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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

## Teacher Helps

### Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

## Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

### Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

## You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

## WATCHFULNESS

*Matthew 24:36-44**Bible Background***Signs of the End**

Our passage begins with Jesus foretelling the fall of the temple of Jerusalem (Mt 24:1-2).

The temple was the center of Israel's religious life. Its fall would shake the core of the people of God, just as it did in 587 BC when the Babylonians destroyed it and shipped Israel's best and brightest into exile. Foretelling the temple's destruction would have grabbed the attention of Jesus' listeners, both his followers and his foes.

The disciples are therefore concerned about this prediction. They ask for further details. Jesus answers with a caution: "Beware that no one leads you astray" (Mt 24:4). He goes on to describe conflicts, earthquakes, famines, and persecutions (vv. 7-10). Jesus describes the coming of the Son of Man with language that echoes the prophets. Using the example of the fig tree unfurling its leaves for summer, Jesus tells the disciples that they will know that the Son of Man is near when these things take place (vv. 32-35). Then he reassures them that his words "will not pass away" (v. 35).

**As in the Days of Noah**

Jesus states that "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 36). The signs he described can be

trusted to indicate that the time is near. But only God knows the exact timing. Not even Jesus knows, but he trusts the Father with the timing of his return. In so doing, he provides a model for the disciples to follow.

Others, however, will not even notice what is going on. The persecutions, suffering of others, and false prophets that preface his return will be ignored by most people, just as the people of Noah's day did not notice the destructive downward spiral of life around them. The chaos and corruption they had created was so familiar, the violence so normal, that they did not register how far they had fallen from God's intentions for humanity (see Gen 6:5-11). Their attention was not on God or God's workings in the world.

But Noah listened to God's warning of coming destruction and obeyed God's instructions for building an ark that would house his family and two of every animal (Gen 6:18-21).

No one else was paying attention. When the flood came, it took them by surprise. They had been focused on the daily routines of living: "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" (Mt 24:38). Having distanced themselves from God, they had no idea of God's growing displeasure with their violence and corruption. Invested only in their daily wants and needs, they never heard what God had to say.

Jesus says the coming of the Son of Man will be like that: a total surprise to those who are not watching, listening to, and living in relationship with God.

### **One Will Be Taken, One Will Be Left**

Jesus gives the image of two people together, with one taken and one remaining (vv. 40-41). The first two are in the field; the second are two women grinding meal together.

Is this an image of “the rapture,” with the true believers removed from earth to be with Jesus? Probably not. Following Jesus’ parallel between the flood and the coming of the Son of Man, being “swept away” is not a positive image. Today’s verses more likely suggest that the ones who disappear are being taken away for judgment, not for reunion with Jesus (Witherington).

Others, however, hold that the ones who are “taken” are “being gathered into the saved community” at the end of the world, “just as some were taken into the ark” (Boring, 446).

Both interpretations uphold Jesus’ primary point: no one knows the day or the hour, and we will all be surprised when Christ comes again. We can watch for the signs, pay attention to God’s work in the world, study closely Jesus’ words about his return, and still the timing remains unknown and unknowable to us. Therefore, Jesus commands us to “keep awake” because we do not and cannot know when he will come back (Mt 24:42). He calls us to live “awake” to God, watching and listening and living out who we are as God’s people every day, every hour.

Jesus then compares his return to the coming of a thief who breaks into a house (vv. 43-44). Clearly, Jesus is not a thief who comes to steal, but he does come to “break into” our everyday world. And he does so on his own timetable—just as a thief would.

The homeowner who knows when the thief is coming would keep watch at the appropriate time and prevent a break-in. Likewise, followers who knew the exact

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

*Introduction:* Jesus’ return has captured the imagination of his followers from the beginning. Throughout history, some Christians have become focused on the details of his return, perhaps at the expense of what he actually said about it. Jesus says we cannot and should not know the timing of his return. Rather, we can trust God’s timing and give up our desire for control.

- I. Jesus teaches about the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:36-42).
  - A. He asserts that no one knows the day or hour (v. 36).
    1. Neither the angels of heaven nor the Son.
    2. But only the Father.
  - B. He compares his return to the days of Noah (v. 37).
  - C. Before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark (v. 38).
  - D. They knew nothing until the flood swept them away. The coming of the Son of Man will be like that (v. 39).
  - E. Jesus states that people will experience his return differently.
    1. Two will be in the field, one taken and one left (v. 40).
    2. Two women will be grinding meal together, one taken and one left (v. 41).
  - F. Therefore “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (v. 42).
- II. Jesus compares his coming to that of a thief in the night (24:43-44).
  - A. If the homeowner had known what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and prevented the break-in (v. 43).
  - B. “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (v. 44).

time of Christ's return might be tempted to do as they wished until that moment. They would not necessarily live faithfully, but would wait until close to the time of his return to get "ready" (v. 44). Instead of securing their homes and getting them in order, they might neglect their responsibilities. Instead of living watchfully, they might ignore the kingdom until the last possible moment.

Jesus emphasizes that knowing the time of his return would not be good for us. If we knew, we would not be about God's work on earth. Rather, we would simply wait around for Christ's return. There is no shortcut to faithfulness, he reminds us. Keep living faithfully because the Son of Man is coming when we don't expect him (v. 44).

We can't outsmart God. Hundreds of end-times enthusiasts have tried to predict Christ's return to no avail. As they spin their wheels with timetables and reams of calculations, their daily faithfulness often falls by the wayside.

## A Way to Begin

*The first Sunday of Advent traditionally focuses on the second coming of Christ. In church history, the first coming (or "advent") and the second went together theologically. It made sense for the anticipated celebration of Jesus' first coming to include contemplation of his second coming. In modern church life, this connection may not be as readily apparent. The two advents may sound quite different: the first a quiet, reflective birth in Bethlehem, the second a dramatic upheaval. **The two advents may be more strongly connected than we realize, however.***

### ○ **The Second Coming**

Distribute copies of "The Second Coming" (p. 28) Have participants read the explanatory paragraphs and jot down their answers to the questions provided.

#### **Question**

- Why do you think the second coming of Jesus has become such a focus for some Christians today?

### ○ **Signs**

Whether in biblical times or modern life, humans like to ask God for signs: to help us make a decision, to make sure we are on the right path, or even to show that God is real and active in our lives.

This desire for signs is what gave rise to the discussion about Jesus' return in Matthew 24. The disciples ask Jesus, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the *sign* of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt 24:3).

In Matthew 24–25, Jesus explains all he can to them. There will be signs, but

as humans, we will differ on how to interpret them. Some people see these signs in the suffering around the world now. Others don't. Some people spend their energy looking for these signs, while others do not feel that need.

