Now, after they had all left—Joseph and Mary and the child were alone. In the weeks leading up to Christmas many churches have a tradition of processing into worship parts and characters in the nativity scene. The ox and sheep the first week. Mary and Joseph the next. And so on until the nativity set is completed at the front of the church on the Sunday after Christmas when the wisemen arrive at last. Now, after they had all left this would be a good Sunday to watch as all those characters leave… if we followed that tradition of having a nativity at the front of the church we would watch during the processional hymn as the shepherds leave the sanctuary, followed by the wisemen, the sheep, the ox, until finally Mary, Joseph and the infant are left alone. Tiny characters in a giant room.

When we were taking down the Christmas decorations yesterday we were putting away our Playskool nativity scene. This is a play nativity set that lives on our coffee table in December. There was one character we couldn’t find in the set. One character left out somewhere in the house for us to find this year— the Christ child. Like the shepherds in the field, like the Wisemen we cleared away the furniture looking under the light of the lamp above, like Herod we searched. We hope to find him sometime before next Christmas.

Now, that they were all gone… the shepherds back in the field, wisemen setting off for home, and even the star’s light is dimmed by gathering storm clouds… the path ahead will not be easy. Joseph has another dream. God calls him to go to Egypt, out of reach of King Herod. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s covenant. And he lives out Israel’s history in returning to Egypt only to later return to the Promised Land. Like his people long ago, Jesus’ life was vulnerable.

Matthew’s Christmas is dark and gritty. It’s like narrative sandpaper removing our Christmas nostalgia. But, this prepares us for the epiphany of who this child is and what it means for the world. The Christmas story can seem other-
worldly, but Matthew’s Christmas is all too real. It’s what we see on the news. Children in harms way; leaders desperately clinging to power. Powerful men using children as pawns in their bid to stay in control. Sacrifice of innocent life. We would love to say this is fiction, to say this doesn’t happen. But, then we look at the news from Aleppo and today in Istanbul. We remember the pictures of drowning toddler refugees escaping the atrocities of their homeland. We know leaders like Herod too well. Herod’s sons rise to power in every generation, and in every generation the lives of the innocents are placed in our hands. Like Joseph we must decide whose voice we obey.

Herod the Great ruled for about 33 years. He was not a Jew. In fact, he was from the land of Edom, a descendent of Esau. Herod was appointed by the Romans as overseer of the land, he wasn’t really a king. But, he loved the title. Herod had to fight for years to get control of the kingdom. So he never really felt secure. He set up private security for himself and fortresses around the country so he would never be too far from a secure place. He searched out and killed the descendants of the Hasmoneans, the previous dynasty, so that he would have no rivals. When he suspected intrigue in his own family, he killed his wife and one of his sons. Before his own death he ordered that his political prisoners should be killed so that there would be mourning throughout the land. Herod probably died two years after Jesus’ birth, but was replaced by his son Archelaus. Archelaus was so brutal that he was later removed from power by the Romans — which is shocking considering how much the Romans practiced and perfected brutality to maintain control.

From Bethlehem to Egypt and back again to Bethlehem then on to Galilee; the family finally finds rest in Nazareth. As long as Herod is in charge the truth of the good news is risky. As long as the Herods of the world reign the gospel will always make us vulnerable. Herod had rationalized his ways by telling himself the Jews needed him. He kept things under control; he kept order. But, this isn’t based in reality, it’s just ego protecting himself from the truth.

Dale Carnegie starts out his famous book *How to Win Friends*
and Influence People by talking about the capture of “Two Gun” Crowley in New York City. It was one of the most sensational manhunts in U.S. history. After two weeks they had Crowley cornered in his girlfriend’s apartment in Manhattan. The police mounted machine guns in the surrounding buildings and began to barrage the apartment with bullets; Crowley fired back indiscriminately. Ten thousand people watched the firefight from the streets. In the middle of all this back and forth, Crowley jotted down a letter, “To whom it may concern” explaining his actions and saying, “Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one – one that would do nobody any harm.”

Crowley was a murderer who shot and killed people indiscriminately. Yet, in his mind he was the victim. Carnegie also offers a quote from Al Capone who said, “I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man.”

Carnegie points out that if men like Capone and Crowley don’t blame themselves for anything— what about the people with whom you and I come into contact? The Herods and Capones of the world will never accept responsibility for who they are. The light of truth is too bright for their eyes.

None of us like to be wrong, and so we try as hard as we can to rationalize and reason to protect our ego. We downplay the violent consequences of our decisions. Painful truth can be so shattering to our egos that we can’t stand to bear it. Truth has a way of making things uncomfortable. Maybe you experienced something like that this past Christmas as you gathered with family. Being around family who knows you so well... the words of those closest to us hurt more than we care to admit. Or maybe you’ve had an experience of letting a truth be known and not being accepted because of it. Families have secrets, known secrets, that aren’t talked about. When these things are named they upset how things are. Truth is risky. But, this is a new year. A fresh start. And a time for to live the truth we see in Jesus.

This scripture is a powerful testimony to the tools available to us for making sense of difficult events in our life, and the atrocities
we see in the world around us. Matthew uses Scripture to interpret the present and put it within Biblical context. Matthew has clear eyes about the violence and darkness in the world, but then he spends the rest of his gospel telling what God is doing about it. The violence of Herod foreshadows the violence Jesus would face throughout his life. God delivered Jesus, Joseph and Mary from Herod; God delivered them from Egypt; and later God delivered Jesus from the wilderness where he was tested; God delivered him from the stones of a mob at the Nazareth synagogue, and finally God’s Spirit delivered the Son from death itself. Throughout his life Jesus responded to God’s call risking himself to reveal more and more of God’s faithfulness. The faithfulness he embodied. What does embodied faithfulness look like for us, Christ’s church in 2017? Where will we find that faithfulness in the year ahead?

I’m becoming more and more convinced the best definition of sin is not missing the mark. That old definition goes back to St. Augustine, and the problem with it is that it’s too soft. Sin is the violence our actions and inactions inflict upon our neighbors. And if we really begin to move from diminishing the fracture sin creates in our lives to realizing it’s destructive character we might begin to truly understand the grace of God in Jesus Christ. God didn’t send the Son to forgive the world of overeating at Christmas… God sent the Son to forgive Herod and to forgive us the sin of turning a blind eye to the sins of Herod just because we think, “That’s just the way of the world”. G.K. Chesterton once said, “Christmas was a revolution that turned the world upside down and, astonishingly, when viewed from that perspective the world made sense.”

What a passage of scripture to begin the new year?! Couldn’t we have started with something more inspirational? Something more hopeful? But, wait: this is hope, not blind optimism. At the beginning of 2017 let’s remember where our hope is— not in the economy or the president or the president-elect or military might or scientific insight or any religious institution. Our hope is in the God who shows up in Jesus Christ. Our hope is in the child from all those nativity scenes we’re packing up— playskool or porcelain, lego or lawn furniture— this year the Christ Child will be
found. We catch a glimpse of him every now and then at mangers here and there; and we have hope that even on cloudy nights his star still shines.
Dale Carnegie, How to Win Friends and Influence People, (ebook, Part 1, “If you want to gather honey don’t kick over the beehive).