

3 January 2020  
Epiphany: On the  
Road to Radiance  
Isaiah 60:1-6;  
Matthew 2:1-12  
First Mennonite  
Church

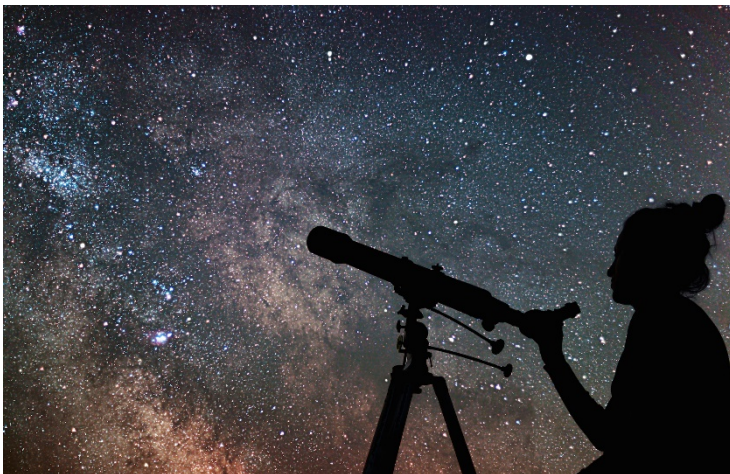
For the past 5  
Sundays we've  
been on the  
road. For four  
Sundays in  
Advent we  
travelled the  
roads of



readiness, repentance, restoration, and revelation. Then last week we travelled on the road to rejoicing where we joined two old people—Anna and Simeon—who rejoiced upon seeing salvation in the baby Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord.

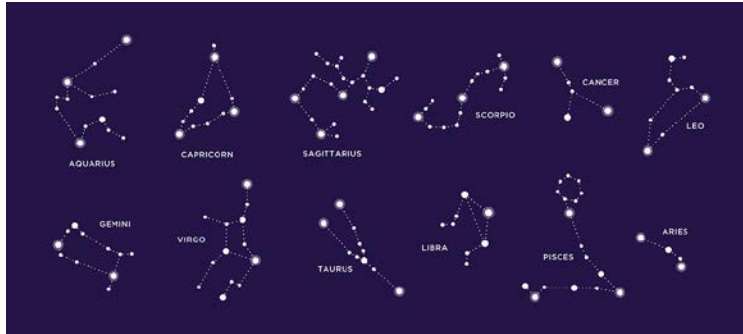
Though Epiphany falls on Wednesday, 6 January, we are celebrating it today. Today, our journey takes us on the road to radiance. To help us reflect on the theme, let us look to Matthew's gospel for guidance. In the story this morning, we are told, *"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy"* (Matthew 2:10). When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.

Who are the **they**? Most Bibles say they are **wise men from the east**. The Greek word for these wise men is **magi**. These people were wise in the practice of astrology, astronomy, stargazing, and dream interpretation. Magi is where we get the English word, magic, from.



Long ago, there wasn't any distinction made between astronomers and astrologers as they were all stargazers. Today, however, there is a huge difference between the two. Astronomy is a well-established **science** that studies everything outside of the earth's

atmosphere, such as planets, stars, asteroids, galaxies; and how these celestial bodies relate to each other. When I was a young, I wanted to be an astronomer. Why I didn't become one is a long story that I won't get into now.



Astrology, on the other hand, attempts to study how the positioning of celestial bodies in the night sky affect people and events on Earth. Those who take it seriously like to read their horoscope every day. As I was born in September, I'm

a Libra. Part of my horoscope for January 1 was: "Today's Moon stimulates your friendliness, bringing out your need for a sense of belonging."<sup>1</sup> I was told to open up and have more conversations with others as it might inspire me with new ideas.

The thing is, I'm one of those people who view astrology **suspiciously**. I view it a pseudoscience, and **do not** take it seriously.

Back in Bible days, these wise ones in the field of astronomy and astrology studied the stars, hoping to discern in them hidden insights to the significance of what was going on in the universe and in history, and this interest in the stars led them on a journey, down a certain road.

What about the star? Bible scholars have laboured to discover what Matthew's "star" might have been. There have been many theories proposed.

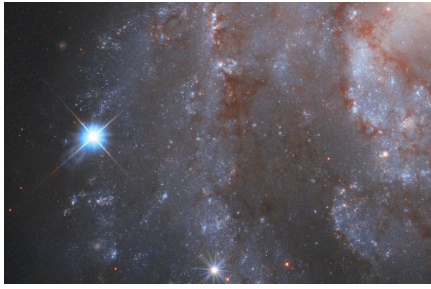


*Halley's Comet-northern Mexico, March 13, 1986.*

1. One theory suggests the star was actually Halley's Comet. It appeared in 12-11 BC. The problem is that its appearance would have been too early for this story.

