Let us pray

Creator God, the one who calmed chaos into creation, through who all things are made new, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Matthew 2: 13-23

Now after they 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, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

In imagining what my first official sermon in a church setting would look like, I'll be honest, I was hoping for a text where no one dies, particularly, not an unsettling number of children. But, lo and behold, the lectionary brings us these verses today, and we are left to figure out what God is telling us through this passage in Matthew, for this particular day in our lives. Being in Seminary, I receive constant reminders from my professors that the story headings in the bible were added latter and should be disregarded. But I find that extremely difficult for texts like this, when someone has added a title as provocative as "the massacre of the Infants." It is a New Year, and there is plenty of excitement and expectation and rejuvenation in the air, and this is the text we have. King Herod, in his anger from being tricked by the Wise men, in his fear of what the birth of the King of the Jews meant for his hold on power, kills all of the children in and around Bethlehem who were under the age of two. As the uncle of a two year old, this was particularly jarring for me. Yet, it is in this version of the Christmas narrative in Matthew that we enter the text this morning.

I was in a course last spring at Columbia that focused on Joshua and Judges. One of the assignments of the course was to provide a sermon or bible study on a particularly difficult text from Joshua which described the genocide committed by the twelve tribes of Israel against the inhabitants of Canaan, the land which God had promised. My professor, Dr. Bonfiglio, warned us against the desire to justify the violence, or to explain away the narrative provided by suggesting that these stories are explanations written after the fact, not narratives of historical fact. It makes us feel better about the text without fully embracing why they were included in the first place. If you allow the author of Matthew, he will lead you to make the jump that Dr. Bonfiglio warned about. There are two aspects of Jesus' identity, foretold by the prophets of old that this part of the Christmas narrative looks to fulfill in the Gospel of Matthew. "Out of Egypt I have called my son" and "He will be called a Nazorean." Now there may be a desire to say well, Matthew obviously knew of these prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures, and wanted to make sure that the readers of this Gospel understood that the messiah he speaks of is the same messiah the Hebrew scriptures speak of. If we really wanted to, we could leave it there. The author of Matthew needed a story to put Jesus in Egypt, so that he could then be called out of Egypt. The author of Matthew needed for Jesus to live in Nazareth; so that it could be said "He will be called a Nazorean." There is no mention of Herod killing a large number of children in any of the other Gospels. Even the act of killing all of these children is explained by the author as fulfilling yet another prophesies from Jeremiah. All of it seems necessary, or at the very least foretold. And if we leave it here, we can move on from this difficult text with little consideration at all.

Yet, on this, the first day of 2017, perhaps this text means a little more for us today. Perhaps we are not shocked at the murder of these children because it is a narrative that we are not unfamiliar with. We remember that Pharaohs, in the Exodus narrative, commanded that all the male babies born to Hebrew Slaves were to be tossed into the Nile. We are reminded in the text of the lamentation in Jeremiah, where the Assyrians have come and murdered the children of Israel or taken them back to Assyria as slaves. "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." We think of our own world, where violence is part of every day life in many parts of the world. We think of the seven year old Syrian girl Baan Alabed pleading for her life on Twitter as bombs rain down in Aleppo and Palestine. The author of Matthew draws the connection from the world of the Hebrew scriptures, to the world at the birth of Christ, and ultimately, to the world we now live. The characters may change but the story is familiar. The struggle for power is still a prevalent part of our lives. It may not be Pharaohs or Kings, but we have seen what those who strive for power are capable of. We have seen the disregard for the humanity of others that the pursuit of power seems to invoke from those seeking it.

The Christmas narrative in Matthew lacks the detail of the Christmas narrative we find in Luke. There are no angels speaking to shepherds; there is no talk of the setting in which Christ was born other than him being born in Bethlehem, no mention of a Inn and whether or not they have room. There is no talk of an angel appearing to Mary or of a census bringing Joseph and a pregnant Mary to Bethlehem. The entire narrative leading to Christ's birth is contained in seven short verses in the first chapter. More lines are dedicated tracing lineage from Abraham to David to Jesus. The second chapter of Matthew is two responses to the birth of Christ.

The first is that of the wise men. They witness the rising of Christ's star and sought out the one who has been born King of the Jews. They travelled many miles and brought gifts to Christ, to glorify him. Understanding the threat that Herod posed, they returned home by a different road. The second response that the text gives us is that of Herod, and the murdering of the children. Herod knew the very presence of Christ was a challenge to his power. His response to that was to try and destroy it.

The very presence of Christ brings about two responses in the text: those who seek to glorify by giving their gifts to Christ and those who seek to destroy in order that they may keep what ever power they think they have. And I think that is our message in the text today. How do we respond to the birth and presence of Christ in our world? There is an unspoken difference in the worlds that Matthew evokes in these texts. Though the stories of terror are familiar, the full presence of Christ is not the same in the world of Matthew at this point in the story and the world we now live. For us, the celebration of Christ's birth includes his life, his death, and ultimately our salvation in his resurrection. We see the responses of the wise men and of Herod and we compare it to our own, but they merely had the promise of prophecy. We have the assurance of salvation through the resurrection of Christ. We have Christ's birth, and in Christ birth we have his life, death, and resurrection. So what will be our response?

I can think of no better way to describe my own faith than to try and answer that very question. It is a common practice that on New Years we are supposes to make resolutions. Now, I had always considered resolutions to be goals I set for myself, to be achieved in the coming year. In preparing for this meditation, I began to think of resolutions as responses to the life I have already lived. My desire for more exercise or a better diet or to pray more do not come about because I exercised enough or maintained a healthy diet or prayed enough last year. Those resolutions are a response to the life I have already lived. We have spent the last few weeks reliving the birth of our savoir, Jesus Christ and in doing so; we affirm his presence among us. Our lives are responses to the birth of Christ. What our lives in response to Christ's birth should be is our resolution this year. If in our response to Christ's birth, we have been less than ideal, if we have failed to live into the life the Christ bids us to live, to seek justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God, let us be resolved to do better in the coming year. May we be wise people, seeking out the light that the darkness could not conquer, bearing our own gifts to Christ so that we may glorify and know him? Let us not respond in fear or anger, to seek power by destroying all those who are like Christ.

Let us be Christian in response to Christ being born into the world. The presence of Christ in the world is a challenge to our own power and privilege. Christ comes into this world, not to affirm the positions of power that we have built, but to liberate the powerless from the systems that oppress them. As the author of Matthew suggest in the second chapter, how we respond to the birth of Christ is an important part of the narrative. And since our lives are our responses to the birth of Christ, then that means that our lives are our part of the Christ narrative.

If you ever struggle to understand what your response should be, I have often found someone in scripture has already said it as well as I could. To be Christian in response to Christ's presence in our world is for me much like the following description Paul suggest to the Romans "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, and serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

It is a new year, and again we have celebrated the birth of Christ. It is an event that requires a response. The world is waiting for ours.