



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**Welcome Love, Welcome Light:  
A Family Christmas Service**

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

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**Rev. Lissa's Homily**

In the Christian gospel of Matthew, it is told that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, three wise men, called Magi, hailing from the east, came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. HE was King of the people of Israel, after all, and felt threatened by the prophecies which foretold a powerful new leader of his people would be born in Bethlehem. Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After the Magi had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, guiding their way until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The star  
It could have been a comet,  
It could have been a supernova,  
It could have been a shooting star.

History leaves very few clues about this star, and even fewer about the men who followed it and what they discovered at the end of their journey. We can assume these magi were men whose wisdom came from interpreting the celestial rhythms of the night sky, mapping patterns of constellations and planets into accurate predictions of how world events would unfold.

Some say the star was added by the writers of Matthew as an "apocryphal" addition, an interesting but false plot device to keep believers dazzled by the miraculous events of the nativity. Some say that it's never a good idea to try to trace actual events to biblical narratives. But for those who have been curious and compelled to look into the question of this star, history does reveal a planetary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Between April and December of the year 7 before the Common Era, these planets had the possibility of aligning three times,

perhaps creating a bright “star” which could have led these magi on their long journey to Judea.

While we may never know exactly which star or how bright, we intuitively understand that science and myth co-mingle together in an awe-inspiring story that still touches us today, and makes us wonder.

Imagine looking up at the sky and feeling so curious and compelled by what you see and experience that you know you must give your life to it. You are beckoned to that star to understand the transformational power it may have on the universe, and on human history.

Long ago, the star leading the magi from foreign lands to bless a new kind of leader, one they called king, a king not crowned and mighty on a throne, but an infant lying helpless and innocent, who came to wield a different kind of power: power undiscovered and untested, coming not from might or sword, but by compassion and service.

The wise men and women who study the stars today have faith that life exists beyond our knowing, buried deep in the mysteries of a universe that is expansive, vast, and ever changing. Their search to understand this awesome power has the ability to transform our view of a contracting national landscape into a wide-open field of cosmic possibility.

On December 22, 2005, just in time for the holidays, NASA’s Spitzer infrared telescope project, managed by none other than Pasadena’s JPL, produced beautiful images of a new section of what amateur astronomers had nicknamed the “Christmas Tree” cluster, a new triangle of young stars buried deep in the universe. Under the infrared light, the visible stars revealed the following observations from the Spitzer lab:

Newborn stars, hidden behind thick dust... the newly revealed infant stars appear as pink and red specks toward the center and appear to have linear structures in a configuration that resembles the spokes of a wheel or the pattern of a snowflake. At a mere 100,000 years old, these infant structures have yet to "crawl" away from their location of birth. Over time, the natural drifting motions of each star will break this order, and the snowflake design will be no more.

Today, scientists are gazing into space to see the beauty of the visible-light stars like the Christmas tree cluster, but also to probe what is hidden and obscured by the light, the fertile possibilities of the 95 % of the universe bathed in dark matter and dark energy. We know that dust around the stars can hide planets, just as our solar system reveals planets around the sun, perhaps the most famous star in our galaxy. Right here at Cal-tech, astronomers are probing beyond the Kuiper belt, an icy field orbit of Neptune, to uncover what they call “Planet 9.”

One hundred years after Einstein’s theory of general relativity, the distant cosmic call of gravitational waves now beckon scientists deeper into their calling. This long-awaited celestial

communication seems a delayed reply to Robert Frost's insistence that the silent stars, object of human fascination, wonder and yearning, should be obliged to "say something" in return.

"Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them," said Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. All of these discoveries bring us into a state of wonder, a marveling at the expansiveness at the universe. Christmas asks us to have the courage to persistently search for the beauty of life and to revel in curiosity, to look up at the stars and discover ourselves belonging not only to the human family, but to the universe itself.

I close with words from the poem *Winter Solstice*, from Reverend Rebecca Parker.

In the universe there moves a Wild One  
whose gestures alter earth's axis toward love.  
In the immense darkness  
everything spins with joy.  
The cosmos enfolds us.  
We are caught in a web of stars,  
cradled in a swaying embrace,  
rocked by the holy night,  
babes of the universe.

Amen, and blessed be.