

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Second Sunday after Christmas (Observance of The Epiphany), January 3, 2021

(Matthew 2:1-12)

The world was treated to an incredible sight in the days leading up to this just-past celebration of Christmas, one that drew a great deal of global attention. In an astronomical event known as a conjunction, over a period of several days the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn gradually brought those two great planets closer to one another. Night after night these two brilliant points of light in our sky drew nearer and nearer.

This certainly wasn't an unusual event; according to NASA, these two planets align in the sky once every 20 years or so.¹ What made *this* particular occurrence so spectacular was that it was the closest they had come to one another in 400 years and it was the first time in 800 years that this took place at night.²

Now I'm admittedly a bit of an astronomy nerd – I have been ever since I watched the original “Cosmos” television series with Carl Sagan back in the early 1980s – and so I was very excited to see this event, a sight often referred to as the “Christmas star.” But although my wife was able to glimpse it a few times as she drove over the mountain coming home from work, and despite my enjoyment of countless photographs posted by friends and strangers alike on social media, *I never saw it*. On those few evenings when this convergence was at its most spectacular, the cloud cover hanging over my home obscured it from my sight.

I never saw it, but I knew it was there. I had faith that it was happening.

The Magi described by the writer of Matthew were likely astrologers from the area of Persia and Babylon who in their time responded to their own glimpse of the Christmas star. But more than simply observing, documenting and considering the meaning of the star, however, something moved this group to *follow it ...* to see what wondrous thing it was illuminating. Undertaking that journey meant they had to move out of what would have been their intellectual comfort zones. As The Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews writes, “In order truly to follow the star, the wise men had to move beyond reason to intuition. They had to move beyond science to faith – trusting the journey even though they did not know where they were going.”³

I wasn't able to see this year's convergence, but I had faith – I *knew* – that it was taking place, far beyond my range of sight. These Magi from a foreign land weren't able to see to what or whom they were being led, but they had faith – they *knew* – that something ... *someone* ... was there. It was a faith rooted in an experience vastly different from that of the first Christians who would have been reading this Gospel, and indeed for the Magi to be portrayed in this particular way might be considered somewhat of a revolutionary thought. Magi were Gentiles – *pagans* – and yet in this Gospel are the *very first people* to worship the newborn Jesus. There was something powerful they saw in that star, something these

¹ “The ‘Great’ Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.” <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/the-great-conjunction-of-jupiter-and-saturn>

² *Ibid.*

³ Susan R. Andrews, “Matthew 2:1-12 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 1* (Kindle edition).

non-believers saw in that brilliant light that inspired them to leave their homes, form what would have been a large caravan and travel to the home of the infant Messiah.

This morning I want you to consider something, and it requires a change of perspective ... perhaps, like the Magi, moving out of your comfort zone. I want you to consider the Christmas star not as something you *see* but rather as something you *are*. I want you to picture yourselves as that glimpse of something spectacular in the distance to which someone else is drawn, someone from our local community or perhaps from even farther away.

In considering yourselves as that star, take a moment to consider what God is doing with and through you to draw someone else here to this church and this community of faith. The Magi saw the star at its rising and risked a great deal, including potentially their own personal safety, to make the journey to the house where Joseph, Mary and Jesus dwelt. They followed an instinct to travel to a place guided only by a star and not knowing what they would find there. Take time to ponder what God is doing in your life ... to ponder the convergence between your journey and what you may discern as God's purpose for you. Even in this time of adjusted worship and physical separation, you each have the God-given gifts and abilities to illuminate ... to attract ... to be a beacon for those on their own journeys.

I'll end by returning to my interest in astronomy and the work of Carl Sagan, who said in one episode of "Cosmos," "Some part of our being knows this is where we came from. We long to return, and we can because the cosmos is also within us. We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself."⁴ As a man of science and not a man of faith, Sagan was speaking of our physical connection to the universe.

However, I'm going to appropriate his words to use for The Epiphany ... and for the consideration I ask you to make about yourselves. As people of faith, we know where we came from. We long to return because *God* is also within us. Like that convergence that guided the Magi to the feet of the Messiah – that first Christmas star that lit their path – and like the beacon each of us is called to be, we too are made of star stuff.

Amen.

⁴ "Carl Sagan – We are Star Stuff." YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrcggrTWKNI>.