#### **Questions**

- Why do you think humans ask for signs from God?
- Have you ever asked God for a sign? What happened?
- How would you respond to someone asking if you thought present sufferings were a sign of Jesus' return?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

After talking about signs of the end, Jesus clarifies that no one knows the day or the hour of the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:36). There will indeed be signs, but the exact timing remains unknown. The second coming will be a complete surprise to many. Many people will be so self-absorbed that they will miss every sign, unable to see God at work or hear what God is saying. **Help participants grasp the surprising nature of Christ's return.**

## ○ **Blizzard of Busyness**

Read Matthew 24:36-44. The image of people “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” shows humanity absorbed in the daily doings of life, especially those dealing with physical needs and wants: food, drink, companionship, and family. These are all good gifts God has given us for our enjoyment as well as our survival. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with them at all.

What is wrong is our fixation on them at the expense of our relationship with God. Every good gift can become a challenge when we are too absorbed by it. In today's world, we would need to add all the accoutrements of technology to this list. We are easily distracted in this life not simply by food, drink, and relationships, but also by TV, cell phones, and work. Jesus warns against allowing these gifts of life to become so distracting that we lose our closeness with God.

### **Questions**

- What distracts you the most?
- When do you find yourself the most absorbed by daily living?
- How do you pull away from these daily things and focus on God?
- What do these distractions reveal about our readiness for Christ's coming? What do they reveal about our readiness to celebrate Christmas?

## ○ **“One of These Things Is Not Like the Other”**

The children's show *Sesame Street* features a song called “One of These Things.” The point of the song is to figure out which object does not belong in the group: the one cat among three dogs or the blue square among three red circles.

Read Matthew 24:36-44. Note the contrasting pairs of workers in verses 40-41. It is not clear which member of the pair belongs to God until one is taken and one is left. Their outer lives may look similar, but their orientations to God are different.

### **Questions**

- There is nothing intrinsically wrong with “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage” (v. 38). What is Jesus' point in comparing the time before the end with the days of Noah?
- Read Genesis 6:5-11. How does this passage shed light on Jesus' comparison?
- How does this comparison help us understand the imagery of one being taken and the other being left?
- What is your emotional reaction to this imagery?
- Where do you find grace and hope in this passage?

# C A Way to End

*Jesus ends by urging us to keep awake since we do not know when the Lord is coming. Indeed, it would not be good for us to know the day and the hour of his return. If a homeowner knew when the thief would break in, he wouldn't be vigilant. He might become lax up until the hour of crisis. **By contrast, Christians are called to live prepared, awake to God in a nurturing, attentive relationship.***

## ○ **Good News**

Discuss: How is Christ's return good news for you? For the world?

## ○ **You are NOT the Boss**

The best news of the passage may be that we are not the boss, we don't have to be, and aren't even supposed to be. You and I do not *need* to know the day or the hour of Jesus' return and we don't *have* to know it, either. Not even Jesus knows the timing of his return—and he appears to be fine with that! Like Jesus, we can leave the details and timing to the Father.

With all the responsibility and stress people deal with in today's world, it should be good news that there is something we do not have to have figured out. Christ's return is a God-sized responsibility. Let's let God be the boss.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving that God knows the day and time of Christ's return. Ask for help in trusting God with all our fears, questions, and concerns about the second coming.

## ○ **The Gift of Watchfulness**

Deadlines can provide a helpful way to organize our lives and our work. We know when something is happening and we prepare for it along the way, working up to the time when everything is due. But Jesus refuses to give us a deadline for his return. In fact, he doesn't even have it to give, because God has not given it to him.

We know Christ will return but we don't know when. This, too, is good news. We don't have to race toward a finish line or feel the pressure of a deadline looming over us.

Jesus calls us to live watchfully, paying attention to God, our lives, and the world. This is such good news! Instead of focusing on some day in the future, we get to focus on the *now*: this day, this person, this moment.

## Resources

M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction and Notes," *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1993).

Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 2005).

Ben Witherington, "Lectionary Gospel Commentary," *Working Preacher*, 5 December 2010 <[www.working-preacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=12/5/2010](http://www.working-preacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=12/5/2010)>.

## 2

## REPENTANCE

*Matthew 3:1-12***Bible Background****Introduction**

John the Baptist first appears on the heels of Jesus' flight to Egypt and return to Israel (Mt 2:13-18). This story parallels the Old Testament account of the exodus. Matthew thus connects Jesus' beginnings with Israel's history, making clear that Jesus is the son of David, the Messiah, and God's own Son (Johnson, 178-80).

This connection to the Old Testament continues in chapter 3 with the introduction of John the Baptist. The stage is now set for the adult ministry of Jesus. The first person on the scene is John, who fulfills the pattern of the untamed Old Testament prophets through whom God spoke to Israel. Like those prophets of old, John preaches repentance, a call to return to God and live a life that reflects God's ways.

**A Prophet of Repentance**

John captures the spirit of an Old Testament prophet with his "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist" (Mt 3:4). His diet is locusts and honey, the food of the wilderness, of those outside of the establishment. Later in Matthew, Jesus specifically links John with Elijah (Mt 11:7-19), whose return was associated with the coming of the Messiah (see Mal 4:5-6).

Josephus, a prominent first-century Jewish historian, mentions John the Baptist as a leader of a Jewish sect. He also records John's death at the hands of Herod (Johnson, 88). John the Baptist had his own followers, who came into the wilderness to hear his preaching and receive his baptism (Mt 3:5-6). According to Matthew, John even garnered the attention of the Pharisees and Sadducees, two groups of the temple leadership who were not generally fans of one another (v. 7).

A Jewish historian like Josephus might not link John and Jesus together, but the early church certainly did. For them, John was not merely the leader of another sectarian group within Judaism—he was the Elijah figure proclaiming the way of the Lord. They understood that John did not simply proclaim an unnamed, future messiah, but specifically *Jesus*: born in Bethlehem, sent off to Egypt, and raised in Nazareth, as Matthew reminds us. John proclaims not just that the Messiah *will come*, but that "the kingdom of heaven *has come near*" (3:2). It is already happening; Jesus is already here.

The prophets of old foretold this Messiah. Now John is here in their stead, fulfilling the words of Isaiah. His is the "voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; see also Jn 1:23). The preparation John proclaims centers on repentance. The

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

Greek word for “repentance” is *metanoia*, which denotes not just a sense of guilt, but a turning away from a past way of life and inauguration of a new one.

John baptized those who came to him as a symbol of their repentance and preparation for the arrival of the Messiah (v. 11). Repentance involves a change of heart, mind, and life. John’s baptism reflects the washing away of the old ways, making space for the new.

This is why John is so disgusted to see the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious establishment, bent on preserving the status quo, coming for baptism (v. 7). He calls them “vipers,” poisonous snakes, a name that echoes the tempting serpent in the creation story. The implication is that John sees the Pharisees and Sadducees as “predatory, poisonous false teachers who pervert the people” (Boring, 157). There is no evidence of repentance in their lives, no “fruit worthy of repentance” (v. 8).

Even more pointedly, John warns them that relying on their blood ties to Abraham will not make them part of the kingdom of God or remove their need for repentance (Mt 3:9). Like the prophets of old, John urges the religious establishment to remember why God chose and covenanted with Abraham originally: that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Taking that “chosenness” for granted and straying from the covenant with God distances the people from their original call and purpose—and requires repentance and a return to God.

