

“The Light of Christ”

At the end of my first year in seminary, during the May Term, a group of students and alumni traveled to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. It was an amazing trip. We worshipped God with several different traditions, including Copts. We saw sites that we might have seen in documentaries, National Geographic, or on Viewmaster reels. Such as saw the pyramids, the Valley of the Kings, the Egyptian Museum, Mt. Sinai, Petra, the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Capernaum, and many of the sites where Jesus walked, preached, and taught.

One of the most interesting places we visited was the Saints Sergius and Bacchus Coptic Orthodox Church.¹ I do not think it was on the radar of anyone in the group. When we arrived in this residential neighborhood, we were ushered from our bus into a small courtyard with high walls. Rather than looking like a sacred space, it looked like a party venue. There were strings of colored lights haphazardly strung from side to side. Inside the church, the feeling was similarly chaotic. Despite the high ceiling, the space felt claustrophobic. It could have been the lack of sunlight or the dark brickwork. It could have been the strings of lights that did not illuminate so much as add confusion to the space. There was also so much that needed to be repaired.

So why were we brought to this inconspicuous, rundown, and odd church? Because the other name for this place is the Church of the Holy Family. It is called that because it was built over a cave that housed the Holy Family when they were refugees in Egypt.

The question arises, “Why was the Holy Family in Egypt to begin with?” According to the Gospel of Matthew, and only the Gospel of Matthew, the Holy Family was escaping persecution by King Herod. As Matthew tells it when the Magi were following the star to Bethlehem to see the child whose predictions would be the King of the Jews, they stopped in Jerusalem. There, they met King Herod. They told him of their prophecies. Herod got worried. Was this child king going to grow up to lead a rebellion against him and his family? There was only one way to prevent that: he would kill the child.

Herod devised a simple plan. He told the Magi that he would like to worship this new king as well. He asked them to send word when they had found the child. Of course, his real plan was to kill the boy, not worship him. After finding the boy and his family, the Magi were warned in a dream not to send a message and to go home by another way.

Joseph was also warned by an angel to get out of town. He packed up the family and headed for Egypt. Egypt may seem an odd choice, as Jordan might be closer. Matthew had his reasons. There was also a trope in the Hebrew Bible that whenever there was a famine in Israel, the people went to Egypt. It did not happen every time, but it was frequent enough that when I was teaching, it became an

¹ For more information about this church visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints_Sergius_and_Bacchus_Church

aphorism. Matthew's reason was to fulfill a prophecy from the prophet Micah.² That the savior would come up out of Egypt.

Prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures were important to Matthew. He refers to them throughout his gospel. He considered them predictions or signs that Jesus was the Messiah. They were also important to Matthew because he wanted to show that Jesus was the new Moses. Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery into the Promised Land. Therefore, Jesus would lead the people out from under the oppression of Rome. Moses came up out of Egypt, so should Jesus.

But I get ahead of the story. While in Luke, the Holy Family travels from Nazareth down to Bethlehem, Matthew has the family living in Bethlehem. Thus, their journey is down to Egypt and then to Nazareth. That fulfills the prophecy that the savior will be a Nazorean, one who is from Nazareth. When the infancy gospels of Matthew and Luke are complete, Jesus is in Nazareth.

We may get distracted by how much traveling the Magi and the Holy Family are doing, but this segment of Matthew's Gospel is about epiphanies. That is, "a moment of sudden revelation or insight."³ This passage is littered with them. The Magi, who were astrologers, not kings, had seen a star that revealed to them that a king was born. Herod receives the epiphany from the Magi that a child who would be king is born. The Magi's second epiphany was meeting the young boy. Then, the revelation in a dream that Herod had evil intent, and they should return home by a different route. These were followed by two epiphanies to Joseph. The first is to leave Bethlehem to protect his family. The second was when it was safe to return to Israel, but to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem.

These epiphanies are part of the theme of light we have been following since the first Sunday of Advent. Candles, stars, angelic messengers, and dreams all provide insight and direction for the various people in this story. These various forms of light and enlightenment lead us to the greatest light of all—the light of Christ.

The light of Christ comes into the world in the form of a child born to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Light from a star guided the Magi to him because, as a baby or toddler, his light was not shining yet; instead, it rested within him. Others around him had to receive the light so that they could care for him and adore him. It is when he becomes a man that the light will shine forth from him as he teaches, preaches, and heals. The light will appear to be defeated on the cross.

Yet, when he rises from the grave, his light shines forth even more brightly than before. His light continues to shine out into the world and the darkness, even

² Micah 5:2-3

³ Online dictionary definition 4

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The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Second Sunday of Christmas, Year A
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.
January 4, 2026

the darkness of those who claim to follow him, but do not, has not overcome it. No matter what the state of the church, the light cannot be put out. As long as there are people who know that the light of the world is love and our role, like Mary's, is to magnify the light of God to all people.