

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

## SERMON

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I’d like to begin with a poem I found on the Internet - it is a take on the ever-popular poem, ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas.

*‘Twas the day after Christmas  
When all through the place  
There were arguments and depression -  
Even mom had a long face.*

*The stockings hung empty;  
And the house was a mess. The clothes didn’t fit;  
Dad was under great stress.*

*The family was irritable;  
The children were not pleased.  
The instructions for the swing set  
Were written in Chinese.*

*The bells no longer jingled;  
And no carolers came around.  
The sink was stacked with dishes;  
And the tree was turning brown.*

*The stores were full of people  
Returning things that failed.  
And shoppers were discouraged;  
Earlier purchases were now on sale.*

*‘Twas the day after Christmas;  
Joy had disappeared.  
The only hope on the horizon  
Were Bowl games on New Year’s.”*

Welcome to worship on the day after Christmas. The malls may be busy today, but my guess is that most houses of worship will not need overflow seating. So I want to seize this moment to talk about the “down-side” of Christmas.

When Luke tells the story of Christmas he puts six scenes in the story, concluding with the blessing of Jesus in the temple by the old prophet Simeon. The flow from one scene to the next is so peaceful and lovely, that it almost seems as if there should be a song playing quietly in the background. There is joy in the room. When Luke tells the story it all comes to a nice conclusion.

That is not the case with Matthew. We get only twelve verses into the story before we encounter trouble. Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus are on the run trying to escape Herod’s madness. Before we can leave Bethlehem our noses are rubbed in politics and pain, blood and sorrow, jealousy and murder. Two nights ago all was calm; all was bright, angels were singing, shepherds were gathering around the baby - everything seemed to be picture perfect.

Today we hear the cry of the children and the wail of Rachel, the ancient mother of Israel who refuses to be comforted even from her grave. As we hear this very different side to the Christmas story, there is a part of us that wonders what lessons can be learned from this sobering story, this angry outburst of rage from a mad, horrible king?

During the winter of 1962, Dr. Robert Middleton was vacationing in Florida and happened to see the Christmas Day edition of the St. Petersburg Times. The thing that attracted his attention to this particular paper was its unusual format. For this one day, there were two front pages, one containing only good news about the holiday season; the other containing more serious matters of world affairs, like the rioting in the Congo and a bank robbery in Chicago. The editors explained that they were arranging the news in this fashion out of deference to “the spirit of the season.”

It was a noble sentiment. But, the way our Bibles describe the first Christmas stands in marked contrast. The Gospel writers do not tell about the birth of Christ with “two front pages.” When you turn to the New Testament there is no separation of the good news and the bad news. In fact the two are inseparably intertwined.

It has always been so. John spoke of the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. But the darkness keeps trying! Why? It has something to do with the very nature of who we are.

We humans by nature are sinful creatures - hopefully that is not a big surprise. Each of us - day in and day out - struggles between doing right and wrong. As we make decisions at work, at home, in our communities, part of what factors into our decision making process is what we know is the right thing to do and what we know is the wrong thing to do. And unfortunately we have hearts that can be selfish, mean, greedy, lustful and lazy, so our final decisions are not always right. Evil/Sin is never too far away.

Isn't it interesting that one of the more popular children's Christmas books and movies is, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*? In this wonderful Dr. Seuss story the main character is anything but kind and generous. Remember the story?

Just north of Whoville lived the Grinch, who hated Christmas - maybe his shoes were too tight, maybe his head was not screwed on right, most likely his heart was just two sizes too small. Whatever the reason, the Grinch, under the guise of Santa, steals all the presents, swipes all the decorations, and stops bells from ringing in hopes of keeping people from singing and celebrating. The joy of so many people was just too much for the Grinch.

Wherever there is hope and good will, wherever people gather in love and good cheer, evil will be nearby. We can't even get away from it in our children's stories. Even the Grinch comes to steal Christmas.

Hate is strong. Bitterness is real. Greed is rampant. Terror plays havoc with our ordered ways. All that is true. But, as we who gather here know, evil does not have the final say.

Christmas is God's eternal sign that the forces of evil will not win. It will never happen. Evil may sit for awhile on the throne, but it will not sit there forever!

That is the good news for this Sunday after Christmas. The Herods of the world may have their day, but the eternal victory belongs to Christ. And that conviction keeps us moving forward from one Christmas to the next regardless of how dark things may appear.

Do you remember the story of Pandora's Box? In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on the earth. Zeus wished to counteract the blessing of fire, which had been stolen from the gods by Prometheus and given to man. So he had Pandora created and given to Prometheus' brother. Since she was stunningly beautiful, Prometheus' brother did not object.

But Pandora brought with her a box, also a gift from Zeus. They were warned never to open it. Well, you know how that goes. Pandora's curiosity overcame her fear of what

might lurk within the beautiful little box, so she lifted the cover. Immediately innumerable plagues flew from within the box and then journeyed all over the world - plagues that afflicted the mind, the body, and the soul. In terror, Pandora tried to shut the box, but it was too late. Only one thing remained in the box - hope. Hope remained to comfort humankind in its misfortunes. It is hope that we celebrate today.

The writer of the Gospel of John knew about the importance of hope. “The light shines in the darkness,” he wrote, “and the darkness has not overcome it.” And we are recipients of that hope.

I like John C. Maxwell's analogy of a certain kind of fish that has four eyes. These odd-looking creatures are native to the equatorial waters of the western Atlantic region. The technical name for them is anableps, meaning “those that look upward.”

These distinct fish are called that because of their unusual eye structure. Unique among vertebrates, the anableps have two-tiered eyes, with the upper and lower halves of each eyeball operating independently and having separate cornea and irises.

The upper eyes protrude above the surface of the water and enable the anableps to search for food and to spot enemies in the air. The lower eyes remain focused in the water, functioning in the usual fish-like fashion. Thus, in rather ordinary ways these four-eyed fish navigate with ease in the waters of their environment.”

But, in addition, they enjoy a remarkable capacity to participate in the “higher” world above their primary environment. They see in both worlds.

That is a good description of the followers of the Christ child of Bethlehem. We see in two worlds. We see the world of the present reality where Herod so often sits upon the throne. But we also see the world that is yet to come - a world where the Lord of Life, of Truth, of Justice, of Peace, and of Love reigns forever and ever.

The 1962 Christmas edition of the *St. Petersburg Times* had at least one thing right - there is something special, beautiful, almost magical about this time of year. But what makes it so special is not that God, for a brief moment, comes into our world and makes it all warm and fuzzy and then leaves, making us have to deal with all the bad and evil alone. The amazing thing about Christmas is that God came into our world and stayed!

So do not despair. We live in a difficult world - a sinful world - but Jesus has come into world and his star still shines as a reminder that God will not forget us or forsake us. Amen. © 2010