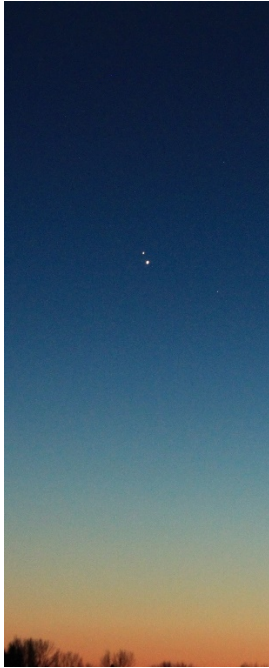
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<sup>1</sup> <https://cafeastrology.com/libradailyhoroscope.html>



*Supernova, taken by Hubble Space telescope*

2. A second theory is that it was some kind of supernova—an exploding star in some distant galaxy.



*Jupiter and Saturn in night sky, Saskatoon, 18 December 2020.*

3. Another more likely theory put forward is the fact that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC, just like they were a couple of weeks ago on 21 December.

My daughter and I went south of the city on 18 December to see this incredible once-in-a-lifetime night sky event. The last time most of the world's population had such a favourable view of Jupiter and Saturn coming so close to each other was on March 5, 1226—about 800 years ago.

Whatever the magi saw in the night sky, they “rejoiced with a really, really big joy,” as the Gospel literally reads upon seeing it.

And they came in the house, and they opened their treasures, and they worshiped the infant Jesus, “the one born king of the Jews.” How did these magi know just from looking at a star that this baby was to be a king? Remember, this is the Gospel of Matthew, not Luke. Matthew has no manger birth, no angels singing in the heavens. The magi weren’t Jews. They were gentiles. So they had no access to the prophetic predictions in the scripture concerning the birth of Jesus.

Tom Wright, in his commentary on Matthew<sup>2</sup>, suggests that the magi came to their joyous conclusion by consulting star charts. Since Jupiter was the ‘royal’ or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was that a new king of the Jews was about to be born. Wright goes on to say that we can’t be certain if this was why the ‘wise and learned men’ came

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<sup>2</sup> (Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part One, Chapters 1-15, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2004, pp. 9-11.)

from the East. Our story says these magi arrived after noticing strange events in the heavens that prompted them to search out an earthly event.

Where did the magi get this “exceedingly great joy”?

I think that they were joyful because they were on a journey, a search. They were joyful because, looking at the baby Jesus, the magi knew that their long search had resulted in an exciting conclusion. Presumably, most of their fellow magi stayed home, took no journeys toward the east, refused to go off on some wild camel ride to see a baby on the basis of nothing more than a star. These magi — don’t know whether there were three or 13 of them, Matthew only says they offered the baby Jesus three kinds of gifts — **were the sort of people who were looking for something, willing to risk a journey, brave enough to venture forth on the search.** And when they discovered the results of their search, they felt joy.



Over the years, I’ve learnt to appreciate the music of a popular music group from Ireland known as U2. I like them because much of their music is focused on spirituality and social-justice. My children think the music is old! Anyway, one of their songs is called, *I still haven’t found what I’m looking for*,

which the lead singer described as “a gospel song with a restless spirit.”<sup>3</sup> I won’t play it for you as the song is too long, but I will highlight a couple of the verses as the words reflect this intense search for meaning, relationship, for peace and joy.

The song begins with these words:

I have climbed highest mountains  
I have run through the fields  
Only to be with you

I have run  
I have crawled  
I have scaled these city walls  
These city walls  
Only to be with you  
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/26/743620996/u2-i-still-havent-found-what-im-looking-for-american-anthem>

Then in another verse, U2 sings:

I believe in the kingdom come  
Then all the colours will bleed into one  
Bleed into one  
But yes I'm still running  
You broke the bonds  
And you loosed the chains  
Carried the cross  
Of my shame  
Oh my shame  
You know I believe it  
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I identify with this song. Even though I've been a Christian for decades I'm still on the road of discipleship, still searching for truth, still searching for answers to some of my deepest questions. Becoming Christian isn't the end of the road, friends, but only the beginning of a journey. St. Anselm back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century described faith as seeking understanding. I understand this to mean that it is my love for God, my desire for a deeper relationship with God, pushes me out on a life-long journey, a life-long search for meaning, purpose, peace, and knowledge for a deeper relationship with God, a search for how God wants me to live and be. And on this search, this journey, there are times we will find answers to our deepest questions, like the magi did when they found baby Jesus, but most of the time, it is in our searching is where we will find joy and meaning and peace. Much of the time we will have to say, But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

I know people who would rather get a root canal done by the dentist than take a trip, a journey to a different place or country. This was true even before Covid recommendations against non-essential travel. These kinds of people love home, its comforts, and especially the familiarity and stability. They love being in control of their surroundings, and the one thing that makes a journey difficult is that it places us at the mercy of the trip. Every trip is a risk.

