



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany (A)

Double Messages

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

My goodness! We have just finished 12 days of blessed Christmas and here, at the beginning of Epiphany, we are slammed with the harsh reality of the world: *double messages*. The representative of empire in our story, King Herod, is using his agency to demand privilege: “Tell me where this new fledgling hope-king can be found, so I can show him my, uhh – homage, yeah, *homage* – let’s stick with that.”

Oh goodness me. Can’t we stay with the sweet story of an infant come to make all things new? Heralds and tidings of great joy? “Please,” We might imagine our distant faith relatives adding, “Please, this event? In front of esteemed foreign guests? Do we really need to have this domestic business played out in front of exotic visitors? Must we air the humiliating dirty laundry of our lived reality of occupation for all perpetuity?”

Upon their eventual arrival in Bethlehem, Joseph might have asked of the wise men, “Did Herod ask your help getting information so he could pay his so-called “homage”? Welcome to our world! This double-speak is the world of occupation from an authority that does not care about us. This is our reality: Our crops. Our land. Our livestock. Our roads. Our women. Our children. All can be conscribed as needed at the behest of Rome.”

Yes. The reality, post-Christmas, is that while Emmanuel has come to be with us, he is counting on us to play our part in bringing light to systems of oppression. He comes, with his rising star, to reveal a new kind of kingdom. He reveals a kingdom that is better described as a “kin-dom”. He comes to point to another way. In this story, he creates a kind of map: We can work together with those who are different from us, with those who have much, like foreign kings, and those who have little, like shepherds, for the common good. And when it comes to duplicitous bullies? Sometimes we must draw a wider circle of neighbors and find a workaround.

The story of God's revealing in Epiphany contrasts with Herod's agenda of amassing self-serving power, through secreting. Herod says one thing when he fully intends to do another. Inauthentic and fork-tongued, he would, it seems, be willing to do anything to stay in power. He would be willing to lie. He would be willing to contrive. He would be willing to collude. He would even be willing to kill an innocent child.

There was a story this past year that tasted of our Lord's hope-revealing star amid modern-day occupation. This star was stopping over a borderland between Ukraine and Poland. The rising light shone in the darkness in the image of baby carriages lined up at a border train station, carriages left there by Polish mothers anticipating the needs of sister Ukrainian mothers fleeing their "Herod" arrival of invading troops in their homeland.

Opening their treasure stocks, Polish women searched garages and attics, spare bedrooms and basements, for a gift worthy of the border. But how did it happen? How did they sense the rising star? Did it start as a small glow in their hearts as they heard stories on the news and saw images of women—just like them—suddenly having to protect and raise infants in a war zone? Did the star start to rise through the vehicle of Facebook or Instagram or TikTok, a tweet or retweet, a post or a re-post, of the starlight idea? This was a crowd motivated by kindness, not a desire to bully. This was a manifestation of a radical outpouring of generosity and love.

The starlight response required two skills, but not a double nature. The response required the skill of perception and the skill of well-placed response. For the Polish women, it was perceiving the fact that real human suffering was in their midst and needed God's response. (For the wise men, it was perceiving that God was doing something new in the world.)

The women in Poland? Not only did they perceive the place where the starlight was needed but they also searched their supplies to see what gifts worthy of love were to be found in their midst. Their well-placed response was transporting gifts to a place where those who needed them most would be able to get them. They left their homes to go and be where God was. For the wise men, the well-placed response was dropping what they were doing to follow the invitation and to bring with them the very best of what they had. They brought gold, frankincense, myrrh, and a fourth thing: presence. Their gift of presence was perhaps the very best. It was in fact what God, God's self, was giving.

This is a whole different kind of economy, a kind of *God economy*. And did the women or the wise men do this at personal risk? Yes. Folks enter harm's way when they choose to align with oppressed people against a bully. They absolutely do! But the call of the revealed Light was even stronger than fear.

Later in our Epiphany story, the wise men are "warned in a dream" to return home another way. How could they not? How could they not leave *changed*? Even if they had taken the same route, it wouldn't have been the same, because they themselves were not the same. They were changed by their walk to and with and for the Light.

Let us be part of this Light that has come, that is now, and will come again. Let us be watchers in our time, finding the places in need of the star. Let us be followers of its guiding light once its presence has appeared. Let us acknowledge the places inhabited by Herod-speak and double messages while working to usher carriages of hope in the places that need it most. How will we know it? How will we know the thin intersectional opportunity space for Epiphany light? Isaiah tells us. Our hearts shall thrill and rejoice. There will be sharing of riches across borders. Shalom and welcome will be shared. “Welcome to our world” won’t be said with irony.

This season of Epiphany, let us go forth to create spaces in our homes, our churches, and our communities as wise people. Let us have eyes to see places of double message and oppression in the stories of our time. Let us perceive small glowing moments of Epiphany possibility in the stories we hear and make ourselves ready to respond. What gifts of courage, hope, and solidarity might you and your family have to offer, from closets, attics, basements, or hearts, that have the power to do a workaround of the double messages of oppression to reveal God’s Light? You don’t have to be able to defeat an army. You just have to help one child of God.

*Anne Zobel is a postulant from the Diocese of Southern Virginia in her second year of an M.Div. program at Bexley Seabury Seminary. She loves all things tree – for the many lessons they teach about cycles, rootedness, and being agents of transformation. She and her husband love to hike the mountains of Virginia and spend time with their four grown children. Anne’s preferred method of Jesus-following is breaking open the stories of God at work in community with **wondering**.*