

“Star Power”
Matthew 2:1-12
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Have you looked at the stars lately? I’m not referring here to the stars in the sky. I’m thinking of the people in our culture we refer to as “stars,” the women and men who excel in their fields. Whether it is stage or screen, music or social media, business or sports, every area of human endeavor has its own set of “rock stars,” the folks who stand out because of their accomplishments, or their notoriety.

I’m sure you know by now these famous folk have power and influence. Not only can they draw attention to themselves—which some of them do on a regular basis—but they can use their star power to address a need or a cause they care about. A lot of what they do is really good. Here are three examples:

- Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2, has been working for decades to fight hunger and poverty. His ONE Campaign has raised more than \$37.5 billion for health initiatives to fight AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.
- Bette Midler, the well-known singer and actor, created the New York Restoration Project which has helped create green spaces and healthy environments for residents of New York City. As of 2015, the Project has revitalized 52 community gardens and planted thousands of trees.
- TV star Michael J. Fox created a foundation to research Parkinson’s Disease. His is the largest nonprofit funding source for Parkinson’s drug research and has funded \$700 million in research.¹

It’s good to know some famous people actually do use their influence to improve life on planet Earth, isn’t it?

Star power. The folks who have this star power shine their light on a need, an issue, a cause, and they can influence the outcome. There is a different kind of star featured in our scripture lesson for today.

This star was also influential. Perhaps it was the most important star in human history. As Matthew tells us:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage (Matthew 2:1-2).

Lots of people over the centuries have wondered about this star—what was it? Was it an actual star, an alignment of the planets, or something else altogether?

Did any of you get a chance to see this year’s “Christmas star?” I missed it, I’m afraid, because it was always cloudy when I went outside to look. This “star” was formed by the conjunction of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn, in the night sky. They were closest on December 21, the first day of winter. These two planets hadn’t been visible this close together in something like 400 years.²

Some people, seeking a scientific explanation for the Star of Bethlehem, suggest it was just such an event; the conjunction of two planets in the night sky, or, perhaps, a comet. However, none of these explanations match up with the known astronomical events of the ancient world.³

Could the star have been an angel? This is how many people in the time of Jesus viewed the stars.

¹ Dan Ketchum, “21 Celebrities Who Run Foundations or Charities,” *yahoo!finance.com*, article on internet, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/21-celebrities-run-foundations-charities-090048045.html>, accessed 29 Dec 2020.

² “The ‘Great’ Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn,” *NASA.com*, December 15, 2020, article on internet, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/the-great-conjunction-of-jupiter-and-saturn>, accessed 29 Dec 2020.

³ Eric Betz, “The Star of Bethlehem: Can science explain what it really was?” *Astronomy.com*, December 18, 2020, article on internet, <https://astronomy.com/news/2020/12/the-star-of-bethlehem-can-science-explain-what-it-really-was>, accessed 29 December 2020.

Folks back then believed stars were angelic beings; they were alive, they were the heavenly host God created to guide human beings in their activities on earth. This would certainly help explain how the Bethlehem star moved through the night sky to stop over the very house where Jesus lived.⁴

We cannot say for certain what that star was that guided the wisemen to Bethlehem. What we do know is this star led people to Jesus. And what about those people, the wisemen? What can we know about them and their role in the story?

- As Matthew tells us, they came from the East in search of the true king of the Jews.
- Their travels brought them first to Jerusalem where they inquired of Herod, the King of Judea, about the royal birth.
- They got directions from the Jewish religious experts, the scribes: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (Micah 5:2).
- When they got on the road again, the wisemen followed the star until they reached Bethlehem.
- And, as Matthew explains:

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).

Star power. The light of the star led them to the light of the world. Looking back to the Hebrew Scriptures, we find some words written in the book of the Prophet Isaiah; words originally written to describe the joy of Israel as God gathers His people and re-establishes them in the land after exile. As we read these lines through a Christian lens, we might observe the significance of a prophecy for the birth of God’s Messiah:

- “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”
- The wisemen—by tradition they are called Magi or kings, they may have been from Persia—followed the star at its rising; and now, they find the light of the glory of the Lord in the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.
- “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”
- The joy of those who found the light of God’s love in Jesus made them radiant; the gifts they offered were wealth from a foreign land.
- “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”
- The Magi, non-Jews, came from a distant land to worship the Messiah of the Jews, who the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem refused to recognize. Their gifts, by tradition, represented the roles Jesus would play: Gold, for his majesty and kingly office; frankincense, for the worship of his divine nature as God’s Son; and, (not mentioned by Isaiah) myrrh, used to prepare a body for burial, to signify his tragic death.⁵

Star power. The light of the star led them to the light of the world. There’s one more part of the story we ought to pay attention to on this Sunday before the day of Epiphany (which is January 6).

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:12).

⁴ Dale C. Allison, Jr., “What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?” in *Biblical Archeology E-Book, The First Christmas, The Story of Jesus’ Birth in History and Tradition*, (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2009), 25-31.

⁵ Shelley D.B. Copeland, “Matthew 2:1-12, Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 217.

We know from the story they did this so that they would not be a party to King Herod's plot to eliminate the newborn rival king—a plot Herod executed by having all the infants in Bethlehem put to death.

But Mary and Joseph escaped, with Jesus, to Egypt.

Rev. James C. Howell, the senior pastor at Myers Park UMC in Charlotte, NC, suggests there might be more to Matthew's account of the wisemen's return home by another road. He writes:

But could it be Matthew is offering a tantalizing hint about life for those who have met Christ? Nothing is ever the same. You don't take the old road any longer. You unfold a new map, and discover an alternate path.⁶

I think this is true for followers of Jesus. Once we've encountered him, once we've met him, we are no longer the same. The world doesn't look the same anymore because we see, through Jesus' eyes, what is false and what is true. We see the false rulers and false powers for what they are—life draining. And we see the true ruler, the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, in Jesus—Jesus is life giving. Earthly rulers and earthly priorities can't hold a candle to the life Jesus offers us.

Followers of Jesus follow another map for life; that map is Jesus, who makes us his own and who takes us home by another map, another GPS...the one we find in the Bible. It is the way of mercy and of grace and of truth and of love that is found in Jesus Christ.

The Bethlehem star no longer shines in the night sky. But the light of God's love continues to shine through Jesus Christ. May the light of the world be our guide, as it was throughout the difficult and tortuous year of 2020. May the light and life of Christ guide us all in this new year rising. Amen.

⁶ James C. Howell, "Matthew 2:1-12, Theological Perspective," in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 216.