

January 25, Epiphany 3A (Isaiah 9:1–4; Matthew 4:12–23)

Remembering the past enlightens our understanding of the present. We have been here before.

by [Christine Chakoian](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

Published on January 18, 2026

It is faithful to live in the present, in “the day that the Lord has made” (Ps. 118:24). But that does not mean forgetting the past. Remembering it provides for a more faithful life now—even when the past is painful to recall.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” George Santayana wrote in 1905. It is crushing for me, as a descendent of survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide, to know that just 25 years later the Holocaust began—fueled in part by history’s ephemerality. In 1939, Adolf Hitler confirmed the cost of forgetting when he wrote of his attack on Poland, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”

Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes how important it is to remember history, beginning with its 17-verse homage to Jesus’ genealogy. Scholars make clear that this rehearsal of history anchors Jesus’ messianic identity. But its purpose does not end there. Throughout the gospel, Matthew grounds the present in the prophetic past—as in this passage, when Jesus’ ministry is launched.

When Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, he goes immediately to Zebulun and Naphtali, intentional locations that Matthew suggests fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy from this week’s first reading: “But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”

This specific history informs the present, as scholar Anna Case-Winters notes:

In its original context, this text refers to the situation of oppression after 722 BCE when Assyria occupied Zebulun and Naphtali (in the region of Galilee) and exiled the leadership. Here, Matthew transposes the text from one situation of imperial aggression to another as Israel now suffers under Rome’s imperial control.

But, she goes on, Isaiah also reminds us that the current reality of imperial control is not the last word:

The promise of the passages that follow (e.g., Isa. 11:4–7) is that the “rod of the oppressor” will be broken “through one who will embody God’s reign of justice, righteousness, and peace.”

Remembering the past enlightens our understanding of the present. We have been here before.

What’s more, rehearsing the challenging events of the past presses us not to give in to futility. Instead, we are urged to look forward to the fulfillment of God’s vision for the world.

Matthew confirms that calling. Jesus' first words are a call not to accommodate injustices but to commit to the reign of God: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And Jesus' first actions embody what the reign of God looks like.

Instead of cozying up to the politically powerful, the educated elite, the wealthy, or the religious purists, Jesus reaches out to fishermen. Case-Winters cites Athenaeus, who says they are "on a par with moneylenders and are socially despised as greedy thieves." Moreover, the empire's demand on them is oppressive:

Not only must they supply enough fish for themselves and the empire, they must pay tax upon what they retain and tax upon any transport of fish. Indeed, Peter, Andrew, James, and John lead an economically and socially precarious existence.

What would it look like for our generation to learn from the past? What would it tell us about the present? Even more, how would it lead us to change the trajectory of the future, looking to the kingdom of heaven—the template of God's will? Maybe it starts where Jesus did: recognizing the lowest ranking in society, both for the value they bring and the burden they carry.

Every age has its oppressive rulers. In the eighth century BCE, Assyria appropriated Galilee and exiled Jewish leadership. In Jesus' age, Rome levied heavy taxes on the poor and required submissive fealty from local religious and political leaders. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Genghis Khan swept through Asia and parts of Europe to establish the Mongol Empire, slaughtering countless people along the way. In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire slaughtered 1.5 million Armenians. In the mid-20th century, Hitler claimed to glory in speed and brutality, threatened to execute anyone who dared to criticize him, was indifferent to, in his own words, "what a weak Western European civilization" would say about him, and "issued the command to send to death mercilessly and without compassion men, women, and children."

We cannot sit by and watch oppression unfold. We cannot claim not to remember what happens when rulers bask in their power, seek vengeance on those who dare to criticize them, care less about what those they deem weak have to say, and revel in destroying whole peoples with speed and brutality. In ICE raids that arbitrarily target people of color, pull children away from their parents' arms, and hide the seized in unknown locations. In commands from the executive branch that overstep limits on the use of force in American cities, upend Congress's power to appropriate funds, and threaten the judiciary's authority.

It is our time to repent. It is our time to reject futility, to seek the kingdom of God here and now. It is time to remember the past and avoid repeating it.