

# What Child Is This?

December 28, 2025

My daughter got sick yesterday. She's fine today. It was one of those quick, 24-hour bugs that come and go almost as suddenly as they arrive.

But her being sick meant canceled plans—some things we were disappointed to miss, others we were secretly relieved to postpone. It meant a long bath and cuddles on the couch. It meant ordering in watermelon popsicles and binge-watching the “Home Alone” movies, which—if you’ve ever watched them with a five-year-old—come with an infinite number of theological questions.

And the entire time I was tending to her—checking her temperature, brushing hair out of her face, sitting close enough that she could fall asleep reassured of my presence—today’s Gospel kept looping through my head:

“Now after the Magi 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... for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’”

(Matthew 2:13)

When a child is sick, the only worry they—or their parents—should have is whether the popsicle is going to stay down. Not whether a petty, petulant tyrant is about to upend their lives.

And that tension—that dissonance—is where today’s story lives. Because Matthew does not give us a sentimental Christmas card. Matthew gives us a frightened family, awakened in the night, fleeing across borders with a child who has already been marked for death. Matthew gives us political violence. State terror. Innocent children caught in the machinery of power.

We call this story “The Flight into Egypt,” but let’s name it plainly: this is the story of a refugee family. And it’s hard to sit with. Especially in a world like ours.

John Pavlovitz writes about a feeling many of us recognize—the sense that something is off. That despite the calendar insisting it’s Christmas, despite the lights and the music and the rituals, hundreds of thousands of families are finding no room in the inn.

“I think I’m becoming starved of peace,” he writes. And then he asks the question that refuses to let us look away: What child is this?

It so resonated when he wrote:

“I’ve sung this song for my entire life, and as a younger version of myself, I would always see a single child, born in the cold, surrounded by the smell of damp straw and animal dung. I would see one tiny, vulnerable child arriving in anonymity and soon cradled in adoration. One child whose attention my heart demanded.

“Now, when I hear those words, I see different children: Children in Gaza. Children in Ukraine. Children at our Southern border. Children afraid to go to school out of fear that their parents will have been picked up by ICE before they return home.”

What a faithful celebration of Christmas looks like is singing “What Child Is This?” now, and envisioning not just one baby in a manger, but rather seeing children in Gaza. Children in Ukraine. Children at our southern border. Children sleeping in cars, in shelters, on sidewalks. Children whose lives are shaped not by lullabies but by sirens. Not by bedtime stories but by protocols of what to do if they get off the bus and find themselves home alone.

How do we celebrate one child while so many children are being discarded? How do we sing “peace on earth” while the earth is anything but peaceful?

If we’re honest, this question doesn’t interrupt the Christmas story. It is the Christmas story. Because the Bible never pretends that God enters a calm world. God enters this one.

Isaiah says it this way: “In all their distress, God was distressed... It was no messenger or angel but God’s own presence that saved them.”

As I preached on Wednesday night, in Christmas, we celebrate that God does not remain at a distance. God does not send thoughts and prayers from afar. God shows up inside distress.

That’s what Emmanuel means. Not God above us. Not God watching from the sidelines. God with us. God inside human vulnerability. God inside a body that can be harmed, and showing us that it is precisely within that vulnerability that we will be saved.

Rev. Josh Olds reminds us that this is not the Messiah anyone ordered. People wanted strength, legitimacy, power that looked official. Instead, God arrived undocumented. Uncredentialed. Born to a teenage girl, allegedly illegitimate. Known first by shepherds no one trusted as witnesses. And then—almost immediately—on the run.

Jesus never did things “the right way,” if by “right way” we mean the way that keeps empire comfortable. God-with-us shows up among the unwanted, the vulnerable, the easily discarded. And that makes power nervous.

Which is why Herod reacts the way tyrants always do. When power feels threatened, it lashes out. When it feels insecure, it turns violent. And children pay the price.

Matthew tells us that Herod orders the slaughter of the innocents—an act of state-sponsored terror that echoes through history. And here’s the thing: Matthew is not just telling us what happened. Matthew is asking us what kind of friends of God allow this to keep happening. Because the Holy Family survives not because God magically stops Herod, but because Joseph listens. Because Mary trusts. Because they flee. Because they take the risk of survival.

Which brings us to something Rev. Anna Blaedel names so powerfully: “It is a foolish thing, and a holy thing, to love what death can touch.” To love a child in a world like this is risky. To love deeply is to make yourself vulnerable. To care is to open yourself to grief.

And yet—everything sacred begins and ends in love. God chooses to love what death can touch. God chooses to love flesh. God chooses to love children. Not in theory. In practice.

And that love is not passive. It is active. It moves. It protects. It resists despair.

Rabbi Noah Chertkoff, reflecting after the massacre at the Chaunakka service on Bondi Beach in Australia, says something that feels profoundly Christmas-shaped: the miracle is not just that the oil lasted eight days. The miracle is that someone lit the flame in the first place. That someone believed light was still worth kindling.

Friends, this is the question Christmas asks us now—not whether we feel joyful enough, but whether we are willing to keep lighting candles in a dark world. Not because darkness isn't real, but because we refuse to allow brutality to get the last word.

“What child is this?”

This child is God's refusal to abandon the world. This child is love made vulnerable. This child is divine solidarity with every child whose life is threatened by violence, neglect, or fear. And this child is also a question addressed to us.

Will we practice witness instead of distance? Will we turn heartbreak into presence? Will we love foolishly, courageously, publicly?

Christmas does not ask us to pretend everything is fine. Christmas asks us to stay. To stay awake. To stay tender. To stay committed to the long, faithful work of survival and care and justice.

The peace we long for does not arrive all at once, fully formed. It is born in small acts of love. A candle lit. A child protected. A community refusing to look away.

So maybe the most faithful thing we can say this season is not “Merry Christmas,” but this: We will not make peace with violence. We will not normalize cruelty. We will not stop loving what death can touch.

And in doing so, we join the foolish, holy work of Emmanuel—God with us. God with them. God still here, always and forever.

THIS is the thrill of hope that can inspire this weary world to rejoice. Christmas isn't over, friends. We've got work to do. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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**Isaiah 63:7-9, Matthew 2:13-23**  
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