

SERMON- Feast of the Epiphany (Observed)

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Isaiah 60:1-6 ————— Ephesians 3:1-12 —————

Good Shepherd

January 3, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12 ————— Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

OPENING:

2020 ended with a bright glimmer of hope.

There was Christmas, of course, but, right before that, on December 21st, there was THE GREAT CONJUNCTION on the winter solstice.

Saturn and Jupiter came into alignment so that they appeared to be right next to each other in the sky. This sort of conjunction, astronomers tell us, last was visible 800 years ago.

What a gift, brought from afar, it was to behold at the end of such a miserable year.

“CHRISTMAS STAR”

Some referred to the conjunction as the “Christmas Star”—making the connection that, maybe, that sort of object was what the magi beheld on their way to Bethlehem.

The math and science regarding this check out (almost):

there WAS such a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC, in fact the two planets met not once, but three times in the sky during that year.

Perhaps then, scholars can guess, it started in the east, then moved overhead, then settled in the west... in a pattern that would have attracted star watchers of that day.

Other candidates explaining the “Christmas Star” have included:

(what we now know as) Halley’s Comet (which buzzed by Earth in 11 BC), or a supernova (which is what Johannes Kepler surmised it must have been), or an occultation (whatever that is) of a particular constellation.¹

I encourage you, via a simple Google search, to go down, as I did, these very rabbit holes; they were exhilarating, interesting, and tedious all at the same time.

If you are like me, and math and science have never been your strong suit, you can end with a fuzzy acceptance that is probably/ maybe/ good enough for the star. especially if you are willing to shave off a year of Herod’s reign here or add a year to Jesus’ birth there.

¹ Joe Rao, 12/21/2020, *Space.com*: [‘Christmas Star’ 2020: Here’s some fun facts about the ‘great conjunction’ of Jupiter and Saturn | Space](#)

Ironically, over the last 50 years or so, it's been out of fashion for Biblical scholars to accept the actuality of the magi's visit, while astronomers are now more likely to champion the celestial phenomenon of Scripture.

REVELATION

Where does that leave us here in 2021?

Like ships passing in the night, science and religion, faith and doubt, Church "insiders" versus those on the outside, can't quite seem to talk to one another, not to mention get on the same page.

I'll admit that, after taking a picture of the GREAT CONJUNCTION two weeks ago and posting on the Church Facebook page, that I texted Steve and Christine with these words about the speck in the southwestern sky:
"It's really exhilarating..... and also kind of disappointing."

Another admission, in the Epiphany story, the worst people, other than the bloodthirsty Herod, are the clergy, the religious professionals, who show up/ quote Scripture and then peace out.

There is no curiosity, no sense of wonder, not even a vague speculation about what's going on only 5 miles down the road in Bethlehem.
They merely cite the prevailing wisdom of yore, that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (which turns out to be right), collect the check and move on.

What they need, what you and I need, is a reminder
—stunning and shining and brilliantly illuminating reminders—
that revelation comes sometimes from the outside,
that God so often reveals Godself in unexpected and extraordinary ways.

So often in the Bible, it's dreams and stars and all the people/ things that you would never expect, that deliver God's message.

We are who are on the inside of the tradition need to hear that, and to be willing to receive these epiphanies regardless from their source.

Like Mary and Joseph, who did not really know where the Magi and their gifts came from, we should graciously accept such gifts and the miracle behind them.

IMAGE #1:

Where we can find such signals, such brilliant stars pointing beyond, right here on earth?

Here are a couple images of that dynamic, just to try open up that world, and maybe help us to see Epiphany in action.

The first image is indeed a little out there, strange and exotic like the Magi. Here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, right outside the sanctuary, about 40 feet from where I am standing, strangers and travelers come from afar to this place. They have no connection to the church and have probably never come inside but they come to pay a sort of homage.

There is a *Pokémon Go* station right outside the church in the parking lot. This is a spot where you use your phone to battle and train, stick with me, online avatars to earn points. My 10-year-old nephew showed me once and I have no idea what's going on with it.

But it means there is a fairly constant parade of people, often walking, sometimes showing up in cars to do something on your phone.

They use the GPS navigation, they "traverse so far" by the stars to get here and then they go on their merry way.

I can only imagine the first interaction between John Morris, our impeccably mustached former Navy Captain and the scruffy George Mason students trying to explain why they were here.

Maybe it's the 2021 talking but are these Pokémon players not like the magi? They don't know Bethlehem from Bathsheba, but they are curious, star searchers, star trekkers, adventurers, eager to cross a threshold. Maybe they even see something that we do not?

I don't like New Year's resolutions but here's one for me: to talk to our visitors and ask "What are you doing?" "How are you doing?"

IMAGE #2

My next image is closer to home, and we had it right here a few moments ago. The Christmas Carol "We Three Kings" was written by an Episcopal clergyman, and he intended for each of the 3 verses to be linked to male voices.

The image of the McGarry sisters offering their version, upending the familiar image that we often have, is a powerful one, its own gift. It helps us to understand again the intrusion of the original magi, coming from afar, offering something different, but beautiful and miraculous.

It reminds me how the Disciples would later be called “world turners” for what they were doing to the Greco-Roman world around them²; but the wisemen were the first to turn the world upside down, by journeying across boundaries and expectations, following a star that was not behaving either.

This rendition of “We Three Kings” help us think about Epiphany in that way and, stay tuned, as the Three Kings will be back during announcements to explain their gifts.

I know I am biased because of the work that I do with the children and youth here, and because I have a 3 year old at home. But I SO BELIEVE in what young people have to offer to us as strange/ exotic/ unexpected and what it teaches us about God and God’s inbreaking in this world even though I know I will be teased about my lack of Pokémon knowledge tonight!

CONCLUSION

To close and return to the original look at the “stars in their courses.”

Matthew, in writing this story, does not want to compete with contemporary astrophysics.

Nor is he recommending astrology as a way to the divine.³

Instead, our Gospel story “cleverly testifies to the power of God” and shows that there is no bounds on how God will work in our lives.

As Dante wrote: “God is the love that moves the stars”

and there is nothing outside God’s control or notice that will not allow us to be in relationship with the newborn Jesus born under a star in Bethlehem.⁴

AMEN

² Acts. 17.6

³ David Schnasa Jacobsen “Exegetical Perspective.” 2013. *Feasting on the Gospels – Matthew* (Volume 1) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. 17.

⁴ James C. Howell “Theological Perspective.” 2015. *Feasting on the Word- Advent through Transfiguration (Year B)* (Volume 1) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. 212,214.