***LET THERE BE…LIGHT!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Isaiah 62:1-3 and Luke 2:21-40

Earlier this week there was an extraordinary event in the night sky as two planets – Jupiter and Saturn – rolled together in a brilliant once-in-a-lifetime event that captured the imagination and viewing delight of people around the country. Like everyone else in town we missed it on Monday because clouds rolled in, but we were able to see it Tuesday evening in a clear southwest sky just after nightfall. As I headed home, I found the field next to McSwain Elementary School littered with stargazers, all looking in the same direction at this amazing thing that was taking place in the sky. In astronomical terms, this event is known as a great conjunction, and while it happens about every 20 years, the two planets this year were the closest they had been in 800 years, before most of you were born! The bright spark formed by the close proximity of the two planets is sometimes called the Bethlehem star as it evokes thoughts of the bright star that appeared in the east to guide the wise men to Jesus’ side two thousand years ago. As Henry van Dyke imagines it in *The Story of the Other Wise Man*:

*Jupiter and Saturn rolled together like drops of lambent flame about to blend in one. As Artaban watched them, behold! an azure spark was born out of the darkness beneath, rounding itself with purple splendors to a crimson sphere, and spiring upward through rays of saffron and orange into a point of white radiance. Tiny and infinitely remote, yet perfect in every part, it pulsated in the enormous vault….Artaban bowed his head….”It is the sign,” he said. “The king is coming, and I will go to meet him.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

It is easy to imagine how stargazers might regard this startingly new and bright light in the night sky as a sign of some grand event, something beyond a cosmic great conjunction – something like the birth of a king! In googling the Great Conjunction 2020, I found a host of sites offering opinions about the great significance of this event, not in biblical or astronomical or scientific terms, but in astrological terms – as in the signs of the Zodiac. I will skip the details!

No one really knows whether the star that the wise men followed was a great conjunction or some other cosmic event. No one knows exactly when the wise men saw the star and came to Bethlehem to visit the young Jesus; for that matter, we don’t even know exactly when Jesus was born. Our celebration of his birth at this time of year is rooted less in any biblical or historical evidence for the time of Jesus’ birth than the coopting by Christians of a winter solstice festival centuries after he was born. Tradition has established our celebration as December 25th (or a few days from now in the Orthodox traditions). Our celebration is not really about *chronology* (the exact time of Jesus’ birth) or *biology* (how he was conceived), it is about *theology* and more specifically C*hristology* – the meaning of Jesus’ birth. The words of old Simeon that we heard this morning serve as a guiding star for us in understanding what his coming really means and why we have so much reason to celebrate. In some sense they give answer to the question we just raised in song: *What child is this?*

Simeon was in the temple when Mary and Joseph arrived with their infant son to do for him what was customary under the law – circumcision, naming, presentation to the Lord, and the offering of a sacrifice (by tradition poor families offered two turtledoves, which might leave a conspicuous void in the second day of the Twelve Days of Christmas song). Mary and Joseph were observant Jews, and so they did for their son what the law required; their visitation by angels and shepherds the night of his birth did not change their commitment to do for him what they would do for their other children, except perhaps in naming him*.* They didn’t name him Joseph, Jr. after his father, they named him what the angel told them to name him: *Jeshua*, Jesus, which means, “the Lord saves”.

Simeon had been waiting and watching for God’s salvation. He was a devout old man who had patiently, faithfully, tirelessly waited and watched for the coming of the messiah. While others had given up hope or had tired of watching and waiting, Simeon persevered. He remembered the ancient prophecies of Isaiah about God’s chosen one who would be the consolation of Israel and who would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. He dared to hope that the prophecies were true and might be fulfilled in his lifetime. He looked back across Israel’s history and saw the faithful hand of God guiding, prodding and saving God’s people over and over and over again, and he trusted God would do so again. He had been led by the Spirit to believe that he would see the messiah with his own eyes before his death. When he took the baby Jesus into his aged arms there in the temple, Simeon understood that God’s promise for him and for Israel was being fulfilled; he recognized that in this child the past and future were meeting: the past promises of God and the future hopes for Israel.

