

On the Christmas Star
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Today is Epiphany—the day we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ to all nations, represented by the magi who come to worship Christ. By the willingness of these wise men to follow the light of a Star, the whole story of Jesus' birth changes. We can celebrate Christ as the light of the world, not just as an exclusive messiah to a select few.^[1] Rev. Stephen Bauman explains Epiphany by saying, "Everyone has been invited to God's natal party, even those who have been traveling radically different paths on their search for their true home . . . Even the most well-schooled Christian needs regular reminding that no one is above another, that no one has a corner on the complete truth, and that even the baptized travel a path with many distractions."^[2]

It's an important day, and it's also a day that can be difficult to deal with in modernity. The biggest question we may have is what's up with that Star of Bethlehem, that Christmas Star. We modern people like to search for facts, for proof. So it's not surprising that scientists have pondered what astrological event the Star of Bethlehem was, asking what was present in the night sky around the birth of Jesus.

Astronomers have proposed four theories of what the Star could have been. Joe Rao, an instructor at New York's Hayden Planetarium, explains that the Christmas Star could have been a bright meteor, a comet, a nova or supernova outburst, or a grouping of the bright naked-eye planets that were confused for a star. Scientists have dated some astrological events around the time of Jesus' birth and found the most likely explanation of what these wisemen from the East followed to Judea.

The most compelling case revolves around the constellation Leo and the planets Venus and Jupiter. I hate to tell you this, but December 25th was not the actual date of Jesus' birth, feeling like the Grinch up here with that revelation. But we know that Jesus was born sometime between 7-3 B.C.E. Astronomers note that on August 12th 3 B.C.E. there was a close conjunction of Venus and Jupiter with the constellation Leo. Venus eventually vanished due to the glare of the sun, but Jupiter and Leo remained in the night sky for ten months.

All of these astrological events would have been important for the magi, who were priest-astrologers of sorts. In some translations of the Bible, the Magi are referred to as astrologers—as in "Astrologers from the East showed up in Jerusalem."^[3] They read the signs in the sky and tried to interpret their meanings, not sure they did horoscopes the way we think of astrology today. But Leo lining up with Venus and Jupiter would have been amazing for them to behold.

But here's where it gets really interesting—in June of 2 B.C.E. when the Magi most likely had their audience with King Herod, to quote Joe Rao, "Jupiter and the stars of Leo began to sink into the western evening twilight, Venus again returned to this same region of the sky for an even more spectacular encore. The Magi certainly would have especially taken note that on the evening of June 17, Jupiter and Venus appeared even closer together than they did in the dawn skies of the previous August . . . Finally, at 8:30 p.m. local time they drew to within a mere 0.6 of an arc minute of each other while appearing in the western twilight sky. To the Magi the two brightest planets must have appeared to coalesce into one and glowed before them like a dazzling beacon over Judea."^[4]

So there you have it, an analysis of the astrological event that most likely was interpreted by the Magi and the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as the Star of Bethlehem. Case closed, we can all go home now. Seriously though, as I read up on these scientific explanations, I can't say that they made me feel that much more solidified in my faith. Probably because I've long held that there is a difference between faith and belief in our Christian tradition.

UCC Pastor Robin Meyers says it best, "Beliefs are claims made that something is or is not the case. In religion these claims are made about God and then elevated to the level of dogma . . . Faith, in contrast, is an orientation toward the mystery of God, best understood by many as unconditional love, not a list of claims that one can know with certainty what that mystery is or wants, or even whether it exists. Faith, oddly enough, requires faith. It is a form of trust, the ultimate form of trust."^[5]

This is why in the United Church of Christ we have a Statement of Faith that unites us as a denomination, not a set of creeds we have to adhere to in order to belong to the UCC. We're non-creedal, not big on dogma. We emphasize faith as "an orientation toward the mystery of God."^[6] We encourage everyone to work out their beliefs and we often do this together in each local UCC church, but we don't have a Statement of Belief as a denomination. We have a Statement of Faith, and there's a difference.

Maybe I'm alone in this, but having a bit of mystery in Christianity doesn't bother me that much. Because there are some things that are beyond our comprehension, and maybe they're supposed to be. Maybe the meaning and truth found within our faith and a connection with the holy is deeper than the historical or scientific facts we can ascertain using our modern methods of analysis. One of my favorite professors in seminary always said that whether these stories in the Bible happened exactly as written or not, they remain some of the best and truest stories you will ever hear in your life.

Today I related one scientific hypothesis that the astrological event we say is the Star of Bethlehem was actually Leo, Venus, and Jupiter in close proximity to each other at various dates in 3 and 2 B.C.E. It's wonderful. Now we know what those wisemen might have seen and why they would travel to investigate what was going on in Judea. But this scientific explanation doesn't make the story itself that much more compelling. Because it's not really about that astrological event in the sky, even if we know what it may have been.

The story is about what that astrological event led to. Epiphany is about trusting God, it's about getting outside your comfort zone, it's about humility in recognizing that even if you're rich and wise and powerful, God is worthy of your love and devotion. It's about the unconditional love of God being extended to all people, even people whose paths are far different than any of our individual paths. Because at the end of the day, we're all trying to follow or should be trying to follow that metaphorical Star of Bethlehem to get back home to God, to fall on our knees out of pure love and devotion to God in our midst.

It's about hearing the story anew every year. "And there guiding them on was the star that they had observed in the East. It led them on until it came to a standstill above where the child lay. Once they saw the star, they were beside themselves with joy."^[7] Let's be beside ourselves with joy today at a Star in the sky that led these astrologers to trust God and venture out into the world to discover holiness in their midst. And let's you and I live into our faith and the unconditional love of our divinely mysterious God. Let's follow the example of the Magi. Let's be bold and humble and trusting and open to holy adventures this year. May it be so. Amen.

[1] "Epiphany" ELCA Resource, <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Planning/Epiphany.aspx>

[2] Rev. Stephen Bauman, Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word, Year C, 65.

- [3] Robert J. Miller Ed., The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version, Matthew 2:1.
- [4] Joe Rao, "Was the Star of Bethlehem a star, comet . . . or miracle?" December 23, 2011, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45778305/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/was-star-bethlehem-star-comet-or-miracle/#.UOb0fnepcRM
- [5] Robin Meyers, The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus, 118
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Robert J. Miller Ed., The Complete Gospels: The Scholars Version, Matthew 2:9-10.

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