



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Feast of the Epiphany (C)

A New Story

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

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany and the end of the twelve days of Christmas. We leave Christmastide today and enter into the Season after the Epiphany. These days between Christmas and New Year's are a sort of liminal time when things slow down a bit and people are more reflective about what went well in the past year and discern what they would like to change and what they hope for in the new.

In December 2018, the sequel to the classic movie “Mary Poppins,” called, “Mary Poppins Returns,” was released. The movies are loosely based on the P.L. Travers books, with the first book published in 1934 and subsequent books in the series being released between 1935 and 1988. In case you did not know, the Mary Poppins of the book is not as sweet as she is portrayed in the movies! Regardless, the children love Mary and they have many adventures together, with Mary teaching them life skills along the way. In “Mary Poppins Returns,” these adventures include some catchy songs to go with them, just like in the original movie.

One of the songs is called “The Cover is Not the Book,” and, as you can imagine, it talks about not judging a book (and ultimately a person) by its cover. The chorus says this:

[The] Cover is not the book
So open it up and take a look
'Cause under the cover one discovers
That the king may be a crook
Chapter titles are like signs
And if you read between the lines
You'll find your first impression was mistook
For a cover is nice
But a cover is not the book

The Banks children in the film learn that sometimes people who are nice to them at first and seem like they're on their side really aren't. Learning how to discern people's true character is like discovering what a

book is really about, no matter how attractive or unattractive the cover looks. This becomes an important lesson for the children as the story continues.

This type of discernment is also important to our magi, as they encounter the duplicitous Herod while trying to follow the star to find the king of the Jews. Following Jesus certainly has consequences, doesn't it? The wise men – and we actually don't know if there are three or two or more, as the story does not tell us – seek out Herod, thinking one king would surely know the presence of another. He received them because they were magi, a learned and wise class of men, famous at that time as having special powers. In their innocence, they set in motion events with Herod that they could not foresee. Their desire to follow the star to Jesus was their sole focus. Even in his infancy, Jesus was changing people's lives.

These wise men represented the Gentiles coming to know Jesus and being embraced as God's children. They have found God's proclamation of love, Jesus, through creation, a star. But in order to find Jesus, they must first understand the prophecy of Jewish Scriptures. Nature alone cannot provide them salvation—they must learn about God's plan for the Messiah so they can find him and pay him homage. Their encounter with Herod, who already knew the Scriptures about the Messiah, must have been confusing. Why was he not coming with them? Why had he not already been there himself? Why was he asking them to go in secret? Surely this was a marvelous event that everyone should know? Like our song from "Mary Poppins Returns" reminds us—we must be discerning when it comes to our faith. We can't judge a book by its cover. Herod acted one way outside – but inside was another story.

The magi had come a long way—from "their own country" from the East—and traveled to pay homage to an infant, offering the gifts of their culture – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. With these gifts, they also offer themselves, kneeling down to celebrate and honor Jesus' kingship. There's a theory that in ancient times, those three gifts represented laying down an old way of living and taking up a new one. Frankincense was used by the priestly class—those who had special, mysterious power; Myrrh was used in death – for mummification and the afterlife; and gold, the false god, was the substance used to make the false idol of the calf in Moses' and Aaron's story, and of course, it was also used as a payment or reward for services rendered.

By laying these gifts at Jesus' feet, according to this theory, the magi are showing that they recognize that they are encountering a new way of living. This new way is affirmed by a dream from God that warns them not to return to Herod, but to go home another way. How wise they are! They have been changed and they heed God's word instead of Herod's, keeping them safe as they travel home.

In the same way, we too, are invited to be transformed. The past is history, and we cannot return to it – we cannot move forward by going back the way we came. When we encounter Jesus, we go home another way—a way that unfolds in front of us, not behind us. We give up our old ways and die to ourselves daily so that we might become who God has created us to be.

In this new year and this Season after the Epiphany, as we, like the wise men, discern those things that we want to lay at Jesus' feet – we can find our own star to follow as we go home another way, so to speak, on the road where God is beckoning us. Some congregations give out Star Words—different words on paper stars that are prayed over and selected at random by worship participants to focus on their faith journey in the new year. You can create your own Star Word by getting quiet and listening to that still, small voice of God, who enlivens and inspires us. Once a word emerges, you can write it on a piece of paper or create your own paper star and put it in a place where you can refer to it throughout the year—your refrigerator door, on a mirror, on your computer screen, in your prayer book or Bible, or whatever works. Look up its definition and see what strikes you. Notice your word in places and in conversations throughout the year. As you continue to reflect, you might find yourself in a year-long conversation with God.

Like any other gift, this star gift can be received with joy and an open heart of opportunity, or it can be jammed at the bottom of a purse or put in the recycle bin and forgotten. It's up to you. Epiphany and the Season after the Epiphany are the celebration of God's light in the darkness and a reminder of our life-giving, loving God, who came in the Word made flesh for all people. May we receive God's gift of discernment with the willingness of heart to be transformed like the wise men and, shining with the light of Jesus Christ, find our way home. Amen.

The Rev. Danée Ashley is an Episcopal priest and licensed marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and the Seattle area and is a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC (www.soulspaseattle.com). Danée uses art, music, drama, poetry, and movement in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual. She has written for Working Preacher, Luther Seminary's Faith+Lead, Sermons That Work, and other publications, as well as being a contributor to podcasts, books, and producing a play about fertility struggle. Danée's favorite pastimes include reading, traveling with her husband, making sure their rescue dog Cooper is living his best life, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.