

Opening: Four Witnesses, One Gospel

Good morning, First Friends, and grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus.

Sermon Opener: Christmastide

Today is the last Sunday of 2025. Next week, we begin a new year together, with Scripture setting the pace for our church family, week by week.

So, this morning I want to do something simple, steady, and grounding. I want to bring together the things we've been learning into a single Gospel-centered message that carries us forward without drifting into tangents.

And I want to say up front: this is not an Advent sermon, because Advent is the season of preparation and waiting, and we are not waiting right now.

We are in Christmastide, the days after Christmas, when the church insists that we don't pack Jesus back into a box and move on as if nothing happened.

Some of us know that "the morning after Christmas" feeling. The wrapping paper is gone, the house is quieter, and the world starts to press back in again.

I don't have to tell you that our culture moves on fast; you know that. But we have a way to slow that down; looking at the calendar... It slows us down on purpose because discipleship requires more than a single holy day, progressive sanctification is, well, a process of growing... Growing our faith and our lives into being more like Christ. This is one of the gifts of the church calendar: it helps us stay with Jesus long enough for the good news to become a way of life.

So today, as we close 2025, I want to honor four witnesses the calendar reminds us of right after Christmas: four feast voices that keep Christmas honest and keep the Gospel central.

Here is the idea for this whole message: **Christmas is not a sentimental escape; it is God coming into the real world to save the real world, and to form a people who live the real Gospel way.**

That's why our readings today are not cute manger scenes, but **Matthew 2 and Hebrews 2**, because the Bible refuses to let Christmas become a postcard. **SHOW SLIDE: Matt & Hebrew**

- Matthew shows us a world where power can be violent and families can become refugees, and yet God is still at work.

- Hebrews shows us why Jesus can hold that kind of world: because he shares our humanity, suffers with us, and breaks the power of death from the inside.

Tangent: A brief word about the calendar

Let me teach the calendar for just a moment, not as trivia, but as discipleship.

The days after Christmas are called Christmastide, and they form a bridge between Christmas Day and Epiphany. Epiphany is where the church emphasizes Christ revealed to the nations, the Gospel going public, and the light expanding outward. And right in the middle of that bridge, the church places three ancient feasts: Stephen, John, and Holy Innocents. This placement reminds us that Christmas is remembered as courage, truth, and honest lament, not just carols and hot chocolate.

So, I want to walk through these witnesses one at a time, and I want you to notice that each one points back to Jesus. Each witness is like a facet on one diamond, and the diamond is the Gospel: *God-with-us in Christ, saving us and shaping us (progressive sanctification)*.

And each witness, Stephen, John, and the Holy Innocents, becomes a take-home response, because the Gospel **does not** just comfort us: it forms us.

Witness One: St. Stephen: Courage and Forgiveness

The first witness after Christmas is St. Stephen, remembered on December 26.

Stephen matters because he shows us what happens when the birth of Jesus becomes the life of Jesus inside a person. He is not remembered because he was fearless; he is remembered because he was filled with the Spirit and steady in the storm.

When the pressure rose and the accusations came, Stephen did what Christians have always been called to do: he witnessed to Christ. And when the violence came, Stephen's last words echoed the heart of Jesus: **forgiveness, not revenge**.

Pause with that and unpack that: Church, that is courage and that is cross-shaped.

If you ever wanted to know what “carry your cross” means, Stephen is one of the most explicit pictures of what it looks like. He teaches us that following Jesus does not always lead to safety, but it always leads to faithfulness. And he teaches us something that hits home for our relationships, our homes, and our church family: discipleship shows up most clearly **when we are wronged, and we still choose love**.

We could say it this way: the life of Jesus becomes visible when we refuse to be controlled by the chaos in the room. A steady, forgiving presence is not weakness. It is evidence that Christ is alive in you.

So, Stephen gives us a Christmastide question to carry into the new year: ***Where do I need to practice courage and forgiveness because Jesus is Lord?***

Witness Two: St. John — Truth and Tenderness

The second witness is St. John the Evangelist, remembered on December 27.

John matters because Christmas can become vague, and John refuses vagueness. He says it plainly: **the Word was with God and was God, and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.** That sentence does not exist to win a theology contest. It exists to anchor our trust in a God who comes near.

John's witness is truth, but it is truth with tenderness, because Jesus is full of grace and truth.

Church, we need both: **Truth without grace becomes harshness, and grace without truth becomes fog.**

- John teaches us to speak clearly about Jesus, but to speak in a way that sounds like Jesus. If our “truth” makes us proud, reactive, or cruel, it's not the truth of Christ; it's just our **ego baptized.**
- John also teaches us that Christian life is not built on rumor or secondhand religious hype. John says, “We have seen,” “we have heard,” “we have touched,” because the Incarnation is grounded in reality.

