The wise men are on the altar today—that's not their usual place, especially this early in the season. They are here because today we are talking about part of the Christmas story that we don't talk about much—a part that usually isn't represented anywhere in the nativity and they are the closest stand-in we have. Today we are talking about Herod and keeping Herod in Christmas. Let us pray:

In a nearby state, there is a church that is expecting a sermon on joy this morning. Joy is a traditional topic for this Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent. In fact, in a little while we will light the third Advent candle and it is pink, or rose, traditionally for joy.

But how is the preacher supposed to preach on joy and the congregation supposed to receive a message on joy when their neighboring community had a bad house fire in which a toddler was killed. On the way home from that fire, a sheriff's deputy was in a car accident and was killed, leaving behind a wife and small child. And in another neighboring community a man shot his ex-girlfriend and her children, killing the children and seriously injuring her. Where is the joy to be found for that church?

Or the Vanwey's who remain in a vigil at Jim's side, in hospice.

Or the many clients of the Las Vegas probate lawyer who, according to yesterday's paper, simply disappeared taking millions of dollars in client estate money—perhaps as much as $13 million, the many families who not only lost a loved one, but also the estate.

Or the dozens killed and dozens more injured in the bombing of a Coptic church in Cairo. 160 killed in the collapse of a church in Nigeria, or the 36 young artists killed in the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland.

Or the families grieving the loss of loved ones, worried or scared over illness both mysterious and potentially life threatening and known to be life threatening. Where is the joy?

Or the families that worry that any day they will all be deported, even though they were granted temporary visas and have been living and working in the US for years.

Yet, every Christmas movie tells us that sadness has no part in Christmas and every story has a happy ending.

That's why King Herod doesn't fit the Christmas story. The horrific killing of the innocents, which harken back to killing the infants in Egypt—it's too terrible. It doesn't belong.

We were at the Living Nativity last night and there was no Herod, no soldiers with swords coming for the children. No Christmas card with the slaughter of the innocents on the front.

This part of the story may not seem to fit, but we need to hear it. Like a lot of stories, we have to hear the whole story or we get the story wrong. Every true story admits that even in the midst of blinking decorations and flickering candles, darkness threatens the light. Ignoring the darkness is ignoring reality. We leave King Herod out of the Christmas story at our peril because we think we're supposed to keep the hardships of the real world away from Christmas. But when we do that, Christmas can't help us when the difficult times come.

Matthew says that Christmas came in the days of King Herod and he intentionally includes the story of the killing of the innocents. We need Herod in Christmas.

King Herod was ruthless, vicious even. He killed at least one of his numerous wives, his mother-in-law, and three of his own sons. Caesar is reported to have said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. With reports of the birth of the "king of the Jews" it was entirely in keeping with his way of thinking to seek to kill this new potential rival, whether or not many other innocents died in the effort.

Kathleen Norris says that "Everything (Herod) does, he does out of fear. Fear can be useful." It keeps us alert, especially in unsafe situations "but when a person is always on the defensive like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating. Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their own wake... if they have power but can only use it in furtive, pathetic, and futile attempts at self-preservation."

We usually imagine angels speaking in soft, reassuring tones. The angel in Joseph's dream shouted: "Wake up! Hurry! Run!" They escaped to Egypt. They were far from home, but young Jesus was safe.

But not everyone was safe. When the wise men didn't return, Herod ordered every boy in Bethlehem 2 and younger be killed. Using words from the prophet Jeremiah, Matthew tells us: "wailing and loud lamentation, / Rachel weeping for her children; / she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (v. 18).

Matthew did not want us to have a bucolic, perfect nativity. He intentionally set the light of Jesus against the darkness o Herod. Matthew knew that the Christmas story happened in the real world, where there was horror and suffering and pain. Even the birth of the new King didn't stop the suffering.

We talk about keeping Christ in Christmas and we love the tinsel and the decoration and the cookies and the warm, fuzzy feelings. Last night when we were at the Living Nativity, a number of people would yell out their welcome or their thank you or their "happy birthday" greetings to "baby Jesus" and I couldn't help but think of the scene in the movie Talladega Nights when Ricky Bobby insists on praying to Baby Jesus because he likes the Christmas Jesus best.

I think many of us like the Christmas Jesus best, and the Christmas story best—well except for Herod.

The part of this story that we're used to leaving out—the sadness, suffering, and death—is important. Because it is the darkness, it is the suffering that tells us why this child is so special, why this child is holy. When we remember the story, we need to remember all of the story. God comes to the worst places and the most painful circumstances to share our suffering, to care for us in the midst of tragedy. Christ has come to bear our sorrows. Immanuel, God with us, even in the darkness. We have not been left alone.

This holy season is the promise that God's joy is deeper than our sadness, and that ultimately life is more powerful than death, and that the light shines even in the darkness.