Every baby is a risk, too. The birth of Jesus set a whole train of difficult, bloody events in motion. The baby that the magi discovered was not the end of the journey, but the beginning, as Christ always tends to be for those who follow him. Note I said, "for those who follow him." We don't just "believe" that Jesus is the Messiah; we follow him as Messiah. Christ takes us places that we would not have

gone without his leading. Like the magi who saw his star rise in the east and followed it. We, just like them, are stargazers and travellers. We saw a light on the horizon and we followed where it led, down an unfamiliar road, guided by the light of the one Matthew introduces as “king of the Jews.”

Matthew introduces us to another character in this Epiphany story — King Herod. There, in the house under the shining star is baby Jesus, King of the Jews. Up at the palace backed up by his soldiers was Herod, a fake king of the Jews. Herod was put in power by the Romans. When Herod heard about the one whose star had risen in the east, “the one born king of the Jews,” he got very nervous. The star struck him with fear. And when Herod got scared, somebody was in great pain. First, he tried to get the magi to give him the baby’s exact whereabouts. But when the magi evaded him, took another road back home, then Herod ordered a slaughter, killing every baby in and around Bethlehem, two years old and under.

Herod was one of history’s great villains. He not only murdered most of his good friends, but even his beloved wife, and three of his own sons. He was threatened by everybody and, it was said of Herod in his own day, that it was better to be his sow than his son; the pig in the royal barnyard had a better hope of survival.

But Matthew says it wasn’t only Herod who got nervous when the baby Jesus was born. Matthew says that, “Herod was terrified, and all Jerusalem with him.” All of Jerusalem trembled because all of Jerusalem knew how bloody Herod could be when he was anxious. Even Herod couldn’t pull off a massacre of this magnitude without help. Herod wasn’t the best of kings, but sometimes — better the devil that you know than the devil you don’t know. Our present order may not be great, but at least we are secure in what we know.

We’ve got quite a story here: the magi in their huge joy and Herod and all of Jerusalem filled with murderous fear. Where do you find your place in this story? As you stand before this new infant king, are you the fearful Herod and populace of Jerusalem? Or are you the joyful magi? I expect, if we’re honest, we feel kinship with both. Before the advent of a commanding new Lord of Life, I expect that we’re a mixture of both joy and fear because this baby is beckoning us to go on a journey and, **in every trip, there is fear and joy.**

I lived in Beijing when the horrible events of 9-11 took place in the US. I knew many Americans who lived in Beijing at the same time. They were open about their fears. We also saw what happened when the most powerful nation on earth got mad and waged a global war on terror, first in the impoverished country of

Afghanistan and then another war in Iraq. With all the legions of Rome behind him Herod was still afraid. Afraid of a baby! And with the trillions of dollars spent waging the war on terror, the Americans I knew in China **were still fearful**. Even with the world's most powerful military, they were still afraid. Just like "all Jerusalem" they were afraid, even in their power.

So the baby becomes a source of judgment for us today, joy, yes, but also in him we see a mirror of ourselves. When we are afraid, we are not at our best. Herod's fear certainly brought out the worst in him.

But that baby brought out the best in the magi. We are also like the magi. In fact, seeing the magi give their gifts to the baby Jesus and kneel in homage to him ought to remind us of ourselves. What else are we doing here in church this morning if not giving to and worshipping before Jesus? Those magi therefore might be called the very first church, the very first to bend the knee and worship Jesus. For them, the magi, this baby and the journey that he calls them to undertake, is a source of great joy, rather than merely a cause of deep fear. They "departed by another road for their own country." Are we willing to go on that journey with joy, to relinquish our sense of comfort and control and go to where the star, and its Lord can lead us? Can we, as the church, rise with this shining new star and rise to a new sense of adventure, forsake our cozy boundaries, and go forth following him?

Perhaps that's a chief requirement for being a Christian — a willingness to go on a journey, head down a road, the destination which is known only by God. Perhaps, one of our struggles with such a calling is that we're too settled in, as if coming to church were the end of the journey with God, rather than its beginning. Yet we follow a living Lord, a demanding Saviour who leads us forward, in whose service is an ongoing search, that includes, high adventure. Let's follow the star. Let's stay on the road for it promises radiance! Amen