### Judgment and Change

John underscores this warning by adding a note of urgency: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (v. 10). Simply being planted in the right orchard is not enough; God wants a life that bears God’s fruit. John has come to offer this call to repentance, change, and fruitfulness in preparation for the Messiah.

*Introduction:* John the Baptist is a larger-than-life character, reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. He is the one who has come to “prepare the way of the Lord,” as Isaiah wrote (Isa 40:3). John is the messenger heralding the coming of the Messiah, whose kingdom has come near (Mt 3:2). The main preparation for the kingdom is repentance, which involves a change of heart, mind, and life that makes room for the new things God is doing. The kingdom has come, John proclaims, and all are invited into the changes that the kingdom will bring.

- I. John appears in the wilderness of Judea (Mt 3:1-6).
  - A. John calls people to repent, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (vv. 2-3).
  - B. John wears camel’s hair clothing and eats locusts and wild honey (v. 4).
  - C. Many came to hear him preach and receive his baptism (vv. 5-6).
- II. John reacts to the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 3:7-10).
  - A. They come for John’s baptism (v. 7).
    1. John calls them a “brood of vipers.”
    2. He calls them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”
  - B. He warns them not to claim ties to Abraham as their salvation (vv. 8-9), since God can raise up children of Abraham even from stones.
  - C. Fruitless trees will be cut down and burned (v. 10).
- III. John differentiates between himself and the Messiah (Mt 3:11-12).
  - A. He contrasts his own baptism with water with the Messiah’s baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire (v. 11).
  - B. He warns that the Messiah will separate the wheat from the chaff (v. 12).

John clearly differentiates himself from this Messiah. He contrasts his baptism of repentance and preparation with the coming baptism of “the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11). The one who is coming after John is more powerful than him and will enact the judgment to come. John borrows an agricultural metaphor for this judgment: the separation of wheat and chaff on the threshing floor. The “winnowing fork” (v. 12) was an instrument used to toss harvested grain into the air so that the useless chaff would blow away. John’s message is clear: the Messiah comes to turn our mixed-up world all around, to change us “from the inside out,” making a “clean sweep” of our lives (Peterson, 1521).

Now is the time to repent, John tells his listeners, so we will be more prepared when the Messiah comes. Now is the time for the kind of change that really matters. With the Messiah on the way, his winnowing fork in hand, change is in the air. John heralds that change and urges us to lean into it and toward the One who came to change, heal, and save us.

## A Way to Begin

**A** John jolts the people with his message of wrath to come and the need for repentance. He preaches that the kingdom has come near—not just that it is coming, but that it is already here, suggesting that the Messiah is also here.

*There is deep urgency to John’s preaching, the same kind of urgency heard in the prophets of the Old Testament as they tried to jolt their listeners into repentance and a return to God.*

***How can believers today respond to such a fiery, divisive figure?***

### ○ **Prophetic Preaching: Necessary Roughness?**

Some people tend to be fascinated by fiery preaching. Many of us read Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in history or English class. Edwards preached hundreds of sermons in his life about many different aspects of the faith, but those sermons didn’t make it into our literature and history books.

There’s something about fiery, urgent preaching that can jar us out of our complacency. If we are drifting along, assuming everything is fine, this kind of preaching forces us to rethink our relationship with God and others.

- What kind of preaching did you grow up hearing? How did it affect you?
- What kind of preaching most speaks to you now?
- How has this changed for you, if at all?

### ○ **Don’t Kill the Messenger**

John the Baptist announced that the kingdom was finally at hand, the harbinger of what was supposed to be good news. Israel had waited a long time for this kingdom. Now it was at their doorstep—or they were at its doorstep. Even the Pharisees and Sadducees came to hear John and be baptized by him. Nobody wanted to kill this messenger—yet.

### **Questions**

- Why do you think the people were so ready to hear John’s message?
- Have you ever felt especially ready to hear God’s word, as if the time was right for a new thing to begin? What was that like?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

John's message is simple and clear, beginning with, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Mt 3:2). True repentance is not centered on guilt. Guilt is merely a catalyst that alerts us that something is wrong and needs to be confessed and turned away from. **Repentance is about new life: turning away from the old and turning toward the new.**

## ○ Necessary Preparation

Read Matthew 3:1-12. John focuses on preparation. His role is to herald the kingdom's coming and prepare the people to enter it. Entering this new kingdom will be difficult, however, if the people are bogged down by old, unhelpful patterns and ways of understanding the world.

No one expects the people to be perfectly sinless in order to enter the kingdom; that's not the point. The point is to be *ready* to enter it, letting go of the old and preparing to embrace the new.

### Questions

- What helps you prepare to encounter God?
- How much of your time is spent in preparation for other commitments? How much time is spent on Sunday morning preparing your heart for worship?
- Do you feel ready to let go of the old and embrace the new? Why or why not?
- What do you think led so many people to seek out John and be baptized? What made his difficult message so appealing?
- Why does John react as he does to the Pharisees and Sadducees? What in John's words to them suggests that they are *not* prepared for the kingdom?

## ○ Watch Out for Vipers!

Read Matthew 3:1-12. John saves his harshest critique for the members of the religious establishment. The Pharisees and Sadducees were powerful interest groups in Jewish life. Although often in opposition to each other, they both come to be a part of what was happening in the wilderness.

John demands true repentance even of them. He refuses to baptize them without evidence of repentance. John's baptism marks the beginning of a new life and a new perspective. He suspects the Pharisees and Sadducees are not about to change anything. Until he sees "good fruit" coming from their lives, he won't have anything to do with them.

### Questions

- Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees come out to hear John and receive his baptism?
- Have you ever heard or felt a call to change, but not quite felt ready to embrace it? Why do you think this was?
- Shouldn't John have shown more "pastoral sensitivity" in welcoming the Pharisees and Sadducees? How might things have been different if he had taken a less demanding stance?
- How are grace and forgiveness related to the call to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (v. 8)?

# C A Way to End

John's urgency may make us uncomfortable as we enter Advent. If anything, many of us may want to slow down, unplug from urgency, and relax to the gentle strains of "Silent Night." **But perhaps we can hear John's message as an invitation to change, the kind of change that gets rid of the deadwood and invites new growth. Deadwood doesn't bless us, after all. It has served its purpose and is now just in the way. Getting rid of it takes some effort and the right tools, but God is right there, ready to help us.**

## ○ **The Gift of Change**

There is a saying that "a change is as good as a vacation." Maybe that's a bit of an overstatement, but change is certainly good for the soul. John doesn't talk about change for the sake of change. There's another old saying that addresses that folly: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But that's just it. John is talking about what's broke, what doesn't work anymore, what used to fit and now doesn't. If we've ever cleaned out our closet or garage and gotten rid of what doesn't bless us anymore, then we have a taste of the gift of repentance. Distribute copies of "The Gift of Change" (p. 29). Have participants answer the questions provided. As time permits, allow volunteers to share some of what they have written about what they want to change during this Advent season.