We don't live under a king with the kind of power Herod had, but we do live in a world where many forces work to fuel and sustain our fears. Scott Bader-Saye, who's written a book called Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear, says that politicians, the media, advertisers, even some religious leaders often play on our fears. Their profits come in the form of money or influence, but in each case we are encouraged to fear the wrong things or to fear the right things in the wrong way. Our heightened anxiety drives us to act in ways that override other moral concerns.

We fear letting go of the resources that might protect us against an uncertain future, and so we spend our money on fear rather than stewardship. In the name of security we refuse to love our enemies as Jesus told us to do and instead we make political decisions based on fear. We decided what is good for me, rather than the common good—I even had someone say to me, "there is no such thing as the common good." Because we wish to be careful, we do not open our lives or even our doors to strangers, fearing that they will take advantage of us. It is fear that constricts our hearts and thus fear that makes Jesus' ethic of risky discipleship and unconditional love seem unrealistic and irresponsible.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus was born into a world of real pain, a world of deep suffering. And the evidence of today's world shows us that Matthew's talk of Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture does not mean that these ways of the world have ended. The birth of Jesus did not put an end to human tragedy.

We are often reminded to keep Christ in Christmas. Indeed, we must do so! But we would rather not keep Herod in Christmas. He is, as one preacher said, the "Ebenezer Scrooge without the conversion, the Grinch without a change of heart." But Herod belongs in the Christmas story, too, for the story begins in a stable, but it ends on a cross.

Herod recognizes something about Jesus that our clean and cozy visions of Christmas fail to acknowledge: that the birth of this child is a threat to his kingdom, a threat to that kind of domination and rule. Jesus challenges the very power structures of the world into which he is born. Putting Herod back in Christmas means that we must acknowledge that the world into which God came is broken. It means that we recognize that instead of welcoming God's presence on earth, the powers of the world react to it with opposition.

Putting Herod back in Christmas is to see with open eyes the ways that the rulers of this world can and do use coercion, manipulation and violence to maintain and increase their power.

It is to recognize that the victims of that coercion, manipulation and violence are often the most innocent and vulnerable, minorities, poor, and the other. It's the children of poverty who lack access to effective education. It's the uneducated and disenfranchised who have no voice in politics. It has always been women, children, immigrants and the poor who are most vulnerable to the whims of tyrants, the effects of natural disasters, and the ravages of disease.

This is what the Christmas story according to Matthew tells us. Unfortunately it doesn't tell us why God doesn't just fix it all with the wave of God's hand or a simple word. What a clean and cozy ending to the whole story that would be! Then we could get back to our tinsel and Christmas cookies. But that's not how God works.

God works through the power of love and service and sacrifice, not by manipulation or coercion or violence – not even for good. The baby Herod seeks to destroy will not use power or manipulation, but instead will bring healing and teach people to love God and love each other. The baby Herod is so scared of will reveal a God who is love and has all the power that love has.

Putting Herod back in Christmas means that we must make a choice: whether we stand with the powers of the world because we think they will keep us safe from all that we fear, or whether we stand with Jesus in a place of love, taking a stand against the power of fear.

In the chapter that provides this sermon its title, Brian McLaren writes, "The next war— whoever wages it— will most likely resemble every war in the past. It will be planned by powerful older men in their comfortable offices, and it will be fought on the ground by people the age of their children and grandchildren. Most of the casualties will probably be between eighteen and twenty-two years old— in some places, much younger. So the old, sad music of the ancient story of Herod and the slaughter of the children will be replayed again. And again, the tears of mothers will fall."(McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 73)

Matthew interrupts our Christmas festivities and carols, our cookies and joy, with the inconsolable weeping of mothers. We need to keep Herod in Christmas

because following Jesus means we have to make a decision: Writes McLaren, "We do not live in an ideal world. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to face at every turn the destructive reality of violence. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to side with vulnerable children in defiance of the adults who see them as expendable. To walk the road with Jesus is to withhold consent and cooperation from the powerful, and to invest it instead with the vulnerable.

It is to refuse to bow to all the Herods and all their ruthless regimes— and to reserve our loyalty for a better king and a better kingdom." (*Ibid.*) In this season of preparation, I hope that you do not forget that Christmas—even the first Christmas included tragedy and heartbreak and that Immanuel, God with us, came into that world of heartbreak. I think that's why Brian McLaren calls us to "Keep Herod in Christmas" with these words.

"So let us light a candle for the children who suffer in our world because of greedy, power-hungry, and insecure elites. And let us light a candle for grieving mothers who weep for lost sons and daughters, throughout history and today.

And let us light a candle for all people everywhere to hear their weeping. In this Advent season, we dare to believe that God feels their pain and comes near to bring comfort. If we believe that is true, then of course we must join God and come near, too." (*Ibid.* at 74) Amen