

December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Matthew 2:13-15 “Free the Fire” (First Sunday After Advent)

Whenever we’re faced with something that demands our attention—whether it’s a project to complete or a problem to solve—the first question is usually, “How do I approach this?” Do I start with what’s easiest and build momentum, or tackle the hardest part first and get it out of the way? Show of hands – How many of you work easiest to hardest? Hardest to easiest? See, people argue both sides, and the truth is, either can work. It depends on the situation. That’s why I live by the motto, “Plan ahead, be flexible.” Planning gives us direction. Flexibility gives us room to adapt when things don’t go according to plan—which, let’s be real, they often don’t. Too much rigidity leads to frustration; too much improvisation can lead to constantly *reacting* to things instead of responding and leading. I’ve known people who thrive on improvisation. One colleague in ministry once told me that she rarely plans ahead because, as she put it, “Desperation breeds ingenuity.” While I admire that, it’s not how I’m wired. I need a plan—but I’ve also learned to be able to hold that plan loosely. But there are moments when the plan doesn’t just change—it disappears. That’s exactly where Joseph and Mary find themselves in our scripture this morning.

Christmas is not over yet. Yes, we celebrated Christmas this past week, but Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that the story doesn’t end at the manger. The glow of peace and promise is still there—but the world around it remains dangerous. Almost immediately after Jesus is born, fear enters the story. Herod the Great—Rome’s puppet king, whose job was to keep order in Judea at any cost—hears rumors of a child who will be called “King of the Jews.” And like so many rulers before and after him, Herod responds the way threatened power often does-- with fear that turns into violence.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are suddenly in danger. There is no time to plan. No strategy meeting. No careful discernment process. An angel tells Joseph in a dream: *Get up. Take the child and his mother. Flee.* And they do. But -- they must cross a border to survive. They leave behind familiarity, stability, and whatever sense of safety they thought they had. They become refugees in an unfamiliar land. This is not a sentimental Christmas story. This is a story about fear, power, and survival. You might notice that Matthew is doing something very intentional here. This story echoes another story that his Jewish audience would know very well—the story of Moses. A tyrant threatened by a child. Orders for children to be killed. A family forced to flee. A return from danger when the tyrant dies.

Matthew wants us to see that Jesus' story begins where so many other liberation stories begin: not with triumph, but with fear and movement. And that matters, because our theme for Advent this year is *Hope is greater than fear*. But that doesn't mean fear disappears. We often think fear is something we have to silence, suppress, or overcome. But Matthew doesn't "spiritualize" fear away. What did Katy used to call it? He doesn't "sanitize" it. Fear is very real in this story. It is justified. And, this is important—it becomes a *catalyst*. Herod's fear is the fear of losing power. And that fear turns into control, cruelty, and destruction.

Joseph's fear is different. Joseph is afraid *for* someone, not *of* someone. He is afraid for a child. For his family. For their future. And that fear moves him—not toward violence, but toward protection. Fear doesn't freeze him. It propels him. ***Sometimes fear is the fire that turns love into action.*** Matthew also refuses to pretend that the danger simply goes away. When the family returns from Egypt, Herod is dead—but his son Archelaus is on the throne. He's just as unstable and just as dangerous as his father. Once again, Joseph is warned in a dream, and once again, he reroutes. Safety requires attentiveness. Survival requires flexibility.

The Christmas story does not promise us a world without Herods.

But it does promise us Emmanuel—God with us—even when we are running. God’s presence does not remove the threat, but it transforms how we respond to it. That’s why fear can sometimes be a holy thing—especially when it reveals what we love, what we value, and who we are willing to protect. Fear shows us where our compassion lives. And this is where the story turns toward us.

Last week, I invited you to think about a story or a headline you’ve encountered recently that stirred fear—either in you or in others. Fear can make us want to withdraw. And honestly, I get that. There are days when living off the grid in the mountains sounds like a great idea to me. Fear can also turn into anger. That makes sense too—especially when what’s at stake is justice, dignity, or safety. But Matthew invites us to ask a deeper question: *What does fear move us toward?*

There are people all around us living with fear every day. Some fear seeking help because doing so might put them in greater danger. Some fear losing their livelihood. Some fear just being *visible*. Others live with the constant uncertainty of violence—whether close to home or far away. These fears are not irrational. They are grounded in lived experience. And if you are in a season of peace right now—truly, that’s a gift. No guilt trips here. But that peace gives us capacity. It gives us room to listen. It allows us to practice empathy. I just want pause and remind you that empathy is a virtue. It’s a *good* thing. It may not always be in vogue, but it *is* one of Jesus’ core values. Just in case you’ve heard otherwise. Also, empathy is *not* pity. Empathy is the spiritual practice of placing ourselves close enough to another person’s fear that *it begins to matter to us*. Jesus called this *mercy*, which is also a virtue, just in case you’ve heard otherwise. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus says, “Be merciful just as your God is merciful.” When we practice empathy, fear stops being something we push away. It becomes energy. And when that energy is grounded in love, it can become fierce compassion, courageous solidarity, and unexpected hospitality. After all, this story is about a family fleeing violence and finding shelter in a foreign land. Matthew doesn’t tell us how Egypt received them—but we know this much: they

were not abandoned. God did not leave them alone. And God does not leave us alone either.

So this Christmas season, maybe the question isn't just, *What do I fear?* But also: *Whose fear am I being asked to notice? Whose fear am I being called to protect?*

May our fear—like Joseph's—become movement.

May it become care.

May it become protection.

And may it become the fire that turns love into action.