May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

On this first Sunday of the New Year, Gospel reading seems out of place chronologically, since it anticipates already the departure of the Magi—who have not even arrived yet, according to the Church’s liturgical calendar. Why would the Church ask us to hear the story out of order? Maybe it’s the Church way of yelling: “Wake up and pay attention!” Maybe it allows us to hear something we’ve not heard before.

There is nothing sentimental or romantic about Matthew’s version of the Christmas story. It is not one of preparing the nursery, painting the walls, and making it look cute. The God comes to us as a newborn, offers us a new beginning.

Today’s story reminds us that Herod is real, not only in Jesus’ time but in ours as well. I don’t know if the slaughter of the innocents happened the way Matthew describes it but I know that the Herods of this world will always seek to destroy life, that which is holy and sacred.

Herod is in the news every day. You won’t see or hear his name but you’ll recognize him. He’s hard to miss. He’s in some of our families and relationships. He’s in some of our own words, actions, and choices. Herod is our indifference that prevents compassion; our hate and anger that destroy love; our busyness and distractions that deny presence; our violence and anxiety that defeat peace, our inhumanity that negates our creation in the image and likeness of God. Our world and sometimes our lives are full of Herods.

Today’s gospel shows us that the world of Herod is the world into which Jesus is born and in which Jesus puts our lives back together. The world of Herod is the world in which Jesus reveals God is with us and for us.

I’m trying to get us to see the flesh and blood God born on Christmas, an embodied God, a God that comes to us in ways as unique as are each of our lives. Where is God showing up in your life? How?

Perhaps it’s in your marriage, your husband or wife, and the life you have created together. Maybe it’s the child or grandchild God has entrusted to you. Maybe it’s the holiness of a best friend. Maybe it’s in reading the scriptures. For many it will be the beauty of nature: a sunrise in which you offer yourself to God, a sunset in which you give thanks for your life and those you love. For some of you the ordinary routine of work becomes the place in which your life and God’s life intersect. For some it will be your passion for the poor, feeding the hungry, speaking out for justice, or visiting the sick or dying.

There are thousands and thousands of ways in which God offers his life to us, entrusting us with that which is holy and sacred. With each gift God says, “Here, this is yours. Care for it. Guard and protect it. Nurture it. I trust this to you. I have no one else. You are Joseph. You are the one to do this.” So how do we care for and protect that life, beauty, and holiness in a world of Herods?

It has to begin with waking up to the presence of God in our lives. God has entrusted his Son to each one of us in a variety of ways. Just like Joseph we stand in the middle between Jesus and Herod, between life and death, between the life-giver and the life-taker. Each one of us chooses. Day by day, minute by minute, we choose. Over and over again we choose. Will we get up and take the child and his mother or will we sleep through and miss what God is doing in our lives? What will it be for you? For me? What are we choosing? Are we nurturing and growing the life of Christ within us?

Don’t be too anxious or distracted by Herod. Remember, neither newborn Jesus nor Joseph dealt directly with Herod. They didn’t give Herod time, attention, or effort. Maybe we shouldn’t either. That doesn’t mean we deny or ignore the Herods of our lives. It means, rather, that we gain more by nurturing, feeding, and growing the divine life. It means that our work is to cultivate deep relationships, a life of holiness, and love for all people.

I want to conclude my homily with these words: “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the Magi are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, then the true work of Christmas begins.” Amen.