

I don't know if you got to see the "Christmas Star" or "The Great Conjunction" on the Monday before Christmas Day when Jupiter and Saturn were in their closest conjunction since at least 400 years ago (some scientists say 800 years ago), but it was really awesome. I especially loved looking at the pictures taken with telescopes and other professional equipment. Seeing it makes one turn to wonder and be filled with awe. Today- believe it or not- we're still celebrating the season of Christmas, as the 12th day is on January 5th. We're also celebrating Epiphany, which takes place every year on January 6th and is the day often attributed to when the magi follow a star and pay homage to the Christ child. Epiphany is a season reflecting on the revelation of God's gift of Jesus to the world and God's ongoing work through Christ in the world. It is a time to celebrate the light of Christ, Emmanuel, coming into the world. Among those helping God to do the revealing in today's biblical story are the "wise men," or the three kings, as they're popularly called. Today's story is unique only to the Gospel of Matthew, yet these magi seem to make the cut in many, if not most, nativity sets. Let us listen to a word from God but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 2:1-12.**

The various images of the wise men on Christmas cards or in children's books are different from the limited information we read about them in scripture. So much has been made of this story about which we know so little. "The magi, translated as 'wise persons' or 'astrologers' or even 'magicians,' were persons capable of interpreting stars and dreams" (*Connections*, Emerson B. Powery, p. 156). They're indeed "wise," but their wisdom is more of a trade or a science. We don't know how many magi there were. Neither are we told that they were kings. We also

aren't told how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was when they arrived. Some scholars think maybe he was two or so?! What we do know is that these outsiders from the East traveled from Persia (modern day Iran) to Bethlehem, a journey of more than 1,000 miles (Robert Williamson, <http://robertwilliamsonjr.com>). That's a long distance, whether by camel or foot. These magi were weird, mysterious, and intriguing gentiles showing up in a foreign land, searching for a child they had yet to meet nor knew much about; however, they knew that his birth was very significant because they knew that he was the king of the Jews. The star in the sky was so bright that they probably wondered if it was real or just in their own imaginations; nevertheless, they followed it. As important as details are, maybe the point here is that something beyond these magi was calling them, and "it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives" (*Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor).

One of my favorite outdoor Christmas decorations near where I live is a simple, large star nestled high in a tree. I drove by it recently hoping that the owners of the star were honoring the twelve days of Christmas, and there it was...the star of wonder, shining brightly in the night! Many surrounding decorations had been removed, but the star "with royal beauty bright" (*We Three Kings* carol, chorus) remained. Interestingly, the star in today's biblical story doesn't immediately lead the magi to Jesus. Rather, it leads them first to Herod, who goes by the title "King of the Jews." Christmas isn't all sweetness and light, as Herod cannot be eluded. The star leads the magi to the capital city, where perhaps they perceived the child born king of the Jews would naturally be. It leads them to Herod, who seems to only be concerned with preserving his position, title and power. Herod the Great

was king when Jesus was born, and he was a brutal, insecure ruler who lived in constant fear of being overthrown and thus was easily threatened. Keep in mind also that Matthew is making several efforts to bridge prophecies from the OT to this epiphany of Christ's birth in the NT. So when the magi arrive at Herod's palace and ask him the provocative question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?," (2:2) we can imagine how this news may have put Herod on high alert.

We're told that this news not only "frightens" Herod but also "all Jerusalem with him" (2:3). "The power of fear is palpable; it is easy for a leader to share and to use it to his/her advantage" (Hannah Garrity, *A Sanctified Art*). Jesus' reign continues to threaten rulers even today. I imagine with the fear, panic ensues in Herod's palace. "In a way though, the magi's arrival should be expected,' especially among the gathered chief priests and scribes, as Isaiah had prophesied that 'all the nations' would stream to the Lord's mountain. But few imagined that they would arrive with horoscopes, fragrant [gifts], and nature religion" (*Christian Century*, Living by the Word, Thomas Long, Jan. 4, 2014). Herod, with his anxieties high, goes and gathers his priests and scribes and asks them where the messiah is to be born. Those gathered tell him the birth will be in "Bethlehem of Judea" just as the prophet Micah had foretold. Then Herod, with new knowledge and maybe feeling a little more confident and in control, secretly calls for the magi and learns from them the exact time that the star appeared" (2:7). Herod then lies to them encouraging them to go to Bethlehem and seek the child and then to come back and tell him, as he, too, wants to go and honor the child (2:8). After leaving Herod's palace, they once again followed the same star, which

seemed to be a perfect GPS- if there is such a thing. It led the wise men not just to the town, or to the street but to the exact place in Bethlehem where Jesus was with his parents. Isn't it ironic that non-Jews who practiced astrology find the Christ child, while the religious people missed out?! God sent the star to just the people who would know how to act and what to do.