## ○ **Hurry Up and Change!**

Sometimes change happens quickly. Some people stop smoking cold turkey or lose fifteen pounds in a month. Most of the time, though, change comes slowly. If you've ever gotten a bad haircut and waited for it to grow out, you know the feeling.

Discuss the process of change.

## **Questions**

- When has change happened quickly for you? What was that like? Did it last?
- When have you experienced a long-term change? What was that like?
- How is your life different from a year ago, or five years, or twenty years? How many of these changes happened gradually? How many happened abruptly?

End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the changes God has seen us through.

## **Resources**

M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction and Notes," *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1993).

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Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 2005).

## 3

## EXPECTANCY

*Matthew 11:2-11***Bible Background****A Fiery Prophet**

Matthew first mentions John the Baptist's imprisonment in 4:12. The reason for his arrest, however, is not made clear until the account of his beheading in Matthew 14:1-12. Always the prophet, John had been speaking against Herod Antipas's marriage to his brother Philip's ex-wife, Herodias. The law of Moses prohibited sexual relations between such close relatives (Lev 18:1-20).

Antipas tries to silence John by arresting him. From his prison cell, John hears of what Jesus has been doing: casting out demons, healing, and preaching—and sending out disciples in his name to heal and preach as well (chs. 8–10).

These, however, are deeds of compassion, not the “fiery judgment” John anticipated (Mt 3:1-12). John proclaimed a baptism of repentance in preparation for the “wrath to come” (Mt 3:7). He painted a picture of the Messiah with a “winnowing fork” in hand (Mt 3:7-12), ready to separate the wheat from the chaff. Like the prophets before him, John uses striking language to convey the urgency of calling Israel back to God.

**A Crisis of Confidence**

But so far, at least by chapter 11, Jesus is decidedly *not* doing what John expected.

At his baptism, John seemed to understand Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 3:14-15). He probably expected Jesus to come up out of the water and immediately begin the work of winnowing. But that didn't happen—at least not the way John expected.

Between the Jordan and prison, John apparently had a crisis of confidence. Jesus' teaching, preaching, casting out demons, and healing were apparently not enough winnowing for John. For John, this healing and teaching ministry was not the Messiah's work. It was too much compassion and not enough judgment. He didn't recognize this Messiah and began to wonder if he should be looking for another, one who would do what John proclaimed.

Therefore, John sends his disciples straight to Jesus to ask: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Mt 11:3). John is not necessarily rejecting Jesus. But his questioning reveals that Jesus isn't behaving much like the Messiah John was expecting.

Jesus does not answer John's question directly. Instead, he points to what John's disciples have heard and seen. He asks them to be his witnesses, using the same “go and tell” command that he will later give to the women at the empty tomb (Mt 28: 10). Jesus thus puts the burden of discernment back on John and his disciples. They have to decide for themselves

who Jesus is. They have to untangle their own expectations from the reality of what they hear and see.

In describing his own deeds, Jesus uses the words of Isaiah, the same prophet who foretold John as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (Mt 3:3; see Isa 40:3). The work of Jesus is the same work Isaiah foretold: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead raised, and the poor receiving good news (Isa 35:5-6, 42:18; Boring, 266). The same prophet who foretold John as the one crying out “prepare the way of the Lord” also foretold the work of the Messiah as being the deeds of compassion Jesus was doing.

Jesus ends his response to John’s disciples by saying, “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Mt 11:6). The Greek word used is *skandalizein*, from which comes our word “scandalize.” The word may also be translated “stumble over” (Boring, 267). Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who don’t stumble over his failure to conform to popular Messianic expectations (Boring, 267). This comment subtly suggests that John is stumbling over this very thing. John’s mind is so closed to any other understanding of the Messiah that he has trouble seeing Jesus for who he truly is—even though John himself proclaimed and recognized him at the Jordan.

### **A Prophet and More Than a Prophet**

Jesus then turns to the crowds to remind them that they followed John not to see a “reed shaken by the wind” or someone from the “royal palaces” in “soft robes” (vv. 7-8). Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John, used the image of a reed on his coins (Duling, 1877). John was the antithesis of weakness, frivolity, and the easy royal life. The people came not to see the status-quo kingdom, but the coming of God’s kingdom.

The people came out to see John and hear his fiery preaching. Jesus points to John as the one the prophet Malachi

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

*Introduction:* John the Baptist was imprisoned for speaking out against Herod Antipas’s marriage to Herodias. While in prison, John hears of Jesus’ deeds of compassion. But this was not the fire-breathing Messiah John had expected. He sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is truly the Messiah. Jesus asks them to witness to the miracles they have seen and affirms John’s role as the forerunner of the Messiah.

- I. John sends his disciples to Jesus (Mt 11:2-6).
  - A. John is in prison because he spoke out against Herod’s marriage (Mt 14:3-4).
  - B. John’s disciples ask whether Jesus is truly “the one who is to come” (v. 3).
  - C. Jesus answers them (vv. 4-5).
    1. “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (v. 4).
    2. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (v. 5).
    3. “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (v. 6).
- II. Jesus addresses the crowds about John (Mt 11:7-11).
  - A. He asks, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” (v. 7).
    1. John was decidedly not a “reed shaken by the wind” (v. 7).
    2. Neither was he dressed in soft robes nor living in royal palaces (v. 8).
  - B. John is a prophet, and more than a prophet (v. 9); God’s messenger as promised in Malachi 3:1 (v. 10).
  - C. John is the greatest among those born of women, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is (v. 11).

described: “My messenger...who will prepare your way before you” (Mt 11:10; see Mal 3:1). Malachi points to John and John to Jesus. By making this link, Jesus affirms John’s vital role in the Messiah’s coming. He confirms that John is who the crowds think he is. The underlying statement is that *Jesus* is also who they think he is: the Messiah long foretold.

Jesus then shifts from the subject of John and what has been foretold to the reality of the now and the kingdom of God. The issue is not who John is (Boring, 268). The issue is participation in the kingdom of God—which does not rise or fall with John, though he has been a great leader. John may join the kingdom or not; that’s up to him.

Jesus returns the focus to where it should be: the kingdom of God. No matter how great, how faithful, or how influential John has been, “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (v. 11). John is the one whom the prophets foretold to prepare the way. Jesus is the one for whom the way is prepared. Joining him in the kingdom of God is what matters.

## A Way to Begin

**A**ncient Judaism had many contradictory expectations of what the Messiah would be like, but many focused on the need to execute God’s judgment against the unrighteous. John borrowed from the prophets’ fiery images of a “wrath to come” (Mt 3:7), a time of judgment when the Messiah would separate the wheat and chaff, and burn the chaff in “unquenchable fire” (Mt 3:12). **Even though John was a genuine prophet, his expectations threatened to get in the way of celebrating the unconventional ministry of Jesus.**

### ○ **Expectation**

One of the best parts of a big event or long-awaited trip is the anticipation. Israel had been under the thumb of various foreign powers for centuries. They no longer ruled themselves, their taxes went to support an occupying government, and their national identity as the people of God felt compromised. The hope of a deliverer grew stronger and more vivid through the years. They expected the Messiah to be a national hero destined to change history and purify Israel.