So, John gives us a Christmastide question to carry into the new year: ***Where do I need to speak the truth in love, with grace and clarity, because Jesus is the Word made flesh?***

Witness Three: Holy Innocents — Lament and Refuge

The third witness is the one that stops us from turning Christmas into sentiment: the feast of the Holy Innocents, remembered on December 28. Today...

This feast honors the children killed by Herod when he realized the Magi were not returning to report to him. Matthew tells us Herod ordered the death of the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.

That is not a cute Christmas detail, and the Bible does not ask us to pretend it is. Matthew even reaches for the language of Rachel weeping, because Scripture gives grief a voice instead of silencing it.

So let me say this plainly: **Holy Innocents means the church refuses denial.**

- The church looks at the wounded places of the world and says, “Jesus came here too.”
- The church looks at the vulnerable and says, “We will not spiritualize you into invisibility.”
- The church looks at grief and says, “There is room for lament in the presence of God.”

And this is where Hebrews becomes a lifeline. Jesus shared in our humanity so that by his death he might break the power of death and free those held in fear. He was made like us in every way, so he could become merciful and faithful. And because he himself suffered, he is able to help those who are suffering.

Church, this is why we can lament without losing hope.

- We lament because love tells the truth.
- We hope because Jesus has entered the darkness and the darkness has not overcome him.

So Holy Innocents gives us a Christmastide question to carry into the new year: ***Where do I need to become a refuge, through prayer, presence, protection, and practical care, because Jesus came into a world where the vulnerable are threatened?***

Witness Four: Epiphany — Light for the Nations

The fourth witness is Epiphany, the great turning point when Christmas goes public.

Epiphany emphasizes Christ revealed to the nations, symbolized so beautifully in the Magi coming from the East to worship Jesus. The Magi story matters because it tells us from the beginning: Jesus is not the private possession of one tribe, one class, or one nation. They come to worship, they bring gifts, and they bow, because the proper response to Jesus is allegiance. They also become a sign that the Gospel is already crossing boundaries before the church even understands what’s happening.

- Epiphany means the light that found you is meant to shine through you.
- Epiphany means worship becomes mission, and adoration becomes obedience.

So, Epiphany gives us a Christmastide question to carry into the new year: ***Where is Jesus sending me outward in love, because he is light for the nations?***

One Gospel Thread

Now I want you to see the thread that ties these four witnesses together.

The thread is not “be better people in 2026,” because moralism is not the Gospel.

The thread is Jesus: God-with-us, sharing our humanity, suffering with us, defeating death, and forming a people who live his way.

- Stephen shows us what happens when Jesus’ cross shapes our courage and forgiveness.
- John shows us what happens when Jesus’ Incarnation shapes our truth-telling with grace.
- Holy Innocents shows us what happens when Jesus’ presence shapes our lament and our refuge-making.
- Epiphany shows us what happens when Jesus’ kingship shapes our outward mission to the world.

So here is the take-home response.... Simple enough to remember:

- Because Jesus came, we will forgive, as Stephen did.
- Because Jesus came, we will speak truth with love like John.
- Because Jesus came, we will lament honestly and become **a safe place** for the hurting and the vulnerable.
- Because Jesus came, we will go outward in love like Epiphany declares.

And let me add the line I want everyone to hear, because it’s true:

Come as you are, Christmas is God coming to people who don’t have it all together.

Bridge into the next year

Next week, we begin a new series, and that is not just a preaching plan; it is a formation plan.

We are choosing, together, to let the life of Jesus shape the life of this church one week at a time.

We are choosing a steady path, because holiness is not a burst of emotion; holiness is a faithful walk with Jesus.

So, as we step into the new year, bring your real life under the real Lordship of Jesus.

Bring your conflicts under his forgiveness.

Bring your confusion under his truth and grace.

Bring your grief under his presence and help.

Bring your comfort under his mission to the nations.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray.

Jesus, Word made flesh, thank you for coming into the real world and not leaving us alone in it.

Make us a Stephen people—courageous and forgiving when the pressure rises.

Make us a John people—truthful and tender, full of grace and truth in how we speak and .

Make us a refuge people—able to lament honestly, protect the vulnerable, and carry one another's burdens.

Make us an Epiphany people—light-bearers who go outward in love because you are Lord for the whole world.

And as we step into the new year and the lectionary journey, keep our eyes fixed on you.

Amen.