

Today we commemorate the holy day of Epiphany and the visit of the magi to the young king Jesus. Epiphany means “shining forth” and this celebration symbolizes for us the manifestation of God to all the peoples of the earth-the shining forth of God’s love and revelation for all people. Mary and the shepherds had angelic messengers, Joseph had a dream, but the magi received the message by studying the heavens and observing the stars and planets.

During our weekly staff meetings here at St. James we always open with a reading from the Gospel lesson appointed for Sunday and we sometimes get into interesting discussions. For the past few years, whenever we’ve discussed the wise men, the magi, our very adept and clever Director of Music, Alex, has asked a simple question that so far none of us has been able to answer: “How is it that magi from the east, followed a star in the east, but traveled west to find Jesus?”

It’s a great question. And this week, I was taken by the question of the star – what was this star? What did it mean? And why was a star the messenger of Jesus’ birth to the wider world? It’s fascinating that God would use heavenly bodies to direct and lead people to go on a journey to find and worship Christ. There’s a lot we don’t know. So let’s start with what we do know: We know this visit of the magi happened well after Jesus’ birth, likely about two years later. We know the magi’s journey was a journey of epic importance. We know the magi themselves were men who were wise scholar-priests, men who practiced astrology and astronomy from the “east”- from Babylon or Persia (modern day Iraq or Iran), and who likely followed the Zoroastrian religion- one of the world’s most ancient religions that held a belief, like Judaism, in a coming Messiah. We don’t know how many magi there were- some traditions say there were 12 magi (we say three because three gifts were given, but the Bible doesn’t say). What we read about the star from Matthew’s Gospel is that the magi had observed the star at its “rising in the east” and had set out and that it stopped over the place where the child Jesus was.

This event has puzzled scholars and scientists for centuries. But an astronomer named Dr. Michael Molnar from Rutgers University, researched the question of the Bethlehem star at length, taking into account astronomy, archeology, and ancient astrology for the first time. And as I read his theories – it turns out he has support from many scholars and scientists who believe he has found an answer to this mystery.

Dr. Molnar points out that the term star “in the east” is a literal translation of the Greek phrase *ente anatole*, which was a technical term used in Greek mathematical astrology in ancient times. It described, very specifically, a planet that would rise above the eastern horizon just before the sun would appear. Then, just moments after the planet would rise, it would disappear in the light of the sun. So, except for a brief moment, no one would see this “star in the east”-this planet.

This is called a heliacal rising. And astronomers today know, by winding the clock back in time and observing the sky and star charts, that the planet Jupiter, the largest planet, also known as the King planet since ancient times, had its heliacal rising in the constellation Aries, around the time scholars date Jesus birth. And Aries is, get this, the sign associated with Judea. And on that same day, the moon occulted Jupiter for the second time in a row...which was hugely significant because the reappearance of a planet like Jupiter was considered significant for someone born that day. Thus, according to Dr. Molnar, the “star in the east” was the planet Jupiter making this rare type of heliacal rising- with incredible astrological significance. And then Jupiter -being in Aries - was the absolute indicator to ancient astrologists, of a royal birth in Judea.

So what about the star stopping over where the child was? The word here, usually translated as “stood over” comes from the Greek word *epano*, which also, Molnar points out, had an important meaning to the ancients. It refers to a particular moment when a planet stops moving and changes apparent direction from westward to eastward

motion. This occurs when the Earth, which orbits the sun more quickly than other planets like Jupiter, catches up with, or laps, that other planet. So Jupiter would have appeared to have stopped moving when they arrived at Jesus' birth place.

Since these magi would have, no doubt, been familiar with the prophecies of a child being born to the family of David, they most likely had been watching the skies for many years, waiting for alignments that would foretell the birth of this king. When Jupiter made this auspicious and rare heliacal rising they would have known when to start heading west, as well as when to stop. In terms of astrological and astronomical import, this event was absolutely unique within spans of hundreds of years.

Fascinating, right? But what does this teach us today? What's the lesson for us?

First, we are reminded of the purpose and awesomeness of God's creation— that, as Psalm 19 declares, and I quote: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." God's creation, reveals God's truth and glory and declares God's message, says Scripture, and the magi were paying attention.

Second, it reminds us that God is always revealing to us – and to the world, God's messages of love, hope and guidance. What stars has God brought into your life? Probably not literal stars, but messages, people, events, things that beckon you and call you forth into your own journey of faith? It required not only paying attention for the magi to read the messages God had written in the skies, it required faith to act on it. They had to leave their homes and set out on a journey that would have taken months or more to arrive at their destination. They had to have faith and trust that God would get them there and that their long and

arduous journey would not be in vain...that they would find what they were searching for.

The magi are a model of faith to us...to believe God's universal message of hope and love for all people in the birth of his Son, a King of peace. And when they found the Christ, they knelt down, worshipped him in faith, and offered him gifts fit for a king.

Our own life journeys require faith – like the faith of the magi – to look for and trust the signs that God places in our path. We too must trust that our journeys will not be in vain, that there is a purpose to what happens, that our lives and our life events are not random, but in fact, will lead us to exactly where God wants us to go and become who God has called us to be...if we will follow. And as we follow the stars, the signs that God has given us, our journeys will have a good ending too – in this life or the next, and like the journey of the Magi, it will end at the feet of Christ the King, where we, ragged and weary as we may be, will, like the magi, finally bow down and worship God in Christ – and know God's love for us and all people.

Your journey has a purpose...it is of epic importance. Things in this world are not random...and the magi believed that. Your life is not random, but we do have choice. So seek your purpose – find your stars – and follow in faith, the light that God sheds upon your unique path. And then worship the God of love.

Amen.