

I wonder if any of you were able to see the recent astronomical event called the **Great Conjunction** where Jupiter and Saturn aligned together, and appeared as a single bright star in the night sky. News reports called it the *Christmas* Star – and that’s what the ancient *Star of Bethlehem* is called, the star that features in our Gospel reading this morning.

It’s *not* known whether the Star of Bethlehem was a conjunction of planets, though astronomers have discovered there were plenty of conjunctions happening around the time of Jesus’ birth. Theologians *haven’t* agreed whether the phenomenon was natural or supernatural - but I lean towards the miraculous! John Chrysostom wrote in one of his homilies, “How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down, and stood over the very head of the young child? And at this the evangelist was hinting when he said, “Lo, the star went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.”

And with our Gospel reading we’re experiencing a **conjunction** of two seasons: the end of Christmas aligning with the beginning of Epiphany. If *Christmas* is about the hope and promise that the birth of Christ brings, *Epiphany* is when we begin to see this hope and promise *being fulfilled* through **signs** and **wonders** that reveal the identity of Jesus to those who experience them.

So the “wise men” have seen a new star at its rising and *because of their wisdom*, they *recognize* this as a **sign** that a child has been born who is king of the Jews. They travel from the East to Jerusalem in Judea to ask for additional guidance for the exact location of the child. In an article in *The Christian Century*, Debra Dean Murphy describes the wise men or *Magi* as “sages” who likely served as political advisers to the Persian court. Their “resistance to Roman Imperial power would have been a requirement for the job.”

Herod was the alleged “king of the Jews,” having gained that title from the Roman Senate. As a “client king” Herod enjoyed the protection of his position, so long as he remained loyal to Rome. Herod would have felt threatened by the news of wise men from the east seeking to pay homage to a newborn “king of the Jews.” And our text says that not only was *Herod* frightened, but “all Jerusalem with him.” Together, they were fully invested in the comfortable arrangement that existed between the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman authorities. Anything that disrupted their settled situation was to be opposed, *even if it meant the rejection of what God was truly calling them to be.*

We see in the text that Herod *didn't know* where the Messiah was to be born, but the chief priests and scribes helped him out by reciting **the ancient prophecies**: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days” (*Micah 5:2*).

So by this, Herod discovers the child was **in Bethlehem**, and now he wants to know *when* the star had appeared to the wise men, so he could gauge the child's age – already **the plot** was forming in Herod's mind to **get rid of** this threat to the security of his position by killing all male children in Bethlehem, aged two years and under. The biblical scholar Richard Horsley describes Herod's reign as "what today would be called a police-state, complete with loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture and brutal retaliation against any serious dissenter." Power mixed with paranoia is a dangerous combination, especially in the hands of a leader who cares more for himself than for his people. Herod **lies** to the wise men by telling them he also wants to pay homage to the child, and asks them to report back to him when they find him.

The star leads the wise men to the place where the child was, stopping *right over* the house where Jesus was, with Mary. The wise men kneel in respect and worship, and present gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – Gentiles, rather than religious leaders, were among the first to worship the newborn king of the Jews. As they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men left to go back to their own country by another road.

The wise men had followed the star and found God in a **humble** place. From their dreams they discerned the voice of the Spirit warning them not to listen to Herod. The forces opposing God would not succeed in their attempt to hijack God's purposes.

The Gospel in today's passage reveals a God who leads us to **humble** places – where we will find Christ. That's why I find it disconcerting to hear that some churches preach the "prosperity gospel" – the belief that material riches are the sign of God's blessing, if you have enough faith. It's upsetting to read about pastors who have private jets and yachts and mansions. But it can be hard to turn away from aspirations of material wealth and pride of social status. There's a lot of pressure in our western secular culture to value the goal of prosperity.

There's a blog I've recently discovered called "The Alliance," with devotionals by the Christian pastor A.W. Tozer. I found one called "The Humble Place," which seems particularly resonant today. Tozer writes: "I have met two classes of Christians: the proud *who imagine* they are humble and the humble who *are afraid* they are proud! There should be another class – the self-forgetful men and women who leave the whole thing in the hands of Christ and refuse to waste any time trying to make themselves good. They will reach the goal far ahead of the rest. The truly humble person does not expect to find virtue in himself; and when he finds none, he is not disappointed. He knows that any good deed he may do is the result of God's working within him. When this belief becomes so much a part of any man or woman that it operates as a kind of unconscious reflex, he or she is released from the burden of trying to live up to the opinion they hold of themselves. They can relax and count upon the Holy Spirit to fulfill the moral law within them. Let us never forget that the promises of God are made to the humble: the proud man by his pride forfeits every blessing promised to the lowly heart, and from the hand of God he need expect only justice!"

God *wants* to bless us – and wants us to see that our **true blessings** are not found in money or in worldly power or in material things – our true riches are found in a humble, compassionate faith. That’s why we have lessons in the bible like the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and Jesus saying things like “it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The wise men knew not to be seduced by the powerful and wealthy Herod. They knew that a much more valuable reward would be found if they held fast to the leading of the star.

Today’s Epiphany gospel teaches us that God is in ultimate control. The powers and principalities of evil will **not** derail God’s love or purposes for the world. And Jesus *Emmanuel* will be found everywhere that we seek him ...but *especially* in the humble places.

With the spirit of wisdom and revelation, may you, like the wise men, **follow the signs** by which God continues to lead you - so that you would know the hope to which Christ has called us, and the **true riches** of his inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of *God’s* power for us who believe. Amen.