### **Questions**

- What do you do when you’re anticipating a big coming event? Do you ever let the anticipation get the best of you? How so?
- How does anticipation enhance our experience or enjoyment of an event?
- What happens when our expectations are not met?

### ○ **Point of View**

John the Baptist recalls images of the prophet Elijah. That earlier prophet was noted for his zeal at a time when Israel had turned away from God (1 Kings 19:14).

In the same spirit, John preached to prepare the way for the Lord and speak out against wrongdoing. Is it any wonder that this brave, zealous prophet anticipated a Messiah who would act like him?

### **Questions**

- How does our point of view affect what we expect?
- When have you experienced something that was different from—and better than—what you were expecting?
- How might a blind beggar’s anticipated Messiah differ from John’s?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*Jesus had been healing, teaching, preaching, and casting out demons. This was not, however, the sort of messianic ministry John expected! John's disciples ask if Jesus is the one or if they should wait for someone else. Jesus' reply puts the ball back in their court: they must tell John what they have witnessed—and "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (v. 6). Jesus is who he is; his works and preaching are that of the Messiah, just not the one John expected.*

## ○ **A Change of Heart**

Review the thrust of John's message in Matthew 3:1-12, as discussed in last week's lesson. Ask participants to suggest words or phrases that describe John's ministry or outlook.

Read Matthew 11:2-11. Explain that John was arrested in Matthew 4:12. Since then, with his own ministry curtailed, John seems to have suffered a crisis of confidence. Jesus doesn't seem to be behaving the way John expected him to! Therefore, he sends his disciples to learn more.

### **Questions**

- How do you respond when things don't work out the way you had hoped?
- How do we decide when the situation needs to change to meet our needs and when we need to change our expectations?
- How did Jesus' review of his ministry in verses 4-6 answer John's doubts?

Invite volunteers to read Isaiah 29:18-19, 35:5-6, and 61:1-2. Why did Jesus describe his ministry as he did?

### **Questions**

- Why did Jesus take the time to praise John in verses 7-11?
- What did Jesus mean by saying that the least in the kingdom was greater than John (v. 11)? How does this saying put John in perspective for his own disciples?

## ○ **Scandalized!**

Read Matthew 11:2-11. Using information from the Bible Background section, summarize John's ministry and imprisonment. Jesus answered John's doubts by pointing to how his ministry fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies (see Isa 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1-2).

### **Questions**

- Why might this sort of ministry pose a stumbling block to someone like John?
- When have you been "offended" or "stumbled over" someone else's behavior or choices?
- How often is the other person a stumbling block to us—and how often are our expectations of that other person the real stumbling block?
- Later, Jesus says, "Woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes" (Mt 18:7). Could John's moment of doubt have become a stumbling block to others? Explain.

# C A Way to End

John's disciples have seen in Jesus miracles that Isaiah proclaimed the Messiah would do. The work Jesus is doing is the work of the Messiah, just as the work John did preparing the way was the work of the messenger (see Isa 40:3). John can either put aside his expectations and join in the kingdom as Jesus reveals it or he can hang on to his own messianic demands and keep waiting. **If we insist on God giving us the Messiah we expect, we will miss out on all God is doing through Jesus.**

## ○ **Expectancy versus Expectation**

There seems to be a difference between expectancy and expectation. Expectancy implies there is room for mystery and wonder. Expectation sounds impatient and demanding. John went beyond expectancy about the Messiah and had moved into expectation. John expected that the Messiah would be and act a certain way. It was an expectation that Jesus could only disappoint.

Distribute copies of "Expectancy versus Expectation" (p. 30). Have participants answer the questions provided. As time permits, discuss the answers of any who are willing to share.

End with a time of prayer that emphasizes our expectancy of celebrating Christ's birth once again and letting God shape that for us.

## ○ **Witness**

Jesus does not try to convince John's disciples that he is the Messiah. Instead, he directs them to what they have witnessed of his ministry. While John has been imprisoned, his disciples have seen Jesus do these things. They are witnesses to the kingdom Jesus brings. Ask the following questions.

## Questions

- How have you seen God at work in the world and in your life recently?
- Where have you seen healing?
- Where have you seen compassion that changes lives?

Close with thanksgiving for all God has done—and still does—in Christ.

## Resources

M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction and Notes," *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1993).

Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 2005).

## WONDER

*Matthew 1:18-25**Bible Background***Joseph's Dream**

Matthew leads into the birth narrative with a genealogy connecting Jesus the Messiah to David and Abraham (ch. 1). With the genealogy, Matthew underscores that Jesus is connected directly to David and Abraham through *Joseph*. If Joseph does not accept Jesus as his own child, then the link is broken. His role is essential in connecting Jesus to the leaders of Israel.

Early listeners would have understood that young girls were generally pledged to marry at puberty (Duling, 1860). Matthew tells us that Mary “had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). That’s quite a bit of story to summarize in one sentence!

Then Matthew quickly turns to Joseph—and stays there. It is not clear how the news of Mary’s pregnancy came to Joseph, although we first hear that he plans to “dismiss her” (v. 19). Because of the seriousness of the ancient Jewish betrothal system, Mary would have been thought an adulterer, which was a serious charge, especially for a woman.

Since Joseph is a righteous man, however, he plans to dismiss Mary “quietly.” According to the letter of the law, if Mary had committed adultery, Joseph had the right to have her executed (Deut 22:13-21; Duling, 1860). The law,

in fact, calls for her to be stoned to death by the men of her town “because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father’s house” (Deut 22:21).

But Joseph is not one to follow the letter of the law in all cases. He is not looking for vengeance because his honor has been violated. He has no plans to humiliate or harm Mary. Instead, out of compassion and kindness, he plans to keep the issue private and break off his engagement to Mary discreetly. This is a major clue to the depth of Joseph’s “righteousness”: he goes beyond the letter of the law and acts from a heart trained toward tenderness and mercy, not vengeance.

But God then calls Joseph to an even deeper understanding of God’s ways. Like the patriarch Joseph in Egypt, a dream changes everything. Just as Joseph resolves to divorce Mary, an angel appears in a dream and confirms Mary’s story. The angel calls him “Joseph, son of David,” emphasizing the importance of Joseph’s ancestry, and tells him not to be afraid (v. 20). This same command was given to Mary in Luke 1:30. The parallel usage of this phrase connects both Mary and Joseph in God’s plan. It also reminds us that although what is happening is alarming, God is at work.

The angel reveals that Mary’s child has divine origins: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife,” the angel says,

“for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). This, of course, changes everything. Mary is *not* guilty of adultery. On the contrary, God has created new life within her, a holy child.

