

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – At Its Rising – January 3, 2021
John 1:1-14 and Matthew 2:1-12

Just under two weeks ago, professional astronomers and casual stargazers alike experienced a phenomenon that could be seen across the world. That evening, Jupiter and Saturn, while still hundreds of millions of miles apart, aligned enough that they appeared to form a “double planet” in the night sky, visible to the unaided eye.¹ It was the closest that these two celestial bodies had been in some 800 years. And soon, a variety of news outlets began referring to the sighting as the Christmas star.

For centuries, experts in numerous fields of study have sought rational explanations for events depicted in the Bible. I’m reminded here of those who have dedicated their lives to uncovering the remnants of Noah’s ark, or pharaoh’s chariots, or Jesus’ empty tomb. Many of these researchers set out to prove the validity of our faith to any who might doubt our claims.

Simultaneously, others have pursued rational explanations in an effort to demystify the texts. They maintain that while certain biblical events may have appeared extraordinary to ancient observers, that sense of wonder that they

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saturn-jupiter-winter-solstice-great-conjunction/>

experienced is now easily explained by science. To this end, researchers have studied the alignment of various planets near the time of Jesus' birth. By doing so, some have reached the conclusion that what once seemed mysterious and other is now fully within our ability to grasp and comprehend.

You see, whatever one's agenda or bias, there has long been this temptation to say something factual or definitive about the various elements of the biblical narrative. As a history major, I am fascinated by these kinds of explorations. But I also recognize that our scriptures never intended to describe natural phenomenon. And that these narratives are speaking, not about something that we can prove with enough attention to detail and method, but about the miraculous and mysterious presence of heaven to earth come down.

Our second lesson this morning is a great example of this. Matthew reports of a star, which captured the imagination of wise men from the east. Our understanding of outer space tells us that stars are constantly in motion. They are so far away, however, that they often appear to be stationary because we are unable to see them move with an unassisted eye. The biblical account, though, says that this star remained stationary while the magi were in Jerusalem, that it led them all the way to

Bethlehem, that it guided them to the precise location of Jesus, and that it “stood still” to mark the designated spot.²

Friends, no matter how closely our planets align, and no matter what was happening in the night sky at the time of Jesus’ birth, there is no rational explanation for this. No documented account of a star that stands still. And no scientific reason why gentile magi from the east should leave their homeland in search of a Jewish, peasant king.

Our purpose, as followers of Jesus Christ, has never been to explain biblical events in such a way, and with enough supporting evidence, to make these claims palatable to a cynical and learned audience. That, mind you, is the work of scientific exploration. Our task is theological, and intended to reveal something of the character and purposes of God.

You see, to enter into scriptural texts is to affirm the mystery and power of the divine other. It is to observe, among the participants in these passages, glimpses of ourselves. It is to plumb the depths of human motivation and to earnestly seek God’s will. It is to permit ourselves to become lost in awe and wonder. Friends,

² New Interpreter’s Bible. Pg. 142.

theological exploration is the work that artists and poets often perform so well, while the rest of us set out to prove that we are really on the right path.

This Christmas, I received a beautiful card from a musician friend which depicts three shrouded figures on camelback traversing a desert landscape. The night sky is a beautiful palette of colors, accentuated by gold flecks and an omnipresent star. We infer that Matthew's Gospel is the point of reference here. That these are the wise men. That this is the star which is leading them to Bethlehem. And that their final destination is Jesus. It reads, "Christmas reminds us we're all on a journey... toward meaning, toward hope, toward love and lasting peace."

I placed that card on my nightstand. Daily, I pick it up and hold it in my hands. I observe the star at its rising. I reflect on the stunning artwork and the good news found in this message. And time and time again, I have thought, "yes. This is the essence of Epiphany reflection." This is what it means to draw alongside the divine mystery.

My mind returns to Advent, as I hear the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, saying, "prepare the way of the Lord." I think about those wise men traversing through their own desert wilderness, preparing room in their hearts

to pay homage to the holy other. And I think about us, in the wilderness of Covid-19, wondering how God may be speaking to us in this moment, as we search diligently for our own signs of light and life.

This afternoon, I will officiate at my second Covid-19 related funeral in just eight days. The first was held last Saturday, for long-time Westminster member Frank Field. And today, I will gather with the family of John Zimmerman. A native of Akron, Mr. Zimmerman was dedicated to this congregation before moving out of state to pursue other opportunities.

As we pray for each of these families, and for countless others like them who share in the pain of this pandemic, we join in the very human longing to catch a glimpse of the star at its rising, hovering over that place where the God of comfort will be made known. A swirl of color dances across the night sky, as the Holy Spirit guides our way to the manger where the child is born. We kneel in humble service, bearing the gifts of our lives and disclosing the desires of our hearts.

The journey has just begun, and we do not know where it will take us. But we sense that God is near. That the child is chosen, and that we will forever be blessed on account of his faithfulness. The star slowly recedes into the distance, but God's

Spirit remains. We hear the angels singing. And we gather with shepherds and with kings in wondering what new thing God is now doing among us. The night sky melts away, and the sun's first rays appear. We find ourselves lost in awe and wonder. Immanuel. God is with us. Amen.