



We are Meant to Embody Divine Light

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

Matthew 2:1-12, January 9, 2022

Perhaps some of you remember a beautiful little book, published about 25 years ago, called *The Four Agreements*. This book conveys four primary teachings of the ancient Toltec peoples of Mexico, of which the first and most important is to “be impeccable with your word.”¹ Because words are so powerful, because they create realities, we must use them carefully, without violating ourselves or others in any way. Being impeccable with your word means to speak without violating ourselves or our integrity, or that of others, in any way; and also to speak from a place of love, and not from any of our inner emotional poisons

I was reminded of this recently because I was invited to go on vacation in March, my daughter's spring break, with a group of relatives. Two of my relatives have in the past chosen not to be vaccinated against COVID-19. So I emailed them to ask if they were vaccinated at this point. I said that I had no judgment about their choice, but that the answer would impact my decision about whether or not to come.

And in retrospect, I realize I wasn't completely impeccable with my word or honest because I do feel judgment about their choice to not get vaccinated. I did not unleash my emotional poison about their choice, which was good. But I didn't speak honestly from my own integrity,

¹ Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)* (Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997).

either. I became Minnesota nice instead. It's hard to be impeccable with our word: it's hard to be both honest and loving.

This week we had another example of that kind of conundrum. Thursday was January 6, which is the feast of the Epiphany, when magi from the east followed a star to the baby Jesus. January 6 was also the anniversary of when pro-Trump demonstrators stormed the Capitol Building in Washington. On this first anniversary, President Biden said that we must be a nation who "lives by the light of truth, and not under the shadow of lies."² He said that great nations face the truth of the past. Like other attempts to remember dark moments in history, we do this to make sure it never happens again.

So is that the full truth? How ought we be impeccable with our words when we hear someone say something racist, for example? How are we impeccable with our words when it's us who are in the wrong? How do we see the full truth and speak from that place?

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, which is also about truth. But the Epiphany isn't about the troubling truth of our past, although that is very important. It's about the truth traditionally called the gospel, the good news, that is harder to see and harder to tell. The truth is the presence of the embodied Christ in this world, the full union of divine and human. The truth of political darkness and violence was as real at the time of Jesus as it is now. But the Epiphany truth is quietly and gently greater than the reality of Rome and empire. I believe God intends the union of divine and human embodied in Jesus for all of us. We are meant to embody divine light in every moment of every day. Each of us has our unique gifts, our particular ray of the light of God that no one else has in the same way. We are all God's ecstatic creative

² President Joseph Biden, speech on January 6, 2022, as transcribed in NPR / MPR News, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/06/1070931178/jan-6-anniversary-biden-speech-transcript>.

joy exploding over and over again with our own unique signature, for no purpose other than beauty.

So things do not have to be the way they are. The truth is not only the darkness of our past. Divine light is not only possible: it is our purpose and destiny. We are meant to be humble, embodied healers, co-creating justice and thriving for literally all beings: Republicans and Democrats, Black and White people, citizens and people without documentation. For red maples and snowdrops and the Minnesota River. For Ojibwe people and for non-binary teenagers just beginning to blossom into the unique fullness of who God created them to be.

How do we have an epiphany about this gospel truth, the truth of Christ and beauty and divine light? Especially when the gospel in Christian faith has too often been distorted or hidden?

The magi give us clues. First of all, we might sometimes see the truth of Jesus, the good news, from sources outside our tradition, like Don Miguel Ruiz' *The Four Agreements*. Second, the magi found Jesus through a star. My own belief is that the natural world itself is full of truth, always embodying the divine, in ways that can delight and amaze us and guide us. The magi also consulted with the local Jewish religious scholars and with King Herod to narrow down their search. We can always find truth within our tradition. We can read our scriptures with prophetic imagination and the expectation of encountering God's Spirit. Finally, the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. We have our intuition and our non-linear minds and gut knowing.

Since good news can be found in so many sources yet it still so often hard to find, perhaps it's more important to know how to look than where. Theologian Sallie McFague talks about moving from subject-object seeing—I see you mostly in terms of how you affect me—to

subject-subject perception, perceiving others as subjects in their own right, the center of their own reality.³ She calls this moving from the “arrogant eye” to the “loving eye.” We do this kind of observing slowly, up close and personal, with all our senses, without judgment. Not so much like the objective and detached observation of a scientist, but more like the enraptured, utterly self-forgetful delight of a child watching a roly-poly or a kitten or a rock. To see the good news of the divinity in all things, we must slow down and perceive with all of our physical senses, and with the eye of the heart. We can completely forget ourselves and be lost in the intimate particularity of another.

The gospel is that we were made for joy. There is a Psalm that says God created leviathan, the great sea monsters, for the sport of it. Yes, we are meant to heal the world. But the way we heal the world is not through hatred or demonizing those we judge to be guilty. It is also not by sweeping hard truths under the rug. It is holding the painful epiphany of injustice together with the radiant epiphany of Jesus and our birthright to join all creation in embodying divine light.

John Philip Newell, Celtic theologian, was giving a talk in Ottawa about how the earth itself is sacred, and how all things are sacred. A Mohawk elder in the audience approached him and said, with tears in his eyes, that he wondered how his people would be today if the Europeans who came to this continent did so expecting to find light in them. Just this week, at the conviction of three white men who murdered black jogger Ahmaud Arbery two years ago, the judge said that “assuming the worst in others, we show our worst character.”⁴ The judge said that this case should prompt people to consider what it means to be a good neighbor.

³ See Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: Why We Should Love Nature*

⁴ Judge Timothy Walmsley, quoted in Richard Fausset, “Three Men Sentenced to Life in Prison in Arbery Killing,” January 7, 2022, *New York Times*, accessed January 7, 2022 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/us/mcmichael-bryan-sentencing-ahmaud-arbery-killing.html?referringSource=articleShare>

That must begin with expecting to see light in others. To seeing them as subjects in their own right, with a loving eye and not an arrogant one. This includes my relatives who are not vaccinated, and the hostas in my backyard, and the crows and bumblebees and possums.

Changing how we see from the arrogant eye to the loving eye also helps us heal from the sickness and sin of white supremacy culture. We are moving from duality to unity, from dominance to profound respect, from possession to delight.

So perhaps this week, we might take time trying to observe in this way. Maybe begin with something that already delights you, like a flower or a sunset or your crush (as my teenager would say) or your child. Try slowing down and perceiving them with all your senses, including their innate light, as subjects in their own right and not because of how they impact you. Then try it with someone you don't care much about, whether it's a person or another living creature. Then, finally, try this with someone who bothers you. It might be the alcoholic who has caused you so much anguish, or the neighbor who gets mad at the creeping Charlie in your lawn, or the relative who voted differently from you.

In the end, we can't love what we don't know. Jesus' command to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves—including our oak tree and squirrel neighbors—begins with knowing them. And the really good news is it's actually pleasant to observe slowly, without judgment. Who knew that a church assignment could actually be fun. This kind of seeing can change the world, because it's hard to hate or exploit someone close up. It's also easier to tell hard truths in love to someone you know and have compassion for. It actually begins to dissolve our own emotional poison when we watch with a loving eye.

May God grant us small, ordinary epiphanies every day, of the divine light all around us and within us too. Amen.