The angel commands Joseph to name the child (v. 21), thereby claiming the child as part of his own line, a line that stretched back to King David and the patriarchs (Boring, 134). Naming the child implies Joseph’s full acceptance of him. The child will receive a name that was common and yet heavy with meaning. “Jesus” is a Greek rendering of Joshua. It means “God saves,” or “God helps” (Boring, 134–35).

In the Old Testament Joshua led God’s people into the promised land (Num 27:12-23; Deut 31:7-23; Josh 1:5-9). Jesus receives a similar authority to lead. By his name, he anticipates fulfilling the role of Israel’s former kings and leaders. Like Moses and Joshua, Jesus will “save his people”—but from more than earthly slavery or oppression. Jesus will “save his people from their sins” (v. 21).

Taken another way, the popularity of the name “Jesus” around the turn of the era underscores the child’s connection with humanity: he is one of us. At the same time, his name is given by an angel, thus revealing the child’s divine origins.

As he does throughout his Gospel, Matthew asserts that what is happening fulfills “what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (v. 22). Matthew uses this same formula fourteen times to highlight that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Duling, 1860). This first quotation is from Isaiah 7:14, connecting Mary with the “virgin” and the child, “Emmanuel,” with Jesus (v. 23). Emmanuel means “God is with us” and Jesus/Joshua means “God helps” or “God saves.” Both names find their fulfillment in Jesus and his divine work in the world.

### Joseph Obeys

Joseph wakes from the dream with a changed heart. He obeys the angel and

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

*Introduction:* Because of Matthew’s focus on linking Jesus to the Old Testament prophets and King David, Joseph is the story’s central character in Matthew’s birth narrative. Joseph’s acceptance of Mary’s child as his own links Jesus with the patriarchs and kings of Israel and makes him a legitimate heir to David’s throne. Not only that, but Jesus needed an earthly father to provide for and protect him. Joseph’s obedience is key to the baby’s safe birth and childhood.

- I. Jesus’ birth narrative begins (Mt 1:18-23).
  - A. Mary, engaged to Joseph, is found to be “with child from the Holy Spirit” (v. 18).
  - B. Her fiancé, Joseph, plans to divorce her quietly. He is a righteous man who does not want to disgrace her publicly (v. 19).
  - C. An angel appears to him in a dream (vv. 20-21).
    1. The angel tells him not to fear taking Mary as his wife.
    2. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
    3. The child is to be named Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (v. 21).
  - D. The birth of Jesus fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy (vv. 22-23).
    1. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son.
    2. They shall call him Emmanuel, “God is with us” (v. 23).
- II. Joseph obeys (Mt 1:24-25).
  - A. Joseph awakes and does what the angel commanded by taking Mary as his wife (v. 24).
  - B. He has no marital relations with her during her pregnancy (v. 25).
  - C. As instructed, he names the child Jesus (v. 25).

takes Mary as his wife, accepting his new role as Jesus’ adoptive father.

Joseph cements this role as he names the child (v. 25). Both the name itself and the one doing the naming hold important roles in Scripture (Boring, 135). By giving the child his name, Joseph claims him as his own. His obedience also ensures that Jesus acquires a faithful, compassionate earthly father.

Joseph takes his obedience one step further. He does not have marital relations with Mary until after she has the baby (v. 25). The angel said nothing about that issue. Joseph's choice reaffirms Matthew's point that he could not have been Jesus' biological father. It also reaffirms Joseph's righteousness. Just as he chose not to expose Mary as an "adulteress," he also chooses to respect what God is doing by keeping his distance.

## A Way to Begin

*The first seventeen verses of Matthew list the generations from Abraham to Jesus. Matthew values Israel's past immensely. He works hard to show that Jesus is the culmination of all that has gone before him. Thus, he emphasizes the link between Israel's story and Joseph's response to the news that his bride-to-be is pregnant—and not by him. The beginning of Jesus' life story is essential to how the story unfolds.*

### ○ In the Beginning

Tell a story about the birth of your children or perhaps about your own birth (for example, when the parents found out they were having a baby, how they told family and friends, how long Mom was in labor, etc).

How things begin often informs how they continue. Often these prebirth and birth stories become part of our family's lore and may be seen as indicators of the child's future personality or temperament.

At the beginning of Jesus' life, even before he was born, what happens points toward a remarkable future as God prepares the right family to nurture him.

### Questions

- What do you know about your own beginnings?
- What was your family's response to your pending arrival?
- If you have children, have they been interested in their prebirth and birth stories? Why do you think this is so?

### ○ A Risky Start

Faithfulness to one's spouse (or spouse-to-be) was highly valued in Jesus' culture. This was especially true for women, for whom the consequence of infidelity could be death. According to Deuteronomy 22:13-21, female premarital sex was an offense punishable by public stoning.

There was a huge risk in Mary becoming pregnant before marriage. She could have been executed publicly or rejected by her fiancé and her family.

### Questions

- How does our society handle such situations today? How are we different from and similar to first-century Galilee?
- Why might God have risked the unborn Messiah's future in this way? How does this risk inform the rest of Jesus' story?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Matthew does not tell us how Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy, only that "she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (1:18). It is not clear if Joseph knew the crucial part "from the Holy Spirit" or if he only knew about the pregnancy. But Joseph was a "righteous man" (v. 19) who didn't want to humiliate Mary publicly. Refusing to marry Mary would leave Jesus without an earthly father and provider and without a claim to David's throne. It would also leave Mary without a protector in a society with few social safety nets for unwed mothers. **This situation severely tests Joseph's righteousness.** His willingness to trust and obey God is crucial.*

## ○ The Letter of the Law

Read Matthew 1:18-25. Explain that Joseph would have been within his rights to accuse Mary publicly of adultery and even to demand her execution (see Deut 22:13-21). But he has a deeper sense of righteousness than simply following the letter of the law.

Explore what it means to be "righteous." More than mere outward observance, true righteousness involves living in right relationship with God and neighbor.

## Questions

- How does Joseph's plan to dismiss Mary quietly reflect righteousness?
- What struggles do you have in discerning what is "righteous"? How many of these struggles involve the difference between upholding the letter of the law and doing what is truly just and compassionate for the people involved?
- How do we decide when relationships must trump impersonal rules?
- What might this episode tell us about the sort of father Joseph will be to Jesus?
- How does this story help us to appreciate the wonder of Christ's birth?

## ○ Angels and Dreams

Read Matthew 1:18-25. In verse 20, the angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife "for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." The angel further instructs him to name the baby boy Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21).

By claiming Jesus as his own, Joseph ensures that Jesus is of David's royal line and that he will have the earthly father he needs.

## Questions

- Although Mary encountered the angel directly (Lk 1), Joseph only hears the angel in a dream. Why do you think God dealt differently with Joseph than with Mary?
- Are dreams always random, or can they bring important truths to our awareness? Explain.
- Have you ever had a dream that felt important or significant? If so, what actions did you take based on this dream?
- How might we respond if a friend told us God spoke to them in a dream?
- How can Christians reclaim a sense of wonder or mystery about the ways God works in the world?

