I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but the number of obituaries in the newspaper seems to increase right after Christmas. Maybe families hold off on running them? I don’t know and I haven’t counted the actual numbers, but to me it seems like a noticeable increase. Death is never easy but death at Christmas seems particularly sad—a hard dose of reality mixed into all the lights and glitter and cheer.

How much more preferable it would be to not sully the Season but to instead stick to the conjured up images of Christmases that are all soft and angelic. How we’d love to keep that baby in his swaddling clothes and lying a manger. But I would simply argue that there was a hint of sadness and even death in his beginning. That despite our attempts to sanitize it, nothing about his crude birth was ideal, from the condition of the delivery room to the political condition of the world.

We must never forget that “This, this is Christ the King...” whom shepherds needed to guard even as the angels sang. Or, “I wonder as I wander, out under the sky; how Jesus the Savior did come for to die.” And while we may still be savoring our Christmas celebrations, this text, like an increase in the number of obituaries in the newspaper following Christmas, reminds us of the reality of the world.

The reality was that shortly after Jesus was born, those in power got scared and began behaving badly. The rumors of his birth sent shockwaves that reached the inner chambers of the emperor Herod. And isn’t it interesting the way in which it tends to be the small things, the seemingly insignificant things in life that have a way of becoming the most threatening? A rude comment or a thoughtless gesture has a way of completely unnerving us. And any time we are acting out of fear or insecurity, we are never at our best.

What was it, after all, about this infant that an emperor, a powerful ruler of an entire nation might find intimidating? He wasn’t born to great wealth. No power or great influence. And yet there was something about it that caused Herod and the men around him to start behaving badly—for the lying and the deceit and the planning of a murderous response.

What? A baby has been born and some are calling him the King of the Jews? We’ve got to do something about this before it’s too late.

It seems crazy.

It is easy to make comparisons between Herod and Shakespeare’s Richard III. It is no secret that Shakespeare was drawn to political personalities. Stories of corruption and manipulation, along with the blatant abuse of political power, make for interesting characters. And Shakespeare’s Richard is the quintessential villain—the personification of the ruthless lust for power, a murdering, manipulating tyrant who delights in his own sense of evil.
While his tactics are successful, he does not ultimately prevail. At the end of the play, on the night before the battle in which he is slain, Richard is visited by the ghosts of his victims, who charge him with his crimes and completely undermine his confidence. And Richard famously says, "I shall despair. There is no creature loves me. And if I die, no one shall pity me."

Martin Marty once said, “Being a tyrant is an unhealthy occupation.”

Did you ever wonder what might have happened if Herod had simply ignored the whole thing? What would have happened to the baby? How would the course of human history have been different? How might the history of the world be different if some of its leaders and difference makers hadn’t acted out of fear and insecurity? How might your life be different if you hadn’t acted out of fear or insecurity?

And isn’t it ironic that when people in power act out of insecurity or fear, the results almost always tend to validate whatever or whomever they are afraid of in the first place. When politics becomes personal—when one’s opponents are vilified unjustifiably, they are almost always vindicated.

There was something about that Bethlehem birth that struck fear in Herod, and it wasn’t as if he had no other detractors. Certainly more visible and more vocal ones than this baby. But those he could control and silence, which was his pattern. Once, when he thought their own grabs for power were hitting a little too close to home, he had two of his sons imprisoned and eventually killed. But this baby?

Whatever it was it sent Herod over the edge. And this man who had a history of killing any and all who stood in his way gave the order to have all the baby boys born in Bethlehem killed. An act of insane desperation if ever there was one.

And for all of our speculation about how that birth and those early days of his life unfolded, and despite the improbability of it unfolding the way we know it through scripture and theological retrospect, I’m left wondering if this much is at least true: That baby and the rumors surrounding his identity and who he would become, posed a threat then, like he poses a threat now to all who hold positions of power.

Because in him was life—the true life had come into the world, and it represented the ushering in of a much hoped for and badly needed overturning of the world. And that’s a threatening proposition to any who seek to extinguish the light, oppress the already marginalized and who make for the ways of war and not peace.

I don’t know what you think of the American Civil Liberties Union. My hunch is, if you are like me, they have made you proud and they have frustrated you to no end. But this much I know, in ways that far exceed the separation of church and state and their opposition to crèches in the public square, putting up a manger scene on the lawn of the capitol, given who that baby in the manger became and on whose behalf he advocated, is not a message of tranquility but of a radical overturning of the status quo. And that does pose risks for those making society’s rules. And that’s what’s going on in this text. It is a story of men behaving badly because they are feeling threatened and insecure, as well they should.

I discovered something about Herod that also made me think of Richard III and his lonely lament on the night before he died. The story goes that when Herod was an old man and afflicted with what was probably arthritis, and he would go to a place in or near Jerusalem and sit in some hot baths. It apparently relieved some of his pain. He finally moved to Jericho.
Close to the end of his life, he ordered the most notable Jews from all parts of the nation to come to him in Jericho. When they arrived he had them locked up. And realizing how much people hated him, he gave the order that at the moment of his death, the most notable Jews in the nation were to be executed as a way of insuring that at his death, the nation would be in mourning and not celebration.

The world then is not unlike the world today. The rough wood of the manger is the same wood that would make up his cross and the signs were there in the beginning. Epiphany helps us make those connections, between the holiness of his birth and yet the reality of his life—between that story and our story.

This story—the fact that there was no room in the inn, helps us make the connection and better understand our work as a church in building housing for homeless youth through Prior Crossing. A story of corrupt political leadership helps us see it and name it in our own day as well. And I think these Epiphany texts help us make the connection between that frightened young couple and their flight into Egypt, and the deepening sense of despair gripping many young people today.

T.S. Eliot, in his famous poem, "Journey of the Magi," says,

Were we led all this way for birth or death?  
I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different;  
This birth was a hard and bitter agony for us, like death...our death.

If only every day could be Christmas. If only we could have kept that baby in the manger. If you are parents, maybe you've thought the same thing about your children? But he grew up. And one day he lifted his apron over his head and set it down on the carpenter's bench and headed out into the world where he would speak the truth, tend to the sick and lowly, champion widows and orphans and outcasts, become hounded and harassed, be tried and convicted and put to death.

And somehow the end was there in the beginning.

Epiphany allows reality to make its way back into our Christmas celebration. But the good news is that the star—the light that guided the visitors from the east to the Christ then, still shines brightly for us today, in the midst of whatever darkness we may be facing. May that light guide you, even through whatever valley-of-the-shadow-of-death you may be moving.

And in that light may you discover life.

Amen.