



That Crazy Star + Matthew 2:1-12
Festival of the Epiphany
January 7, 2024
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

How do people come to know God?

Probably not by plowing your way through a library of theological books. Probably not even by listening to a sermon. Rather, God likely breaks in for each of us through some extraordinary circumstance. A revelation. A manifestation. An epiphany.

For me it was a children's Christmas program nearly 30 years ago. But this wasn't just any program. It was the annual Lessons and Carols service put on by Advent Episcopal School, which our children went on to attend for the rest of our years in Birmingham, Alabama.

One of my first meetings when I arrived as the new music critic in town was with the the school's choirmaster and organist. He invited me to attend Lessons and Carols, which was coming up in a few weeks. "Yeah, yeah," I said to myself. A kids' program. OK, I guess.

I arrived early, or so I thought. But when I walked in 15 minutes ahead, the entire cavernous, darkened sanctuary was packed to the gills. People sat in the prayerful silence of great expectation. One seat remained and it was the best seat in the house, in the center right on the aisle. The seat that had been reserved for me – reserved seats, I learned later, being totally out of protocol. Everyone, even board members, had to arrive hours ahead to get a good spot.

What followed still brings tears to my eyes. It was the most superb, prayerful, spirited, incredibly disciplined and yet joyfully musical expression of faith by children of all ages that I have ever experienced. All 300 children in the school were involved. And not only that but all the teachers, too. Some were helping by conducting from within the masses of kids, following the choirmaster's lead. Luckily I was not there to review it but just to take it all in, because there would have been no words. My only thought was, here to me has been revealed the living God.

The star followed by the magi was also an extraordinary circumstance. Many have tried to explain it as a scientific phenomenon – a comet, or a conjunction of planets.

But today I want to go out on a limb and ask: Could not the star have been an actual celestial event just as Matthew implies? After all, strange and incomprehensible things happen throughout scripture -- healings, exorcisms, miracles, manifestations, even talking donkeys.

Let's not put it past God to work something like this in the heavens to get people's attention. After all, if God could defy in Jesus' resurrection the very laws that God created – a birth by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the reassembly of the atoms, molecules and dust of Jesus' earthly body into a living, eternal yet still tangible body – why could God have not made a star move through the heavens for a specific purpose, especially when it was all part of God's plan of salvation through his Son?

So let's consider the star to be a character in Matthew 2, just as the Persian magi were characters.

These astrologers (there may have been more than three) identified the star as extraordinary because they knew the patterns of the stars and the heavens, and this star was unlike any they had ever seen. Because they were very learned, they probably also knew the Hebrew Scriptures. So they may have recognized this star as the one prophesied Numbers 24:17, "A star shall come out of Jacob, and as scepter shall rise out of Israel." They would have known that in the Hebrew understanding, "star" could refer to a king. So when they looked up and saw the star moving, that was their cue. They quickly saddled up their camels, packed some gifts suitable for a king, and set out.

Now, there are two very special and winsome things about our character the star.

First is that it apparently paid attention to the travelers. Picture the magi at the end of the first long day. As night approached they may have been anxious: How will we catch up to the star if we stop for the night? The only answer is that that star must have stopped for them. Otherwise they could not have kept up with it. By morning it would have been long gone. Imagine their amazement when they noticed the star pausing its journey as well. The star was following them, just as they were following the star. When they realized this, don't you think they must have looked at each other and said, "That crazy star!"

Secondly, the brilliant star took them exactly where they were supposed to go. First it led them to Herod in Jerusalem. This must have made sense to the magi – surely Herod would know where this new king was. But Herod's advisers had failed to inform him. The magi gave him the first news he'd had of the child. Then when Herod sent them to search for the child, the star led them to Bethlehem.

We know from the rest of Matthew 2 what Herod's furious reaction was to being tricked by the magi, and how the angel in Joseph's dream saved Jesus' life by telling him to flee with his family to Egypt.

But perhaps you are wondering, well, why did we need this star in the first place? If the magi hadn't inquired about the child who has been born king of the Jews, maybe Herod never would have found out about Jesus. But remember the shepherds? They ran into Bethlehem that first night and told everyone what they had seen and heard. So surely Herod would have heard about Jesus sooner or later.

So I think we can say that without the star and without the magi, the Holy Family would have remained in Bethlehem. Once Herod finally got the news of Jesus' birth, he would have been among all the children age two or younger that Herod ordered to be killed. That crazy star not only saved the day, but made it possible for the magi to be the first evangelists in taking word of the Savior to the Gentiles – thereby fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Now we are back to the beginning: How do you come to know God?

I found God in the voices of children.

The magi found God by following the star.

Do you find God in the awesomeness of the night sky, with the red giant Betelgeuse blazing down from Orion's shoulder and the three stars of Orion's belt pointing down to the brightly twinkling Sirius?

Or do you find God in the Fibonacci series that pops up everywhere in nature, from pinecones and sunflowers to cauliflower and artichokes?

Or do you find God in the face of a baby?

What about God's universe compels you to faith and makes you think more deeply about your place in it? What star leads you to the hope that is ours in Christ?

Find it. Follow it. And use your voice, like Paul did, to bring to the whole world the news of the boundless riches of Christ.