

Epiphany 2021 (Observed)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 3, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In the television Christmas classic, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” there is a scene near the end in which the Abominable Snowman places the star on top of the very tall Christmas tree. I always notice what is on top of a Christmas tree. It’s always either a star, or an angel. The star and the angel are the two anchor symbols of the night sky over Bethlehem. The angel is from Luke’s gospel, and the Christmas story. The star is from Matthew’s gospel, and the Epiphany story. Whatever you put on the top of your tree may have more to do with your sense of taste or with family tradition or with whatever you are able to find that works in your chest of Christmas decorations. However, if television’s “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is accurate, Santa Claus and the citizens of the North Pole have a star on top of their own tree.

The Christmas Star was in the news last month because of the “Great Conjunction,” in which Saturn and Jupiter came quite close together, and because of the short days and long nights in the northern hemisphere, earthlings of the northern hemisphere could see the conjunction on the western horizon, appearing possibly as the brightest star in the sky. It was a phenomenon that lasted for a few evenings.

When I was a kid growing up in Houston, Texas, that city had a planetarium, a kind of theater where the ceiling shows various simulations of the night sky. I would have been five or six years old when I was taken to see the Christmas star show at that planetarium. The show went through various scientific explanations of what might have been the Christmas star. Could it have been a comet? Could it have been a supernova? Could it have been a meteor? Could it have been a conjunction of planets or stars? How can astronomy explain the Christmas star? I didn’t realize it at the time, but of course that was intended to be an educational program. To teach the differences among comets and meteors and stars and planets and supernovas.

There has always been a symbiotic relationship between those who are seeking to understand or explain the star and those who are trying to determine when Jesus was born. The way that the calendar was constructed, Jesus would have been born in the year 1, the *anno domini* 1, the year of the Lord 1. That calendar was constructed in the sixth century by a monk who was working on Easter calculations. If I were asked when Jesus was born, my best guess would be prior to 4 BC. But some say the wise men may not have reached Jesus until one or two years later, based on some things that Matthew says about King Herod and the slaughter of all the children under the age of two, along with some very theoretical proposals for squaring Luke’s gospel with

Matthew's gospel, for getting the angels and the star into one unified narrative. In any event, if you are trying to match up with astronomical events of the time, you have a range of dates to work with, and interestingly, a lot of unusual astronomical events in those years. The Chinese recorded what may have been a supernova or a comet in 5 BC. There was a planetary conjunction in 7 BC, in 3 BC, and two in 2 BC. If you are looking for a connection, there are some candidates. You can find unusual things noted in history by the astrologers of the times, and you can also simulate the sky of the time using math and what we now know about the motion and configurations of stars and planets.

What the gospel of Matthew describes does not easily intersect with astronomy. The star seems to lead the wise men west, to Jerusalem, and then to turn south, to Bethlehem, and then to hover, to stop, over the place where Jesus and his parents lived. No comet can do that, no planetary conjunction. Although some of the proposals have two separate phenomena in order to explain the discrepancy. Matthew, for his part, seems aware that auspicious stars were connected with royal births. On the coin with Julius Caesar was a star. On the coin with Caesar Augustus was a star. On the coin with King Herod the Great, who appears in our gospel reading, was a star. So to have a star appearing at the birth of Jesus might suggest that he was a king, or indeed an emperor. *"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."* Which would go a long way toward explaining Herod's jealousy and violent rage in the verses which follow today's gospel.

Now that I'm older I know that every planetarium has a Christmas star show. It's a crowd pleaser and sells tickets during the holiday season. But most people are fascinated with the stars and that they ought to mean something. Horoscopes and the zodiac carry great weight with people. But even apart from mystical and supernatural ideas about the stars, we are naturally curious about the world, and we crave the opportunity to feel wonder. I daresay something we felt more in childhood than in adulthood, most of us. So if you were one of those who looked at the evening sky in December, hoping to connect in some way with a larger meaning and a larger picture, then you might be a modern-day Magi. That's a good thing. That's why this story was written.

On the cover of the service folder, for those who are able to look, I placed an image of the night sky over the Griffith Park Observatory in the Hollywood hills of Los Angeles. There is something nice about a place where Angelenos can go and look up from the bright lights of their flashy city— Tinseltown— and look up at the night skies. For wonder. For wisdom. For curiosity.

The Magi saw a star. It, too, was about wonder. About wisdom. About curiosity. It drew them to Jesus. In our own day, in our own lives, may the star continue to draw Magi to the true light of Christ. Amen.