# C A Way to End

Joseph not only took his angelic dream seriously, but he obeyed the angel's instructions exactly. After the child is born, he names the child Jesus, meaning "God saves." This child will truly live out his name. **But he could not have done so if his earthly father had not been faithful, ready to listen, and willing to obey.**

## ○ **Trust and Obey...and Wonder?**

List on the board the details of this story that reveal Joseph's righteousness. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- When have you had to trust and obey God, even when the reasons why weren't clear? How did you feel in the midst of that experience?
- What did you learn from that time? How did God use what was happening then to help you get to where you needed to be?

In times of struggle, when we are called to trust and obey but can't yet see the outcome, we can take a cue from Joseph and step into the wonder of what God is doing. Chances are, we will later be able to look back and marvel at what God has done.

Conclude the lesson with prayers of thanksgiving for God's wondrous ways.

## ○ **Wondering**

Joseph had no idea exactly what God was up to. All he could do was play his part—which was absolutely essential—and trust that God would take care of the rest. And God did. Later, Joseph could look back and see how God had worked. But at the moment, all he could do was trust and wonder at what God was doing.

Discuss: Is taking time simply to wonder a lost art today? Why or why not?

Suggest that trust stretches our spiritual lives as we participate with God and wonder stretches our imaginations as we consider what God can do. What other connections do participants see between trust and wonder?

Distribute copies of "Wondering" (p. 31). Invite participants to share their responses to the quotations on wonder provided.

Close by listening to a recording of the carol "I Wonder as I Wander."

### **Resources**

M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction and Notes," *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1993).

Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 2005).

## 5

## COMPASSION

*Matthew 2:13-23**Bible Background***The Flight to Egypt**

King Herod's deceptive dealings with the magi in Matthew 2:1-12 provide a framework for today's text. The "wise men from the East" asked Herod about a "child...born king of the Jews" whose star they had observed (Mt 2:1-2). Herod was "frightened" by this news, perceiving this child a threat to his power (v. 3).

Herod concocts a plan, turning the magi into his unwitting spies. But they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Instead, they go home by a different route (v. 12).

Today's text begins with Joseph's second angelic visitation. (The first was when he was told to proceed with his marriage to Mary.) The angel tells him, "Flee to Egypt...for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (v. 13). Joseph obeys immediately. That night, he takes his wife and child on their journey to Egypt and stays there until he receives word of Herod's death (v. 14).

Matthew links this action to the words of Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (v. 15). In the book of Hosea, the "son" refers to the people of Israel freed from slavery and led by Moses out of Egypt into the wilderness and freedom (Duling, 1861). Hosea recounts the story of God's love and faithfulness to Israel and of Israel's unfaithfulness in

return. Matthew applies Hosea's words to Jesus, whom he frames as the fulfillment of Israel, the one who partners God's faithfulness with obedience (Hare, 16). This time, when called out of Egypt, the "son" will respond faithfully.

**The Slaughter of the Innocents**

With young Jesus safe in Egypt, Matthew turns our attention back to Herod. Herod is "infuriated" when he realizes the magi have tricked him (v. 16). His reaction is swift and ruthless. Using information the wise men gave him about when the star arose, he orders the death of "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (v. 16).

Herod's massacre of Bethlehem's infants and toddlers is reminiscent of Pharaoh's massacre of all Israelite male children in Exodus 1:22. Afraid of the growing Israelite population, Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to murder every baby boy they delivered.

But the midwives "feared God" (Ex 1:17) and refused to obey Pharaoh's genocidal order. This early example of civil disobedience allowed Moses to be born safely. But Pharaoh retaliated by commanding all of Egypt to become his assassins: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (Ex 1:22).

In Matthew, Herod does not want to obliterate the entire people of Israel. But like Pharaoh, he wants to hang on to his

power. When his scheme to find the one child fails, he reacts with murderous fury. Like Pharaoh, he will not stop because his first plan failed. But just as God worked through the midwives so that Moses could be born safely, God works through a dream so that Jesus can grow up safely.

This level of violence from Herod would not have surprised Matthew's first readers (Boring, 146). During his reign, Herod committed numerous atrocities. Violence was his primary tool to achieve his goals. Matthew interprets this particular atrocity in light of Jeremiah's description of Rachel, a matriarch of Israel, "weeping for her children...they are no more" (Mt 2:18; see Jer 31:15). Jeremiah's words refer to the Babylonian exile, when Rachel's children, the people of Israel, lost their promised land and were forced into exile. Ramah was the place where Jeremiah said goodbye to the exiles as they were taken to Babylon (Hare, 16).

Rachel's lamentation occurs in Jeremiah, a chapter that also speaks of hope (see Jer 31:31-34). Matthew's use of the Jeremiah quotation honors the slaughtered children of Bethlehem with deep lament. At the same time, it hints that there is reason still for hope. Herod will not have the last word.

### **The Return to Nazareth**

Herod soon dies, and an angel speaks again to Joseph in a dream, telling him it is safe to come home. Joseph responds obediently, just as he did when fleeing to Egypt (v. 21). Again, the repetition of the same language emphasizes Joseph's righteous character and his willingness to trust and obey God. Instead of returning home to Bethlehem, however, they settle in Nazareth of Galilee.

Herod's son Archelaus now rules in Judea (v. 22). Therefore, he has jurisdiction over Bethlehem. After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided among his three sons, Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus. Of the three, Archelaus was the least

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

*Introduction:* King Herod heard of the "child...born king of the Jews" (Mt 2:2) from the magi—and wanted him dead. Matthew describes the escape to Egypt, Herod's murderous response, and the return to Nazareth. Here we see the world's early violent resistance to Jesus and God's mighty acts to ensure that the world will have its Savior.

- I. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escape to Egypt (Mt 2:13-15).
  - A. After the magi leave, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him of Herod's plot and commanding him to go to Egypt (v. 13).
  - B. Joseph obeys, and they remain in Egypt until Herod dies (vv. 14-15).
  - C. This fulfilled the words of Hosea 1:11, depicting Jesus as a sort of renewed Israel.
- II. Herod responds when he realizes his plan has been thwarted (Mt 2:16-18).
  - A. He realizes the magi have tricked him by not bringing word of the child's location (v. 16).
  - B. Infuriated, he orders the death of the children of Bethlehem two years old and younger (v. 16).
  - C. Jeremiah 31:15 interprets the massacre theologically (vv. 17-18).
- III. Joseph and his family return to Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23).
  - A. An angel tells Joseph of Herod's death (vv. 19-20).
  - B. Joseph takes his family back to the land of Israel (v. 21).
  - C. Joseph hears that Archelaus, Herod's son, is ruling in Judea. Fearing what Archelaus might do, Joseph settles in Nazareth (v. 22).
  - D. Matthew says this fulfills the prophets: "He will be called a Nazorean" (v. 23).

competent and most like his father in his brutal temperament. Joseph feared Herod's son might prove to be as ruthless as his father. So God again warns Joseph of the danger in a dream, and the family settles instead in Galilee, in a town called Nazareth (vv. 22-23).

