Something I find strange about the Christmas season is how abruptly it all ends. I was in Target on December 29th and the Christmas section had already been replaced by a Valentine’s Day section. In some ways it seems almost like gaslighting -- like Target is trying to convince me that Christmas never happened. And, of course, it’s not just Target. The way most years go we start with the Christmas season sometime in October and then when it strikes midnight on December 25th everything Christmas-y is swept away like revelers on Bourbon Street at the end of Mardi Gras. Christmas is expunged from the official record like disgraced cosmonaut in the Soviet Union. But there is at least one place where Christmas gets to last a little longer and that place is right here in the Episcopal Church. Wonderfully a church that has spent the last fifty years following the lead of the prevailing culture actually finds itself in a somewhat anachronistic position because it claims that today is actually something called Christmas II. It’s like we either didn’t get the memo or we are part of some strange cult that seeks to preserve an esoteric bit of knowledge. And while I realize that we are probably not going to change our “now you see it now you don’t” model of Christmas in my lifetime it is fun to rebel once a year and keep Christmas alive through Epiphany. So, let’s have just one last gasp of Christmas today before we start putting up our decorations for National Beer Can Day (January 24). And to do that let’s try to answer the question that so many want to ignore about the birth of Jesus: now what? Are we going to act like a deadbeat dad or are we going to do something about the birth of Jesus?

In the Gospel we hear about an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream and telling him to go to Egypt in order to avoid the massacre that Herod was planning for all of the male children in Bethlehem. Say what you want about Herod, but unlike our society he did not forget that Jesus had been born. Yes, his reaction was inappropriate and evil, but it was a reaction. And while Herod is not a model for our behavior, he is doing better than Target and in his own twisted way he actually gets a lot right. So, what I would like to suggest for us on the second Sunday of Christmas is that we do something kind of weird in answer to the question of “now what?” and this weird thing is that we might want to follow Herod’s lead, not all the way mind you, but in the sense that he is doing the opposite of our society. And since this is a Sunday that everyone pretty much forgets about, I can deny it if anyone ever asks me about it.

So here is what I mean when I say that we need to be like Herod and not like our society. While I said that Herod’s actual reaction was obviously wrong, what he got right and what so many people forget is that the birth of Jesus actually means something, something that requires a response from us. Let’s think for a moment about what Herod thought was true. He heard from the wisemen that one had been born who was king of the Jews and he believed it. We know this because you don’t try and slaughter a village full of children because you are trying to impress Jody Foster. Herod certainly did not understand what Jesus’ kingship would look like, but he did believe it was real. That is why he came up with this horrible plan to massacre the children in Bethlehem. So, half a cheer for Herod in that he didn’t act like our society and go back to ignoring Jesus the moment all the gifts were unwrapped.

For the birth of Jesus is something that demands a reaction. On Christmas II we need to ask ourselves are we going to put Jesus away in the closet until next year or will we continue to let him influence our lives. In the Revelation of John, we hear these words from Jesus to the Church in Laodicea, “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” There are a few different interpretations to this (I even wrote a paper about it in seminary) but one interpretation is that Jesus can deal with acceptance and he can deal with rejection but what does not work is indifference. Herod rejected, most of the world is indifferent and yet we are called to acceptance. Acceptance of who Jesus says he is and with this acceptance comes the need to do something.

However, in this need to do something is the place where we part ways with Herod. And while I hope that we can all safely say that we have no designs on directing soldiers to massacre a village full of children we do need to guard ourselves from the temptation that lies behind it. And that temptation is the belief that through our own will we can decide how Jesus will or will not act on this earth. Let me explain what I mean. Herod was worried that Jesus would usurp his power and so he sought to quite literally eliminate him. But there are other more subtle ways in which we seek to eliminate Jesus from our lives. While I think most of us would say that we have accepted Jesus for who he is we often try to choose when and where Jesus is allowed to go. We accept Christ, but not totally. We are like one of those old manor houses in Britain where only certain rooms are available to the public. We might let Jesus into the places that look pretty good, but try to keep him out of the rooms in our lives where things are a little rough. But to avoid being like Herod we need to let Jesus into our lives, all of our life. Jesus needs to be let into those places in our lives where we are uncharitable and prideful. And if you think about it trying to keep him away from a bad habit or an uncharitable disposition is ultimately kind of silly because he knows that they are there, we are like the child who pulls a blanket over their heads in the belief that they have turned invisible.

And here is why the last step is so important. Assuming that we have accepted God in the person of Jesus Christ and let him into our lives this will show forth in what we do. And if we do it right, we can act as Christ in this world. If we flood our hearts and minds with Christ, we will show the beauty and love of God to this world. I once heard it said that the worst advertisement for Christianity is Christians. At the beginning of this New Year, we should ask if we are ready to go out and be a good advertisement for Christianity? Are we ready to go and be Christ’s hands and feet on this earth bringing the message of God’s love to everyone? And if you haven’t made a New Year’s resolution maybe this is a good one. Maybe instead of complaining about the state of the world we can go and be salt and light. We could be cynical and say that it won’t matter and that might be true, but the opposite could also be true. Would anyone have thought that a baby being born to some rather unimportant people in the backwaters of the Roman Empire would change the world? Our challenge though is to not just have this change last for what we call the Christmas Season but to infect our entire lives for all time so that we may be Christ’s own this day and forevermore.