When the star stopped over their destination, the place where Jesus was, we're told that the magi "were overwhelmed with joy" (2:10b). Upon their arrival and entrance into the house, not only did they rejoice but at the very sight of Jesus, they knelt and paid him homage. Then they offered him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, echoed in several passages in the OT as well. This divine meeting seems to be such a beautiful, breath-taking moment. I doubt they planned on being so overwhelmed at the sight of the Christ child. And I sure doubt that Mary and Joseph were looking for more company after the shepherds left them. Again, who knows? What is striking, however, is where the magi go next. They don't go back to Herod's because they receive even further revelation- this time of the most direct and personal kind. Each of them were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they left "for their own country by another road" (2:12). They went home by another way. They rerouted. Maybe because once you meet Jesus, you cannot continue on the same, old path. The magi chose to obey God and thus refused Herod's instructions to return and let him know where the child was. Now that is the power of a divine intervention dream. Have you ever had one of these dreams? You know when you're headed in one direction in life and then God sends a message for you to reroute- to go another way. It's no coincidence that right after the magi left to go back home another

way, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph- in a divine intervention dream- telling him to flee with Mary and Jesus at once to Egypt, not returning until it is safe. The reason? Upon discovering that he was the one tricked by the magi, Herod was furious, belligerent, and extremely threatened. He had “all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under killed” (2:16b) looking for Jesus. Where else have we heard a similar story? This echoes the story in Exodus of Pharaoh and the senseless deaths he ordered of the male children in the hunt to eliminate baby Moses. But in that story, the midwives, fearing God, refused Pharaoh’s command. Metaphorically, they also went home by another way. They rerouted. When faced by the powers of this world that may be in opposition to who God is calling us to be/where God is leading us- what does it mean for us to resist the powers of this world, to listen to God and to go home by another way? What does it look like for you to rebuke fear and choose another way...the way of love?! What if we all were to refuse things that have power over us and suck the life right out of us and choose another way...the way of new life?! A way that leads to following and serving Christ?

In this time of a new year when the resolutions are barely kept much longer than Christmastide lasts, it is important to be reminded that God is with us and at work among us every day of every year- guiding us through the stars or speaking to us in our dreams. Several years ago I was introduced to a new spiritual discipline of receiving a star word on Epiphany to journey throughout the year with me (<https://marciglass.com/2014/01/06/stars-in-2014/>). I must confess that some of the star words I’ve received over the last few years have been both comforting and challenging. On or near the day that we remember the star that led the magi

to Jesus, people choose a star word to journey with them throughout this year. But because we aren't in-person for worship, I'd like to invite you to comment on Facebook below the video of today's worship service if you'd like a star word. Or you can email Tandy Taylor and request one. The star word is yours for the year to pray over, ponder and wait for what God may reveal to you. It is my hope that you'll share, in time, how God through this word has worked on you throughout the year.

God sets our stars and secures our steps in the midst of the great conjunction in our lives. Trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit among us, let us continue to have hope, even as we persevere with this pandemic and life as we know it. After all, "our hope is not in the new year...but in the ONE who makes all things new" (Clergy Coaching Network). "Sometimes we have to be open to new resources for divine revelation, like dreams and stars or advice from children and words of hope from unexpected places" (Connections, Emerson B. Powery). So let us remember that God is on the loose- leading and guiding us to go home by another way- to reroute- because now is when the work of Christmas begins. As Howard Thurman reminds us, "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart." May Christ's light shine through us as brightly as the Christmas Star, leading others, especially outsiders, to reroute and join us in the work of Christmas long after the decorations are put away and the carols cease. Amen.