Matthew's third reference to the prophets, "He will be called a Nazorean" (v. 23), is found nowhere else in Scripture. Some scholars think Matthew is using a play on words, as "Nazorean" sounds like *netzer*, the Hebrew word for "branch." In passages such as Isaiah 11:1, this word is used in the sense of "the messianic 'Branch' of David's line" (Duling, 1861). Furthermore, the word "Nazorean" is verbally similar (although unrelated) to "nazirites," holy men described in Numbers 6:1-21 who were set aside for God's purposes, as evidenced by their strict lifestyle (Boring, 147; Hare, 17). With this word-play, Matthew points to Jesus as one specially set apart to be the Branch of David's line, even though he was raised in small, backwater Nazareth.

In this passage, God has worked mightily to protect this child, the hope of Israel and all people, against the evil in the world. Horrific violence has been done to try to prevent the Messiah's rise, resulting in overwhelming grief and loss. But this Messiah will rise—and rise again: to heal us, comfort us, and save us.

## A Way to Begin

*Today's text sends us to Egypt and back. As in the book of Genesis, Egypt provides safety for God's people when King Herod plans to kill Jesus. In order for Joseph and Mary to protect their precious child, they have to leave everything they know. Help participants empathize with Joseph and Mary's dilemma.*

### ○ **Danger!**

Read Matthew 2:13-15. Becoming a parent often brings a life-changing sense of responsibility—and vulnerability—beyond what we could have imagined before we held that baby in our arms. Those without children may experience that same sense of urgent responsibility when charged with the care of nieces and nephews or other young children. Knowing that our child is in danger puts us on full alert. God has wired us to be attuned to anything that threatens our child.

### **Questions**

- How did you feel the first time you held your baby? (Or a sibling's/friend's baby?)
- What do you experience as a parent or caregiver when your child is in danger?
- When have you felt the need to protect a young child? What did you do?

### ○ **Christmas and Suffering**

Today's text is one we are tempted to skip over. It doesn't feel very "Christmassy" to talk about a cruel ruler and the deaths of innocent children. Yet if the world weren't broken, we wouldn't need a Savior.

Arrange to play the song "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure. Discuss ways Christmas can remind us of the reality of human suffering: Salvation Army bell-ringers, Operation Christmas Child, Angel Trees, special offerings for world missions, etc. The needs are present all year long, but they receive special attention at Christmas.

### **Question**

- What do we miss by celebrating Christmas detached from the suffering around us?

# **B** A Way to Explore Scripture

*Herod's desperate quest to retain power resulted in the deaths of innocent children and unspeakable grief for every affected family. Guide participants to read this difficult text in light of Jesus' coming and the fullness of the Christmas story.*

## ○ **Herod's Fury**

Read Matthew 2:13-23. If you did not use the "Danger!" option under "A Way to Begin," briefly summarize how God preserved Jesus by sending his family to Egypt.

Distribute copies of "Herod's Fury" (p. 32). Or simply share the information provided. Discuss Herod's possible motives for lashing out against a child "born...king of the Jews" (Mt 2:2). As discussed in the Bible Background section, note the similarities and differences between Herod's assault on the children of Bethlehem and Pharaoh's assault on the babies of Egypt in Exodus 1. Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- Why does Herod go to such lengths to try to kill Jesus?
- When have you observed people in power willing to ruin the lives of others for their own gain?
- What details of the text reveal Matthew's outlook on this tragic episode?
- How does Herod's fury foreshadow the world's violent response to the adult Jesus?

## ○ **A Mother's Grief**

Read Matthew 2:13-23. Acknowledge the fact that this is a difficult story to read, especially when we are wrapped up in the joy of the Christmas season. Invite parents in your group to share the emotions they feel upon reading of the "slaughter of the innocents." Ask the following questions.

### **Questions**

- How do people respond when faced with images of suffering? Do we respond differently when that suffering is the result of someone's abuse of power?
- Why is it important to remember the "slaughter of the innocents"?
- We can't do anything for those devastated families from long ago, but how might we minister to people today who are in the throes of deep suffering?
- How might this story point us toward the true meaning of Christmas?

## ○ **The Escape to Egypt**

Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for others to live. In that light, it seems backward for innocent children to die on account of Jesus. Discuss how Christians might deal with this uncomfortable paradox.

### **Questions**

- How might Joseph and Mary have felt upon hearing of the "slaughter of the innocents"?
- How might the families of Bethlehem have felt upon hearing of the crucifixion of Jesus?

## C A Way to End

Matthew may appear at first not to address the full horror of Herod's crime, but in comparing Herod's massacre with the lowest point in Israel's story—the exile—he makes clear the deep wound Herod's actions created. But Herod's massacre is not the last word; God makes a way to save Jesus from Herod's wrath. **And God makes a way for suffering people today.**

### ○ **Endangered Children**

Many of us have fond childhood memories of Christmas. We cherish the warmth of home, the anticipation of special meals, visiting cousins to play with, or receiving that longed-for gift. As adults, we help create similar experiences for the children in our families.

Invite participants to share what they hope the children in their families will remember about Christmases past.

Joseph and Mary tried to create a safe, warm home for Jesus. The parents of Bethlehem shared this same desire to keep their children safe and well nurtured. But Herod's fear and violence disrupted those plans.

Discuss areas of the world where children are in danger from forces beyond their—or their parents'—control. List these on the board. Close with prayer for children who live in dangerous surroundings.

### ○ **Turning Away**

Sometimes we may feel so overwhelmed by the enormity of a tragedy that we turn away from it. We see no way to help or make a difference in the lives of those affected, so we shut down and return to our comparably safe and secure lives. Or we are compassionate at first, praying and helping where we can, but then experience “compassion fatigue” when the suffering seems relentless and no improvement is in sight.

No one could fix what Herod did to the children and families of Bethlehem. No one can fix what is wrong in Haiti or Sudan or the Middle East. Those are God-sized issues—and yet God invites us into the process. Through prayer and giving, mission trips and supplies, we can be a part of the healing. Even today, the class can join together in prayer for children in unstable areas.

Challenge participants to decide to make a difference in someone's life this week by showing compassion in Jesus' name.

### Resources

M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1995).

Dennis C. Duling, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction and Notes,” *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1993).

Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 2005).











# HEROD'S FURY

But if Herod was successful politically, his personal life was an unmitigated disaster. As Josephus succinctly (and mildly!) put it: In revenge for his public prosperity, fortune visited Herod with troubles at home (BJ 1.22.1). Troubles indeed! Herod had no fewer than ten wives and at least fifteen children, ten of whom were sons. His house was filled with plots, lies, counterplots, and machinations of all descriptions as each child tried to discredit his rivals and ingratiate himself to Herod. Such was Herod's temperament that he had no scruples against killing his own children, and he did so on several occasions. Thus it was said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

Source: John C. H. Laughlin, Herod, Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 376.