—arguably the most brutal in the New Testament—occurred after Christmas. Yet we cannot skip over this passage. We must confront this event squarely. Why did Matthew record such a dark event in his Gospel? It is to tell us that, even before the events of Christmas, the forces of evil were at work in this world—forces that despised the news of the Savior's birth and sought to destroy the newborn infant. Matthew tells us we must not lose sight of this.

Of course, none of us gathered here in worship, having just celebrated Christ's birth last week, would ever think of killing Jesus. We believe it impossible to harbor hostility or disgust toward him. But is that truly the case? Throughout the year, wherever we are, we say, "Lord Jesus, enter my heart anytime, anywhere. And please speak your word. I will never close my ears to it or hinder it." I even think the history of the church is more a history of the struggle between our sin, which seeks to make Christ nonexistent, and God's call leading us to repent of it. This is evident even when reading Paul's letters from the time of the early church, when he chose the path of missionary work among the Gentiles and established churches through pioneering missions in Asia Minor and Greece. For example, in 1 Corinthians 4:8, we find these words: "You have become satisfied, you have become rich, you have become kings—and that too without us! And indeed, I wish you had become kings, Then we too could have reigned with you." The Corinthians had become kings without Paul and his companions. This meant they were ignoring the message of the cross, becoming arrogant and boasting about themselves. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their false claims, stating that if one could become a king by ignoring God's will, it would be too easy. Herod plotted to kill the newborn Christ. Yet in seeking to dethrone Christ, Herod and the believers of Corinth were no different. They were the same. This morning, as we offer our Christmas worship just one week after last week's service, I cannot help but wonder: Is there not within our hearts a desire to become kings in place of Christ? As I imagine the heart of Matthew, chronicling the infanticide, this thought compels me.

However, regarding this incident, I must address two points. First, how many infants were actually killed? Bethlehem was a small town, and even including the surrounding areas, its population was only 500 to 1,000 people. How many infants, and specifically male infants, could there have been among them? It is thought to have been at most around 20. Hundreds were not killed. The second point is that this massacre of the infants is not publicly recorded in any other writings besides the Gospel of Matthew. There is no mention of this event in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. At that time, throughout Palestine under Roman rule, conflicts and killings were occurring everywhere. Even if this

had been true, it might have been perceived by the Jews as “too insignificant to be newsworthy.” Joseph learned of Herod’s plot that very night the Magi departed, through an angel in a dream. Joseph set out for Egypt that same night. Why Egypt? In fact, at that time, the region with the largest Jewish population was Egypt. Egypt had the Nile River, and its lower reaches formed a fertile delta. It was possible to harvest grain sufficient to feed a large population. For example, the Egyptian city of Alexandria was home to nearly a million Jews, and it had its own Jewish quarter. A Jewish population roughly double that of Matsudo City already lived in Egypt. It was an ideal place to flee to. And so, Herod died.

After King Herod died, Joseph planned to take Mary and the infant back to Judea. However, upon hearing that Herod’s son Archelaus had succeeded his father as ruler of Judea, he abandoned the idea of returning to Bethlehem. Archelaus was known as an even more cruel king than his father. So the family moved to Nazareth in Galilee. The name Galilee comes from the Hebrew word “Galil,” meaning “circle,” which came to signify ‘periphery’ or “region.” In short, it was considered a “frontier” land from Jerusalem’s perspective. Isaiah 8 mentions “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Around the time of Jesus’ birth, Galilee was home not only to Jews but also to many Gentiles, including Greeks and Canaanites. The Jewish population is estimated to have been around 50%. It was to this frontier region that Joseph and his family moved and settled. The village of Nazareth is located about 20 kilometers southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Moreover, Nazareth is a village whose name never appears once in the Old Testament. When I traveled to Israel in 2012, I visited the town of Nazareth. I remember being surprised as I walked along the road on the hill and looked out over the entire town, seeing buildings packed all around. It felt more like a city than a village. Reading the commentary by W. Barclay, he writes that Nazareth was by no means a remote, desolate village. Rather, Barclay suggests it was a key transportation hub facing the main road connecting Syria to Egypt (known as the “Way of the Sea”). Diverse travelers passed through this village, and it was likely through daily interaction with foreigners that Jesus nurtured the word of God he was destined to proclaim.

Jesus lived in Nazareth for thirty years. He spent his childhood and youth in a good family environment under the care of his good parents, Joseph and Mary. Next, Jesus grew up fulfilling his duties as the eldest son. Joseph appears to have died young, before his children grew up. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, where the entire family would typically have attended the celebration, only Mary is mentioned. Jesus worked as a carpenter, supporting his mother Mary and his younger siblings as the pillar of the household. Jesus likely fulfilled small household duties without complaint while caring for his younger siblings. Thirdly, over thirty years, he learned what it meant to work in this world. His life was probably far from luxurious; he likely bought food and clothing frugally. His carpentry work surely involved various troubles. On a personal note, my brother is an architect who worked long years managing construction sites. He started his own business locally in his thirties. When I occasionally returned to Kagawa, I saw him dealing with work troubles, busy handling them. Jesus must have had similar experiences. Thus, he lived as an ordinary person for thirty years, experiencing what human life is like before speaking words of salvation. What this makes me think is this: where a prophet lived and what kind of life he led is very important.

As I mentioned during the Christmas Eve service, I have come to believe that where and how those who convey God’s word live is of great importance. The Gospel of John tells us that the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. I myself feel it is vital to know this town of Matsudo, where our church stands, more deeply, to become more familiar with it, and to become a church rooted in this community. From late November through December, two local groups applied to use our church building. Both shared heartwarming words. The young woman who played the clarinet in November said, “I feel so happy to be able to play my instrument here in this church and have everyone listen.” And the music teacher from the other day said, “My students are really looking forward to performing what they’ve learned here in this church this December.” We are truly blessed to have this church building. We should feel we owe it to God to make the most of this advantage. Jesus lived in Nazareth, loved the town of Nazareth, and spent His days there until His public ministry began. We too are moved to desire to be those who proclaim the Gospel of Christ, loving this town of Matsudo and the towns of the Higashi-Katsushika region.

I pray for you.