

Epiphany 0C
Peace, Seattle
January 3, 2016
Matthew 2:1-10

SEEKING THROUGH MYSTERY

When a dealer at a New York coin show showed astronomer Michael Molnar an ancient Roman coin minted in Syria in AD 13, featuring a picture of Zeus on one side and Aries the ram on the other, he bought it for \$50.¹

A few months later, Molnar noticed a star on the coin and he was intrigued. Could the coin, he wondered, hold a clue to the identity of the Star of Bethlehem that drew the Magi to see the infant king?

Molnar had read works by the 2nd century Egyptian astronomer Ptolemy, who wrote that Judea was ruled by the constellation Aries. And he knew from other texts that ancient stargazers carefully charted Jupiter and its relationship with the moon. He knew, too, that to the ancients, planets were known as “wandering stars.”

According to Molnar, when Jupiter was close to the moon, Jupiter's powers to create kings was deemed strongest. “There was one particular event astronomers were eager to calculate—when the moon would get so close it would pass in front of Jupiter. This was considered magical in ancient times.”

While the actual year and date of Jesus' birth are not known, biblical historians most often estimate it was sometime between 6 B.C. and 4 B.C. Molnar's research led him to believe that the star that attracted the Magi to Jerusalem was likely Jupiter—eclipsed by Earth's moon while it was located within the constellation of Aries the Ram.²

According to Matthew, the Magi told King Herod they had seen a star in the east at its rising. So Molnar checked the dates of an eclipse of Jupiter by Earth's moon when Jupiter was in the east and the constellation of Aries the Ram was close. Then he referenced those dates against the years when scholars believe Jesus was born. Only one date popped up: April 17, 6 B.C.

When Molnar saw that he got chills. “I didn't sleep.” said Molnar. “I knew as an astronomy historian I had [arrived at] the best answer for [the origin of] the Star of Bethlehem.”

Molnar's theory isn't the only one, of course. Other theories have competed for the title of most likely to explain the Star of Bethlehem, what some call “the cosmic holy grail of the sky.”

Could the astronomical sign seen by the Magi have been a comet? A supernova? An unusual conjunction of two or more of the most visible planets?

While evidence has been explored for many scenarios, all that astronomers can offer are possibilities; the mystery remains. **And mystery is an essential part of these texts.**

¹ This opening paragraph and those that follow are taken, with slight editing, from a January 1, 2016 article by Meg Jones in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Astronomer from University of Wisconsin thinks his Star of Bethlehem theory is gold*. <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/astronomer-from-uw-thinks-his-star-of-bethlehem-theory-is-gold-b99641268z1-364006531.html>

² Published in his book, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*.

Pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung once said the Eastern religions remind us that we live in more than “a cause and effect” universe. Through his study of the classic Chinese I-CHING texts, Jung discovered a pattern of inner realities that were matched by outer realities. He named this intersection “synchronicity.”³

Marie Van Franz, a student of Jung and a psychoanalyst in her own right, went on to say such occurrences rest at the very heart of religious experience. “They may appear as irrational but the oldest wisdom traditions of the world suggest something different. Coincidences or “synchronicities” offer to change the way we understand the mystery of our lives, and can provide important clues on how to best navigate the ups and downs of our personal lives.”⁴

The Magi seem to know this. The gifts they bring to the infant king speak symbolically of the life that lies ahead for the young Jesus.

St. Paul knows this, too. No less than four times in this section from his letter to the Ephesians he uses the word “mystery” in alluding to God’s plan to include non-Jews in the great salvation story.

In a sense, the Magi in today’s gospel stand for all those peoples and cultures beyond our personal knowledge and acquaintance whom God enlists in the grand story of redemption and healing, a story that finds renewed beginning in the Starchild of Bethlehem.

The incredible excitement generated by the New Horizons spacecraft’s fly-by of Pluto last July and the success of films like THE MARTIAN shows how great the human appetite is for exploring the planets and stars beyond our own. We want to see more, to know more about these worlds.

I wonder if this isn’t part of the reason Epiphany—the manifestation of Jesus through the Bethlehem Star—continues to attract us.

As a new year begins, there are mysteries close to home that keep us wondering what the future holds. We wonder...

- Will I get the new job I seek? The relationship I long for?
- Will my health hold up?
- How will the reality of becoming a parent change me?
- What will study abroad add to my understanding of who I am?
- Will the threads in my life come together and confirm that I’m somehow on the right track?

All these questions and many more are in the mix as we enter 2016.

Yet, perhaps the greatest gift the Magi offer us is the encouragement to search for God’s presence and involvement in the larger movements unfolding in the world; to lift our gaze beyond immediate goals and questions about personal destinies.

The Magi remind us that the boundaries and limitations we may claim for ourselves and set for others don’t seem to inhibit God in the least.

At the end of the day it’s these foreigners, rather than the Jerusalem insiders, who end up showing us more about how to receive the gift of Emmanuel—with conviction, reverence, humility, and a hope.

³ Jung wrote about his relationship to Wilhelm in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp. 373-377, which is excerpted here: <http://www.log24.com/log08/saved/080810-JungOnWilhelm.html>

⁴ The reference to Jung and Van Franz, along with the quoted material, come from an article written by colleague Jon Magnuson in ECOTONE, Winter 2016.

As 2016 begins, we can follow their lead by being—as best as we’re able—open to God’s leading, and not too hasty to come to conclusions about how God will show up, or where God is leading us.

We can resist the impulse to discard unusual pathways of God’s grace while holding tight to our conventional and cherished understandings of how God works.

We can lift our sights higher—and be prepared to look farther and deeper into the mystery of God with us, and how this Divine presence in Jesus increases mystery rather than unravels it.⁵

Amen.

⁵ Inspiration for these concluding paragraphs includes Craig Satterlee’s gospel commentary at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2-satterlee>