The words Simeon spoke to describe that understanding are called the *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for the first words of his song: *Now dismiss*. There is a sense of peace and satisfaction in his voice as he says: *Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace*. For so long Simeon had been waiting for that moment, waiting to set eyes upon the messiah, waiting and wondering if that day would ever come before he closed his eyes for the last time. But come it did, and his response is recorded for all of us to hear, bearing witness to who this child is: the messiah of God! He goes on to say something about this child, a surprising thing perhaps, for he describes the child, as “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God’s people Israel.*” There in the temple in the midst of this sacred rite of passage for this Jewish child, he identifies him as being born, not only for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well, thus echoing the words of the angel to the shepherds: *I bring you tidings of great joy for* ***all people****!*

A light to the Gentiles, the light of the world, the light who shines in the darkness and no darkness can overcome it – these are the images used to describe Jesus, this child born in Bethlehem and held tenderly by old Simeon. It is a faithful image that glows brightly in our Christmas carols as we sing:

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light*

*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

The lights on our trees, a shining star, the glow of candles in the night, the glory of the angel choir in the skies above the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night all bear witness to the promise of this child who comes to bring everlasting light to our darkness. The wonder of it all is that the light comes in such an innocuous way – in the night in an out-of-the-way stable in the form of a vulnerable infant. It is not as if God flips a switch and the light shines. The light comes into the world quietly in the wonder of human birth.

Herod will try to snuff out that light with his Slaughter of the Innocents. The Jewish establishment and Rome will try to snuff out that light by crucifying him, and when he breathes his last the whole world will be plunged into darkness. His resurrection is revealed only at dawn’s first light when most of the world is still in the shadows of night. The light comes in this child who Simeon holds, but the world will try again and again to extinguish that light. As Krista Tippett so insightfully notes:

*People who bring light into the world wrench it out of darkness*

*and contend openly with darkness all of their days.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

We who celebrate Christmas and declare Jesus to be the light of the world must still contend with a world that prefers the shadows of darkness and often seems intent on snuffing out the light of Christ. Jesus says, “As you welcome this little child so you welcome me,” and little children, some under 5 years of age, are separated from their parents at the border while others starve or are orphaned by war. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor, and we do precious little to alleviate poverty, not only across the world but also down the street. Jesus says, “Forgive as you are forgiven, not just seven times but seventy times seven times,” and still we hold grudges against our neighbors. Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek,” and we call that weakness. Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and we spend vastly more time and money on waging war and selling arms than we do on seeking peace. Jesus says, “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,” and we run to the shadows rather than risk the pain of faithfulness. Not only do we contend with those who would snuff out the light, but sometimes we are the very ones with whom God contends!

As this pandemic year draws to a close and we look ahead to a new year, perhaps we can take the appearance of that Great Conjunction of the planets to be a sign to us, a reminder of Bethlehem’s star and the coming of the light of the world into our world, and then commit to letting that light shine in us and through us beyond this Christmas. Perhaps the Bethlehem star may be for us a gift this year to carry into the new year, as Ann Weems so beautifully suggests:

*What I’d really like to give you for Christmas is a star….*

*Brilliance in a package,*

*something you could keep in the pocket of your jeans*

*or in the pocket of your being.*

*Something to take out in times of darkness,*

*something that would never snuff out or tarnish,*

*something you could hold in your hand,*

*something for wonderment,*

*something for pondering,*

*something that would remind you*

*of what Christmas has always meant:*

*God’s Advent light into the darkness of this world.*

*But stars are only God’s for giving,*

*and I must be content to give you words and wishes and*

*packages without stars.*

*But I can wish you life*

*as radiant as the Star that announced the Christ Child’s coming*

*and as filled with awe as the shepherds who stood beneath its light.*

*And I can pass on to you the love*

*that has been given to me,*

*ignited countless times by others*

*who have knelt in Bethlehem’s light.*

*Perhaps, if you ask, God will give you a star.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Perhaps, if you try, you may reflect the light of that star in your life – radiating joy and hope and peace and love. Perhaps you might reflect the light of the world to the world, for the world desperately needs it. Perhaps in the midst of this pandemic you may still bear witness in and through your life that the light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot, will not ever overcome it – not this year, not next year, not any year! Amen

1. Henry van Dyke, *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, Enthea Press: Columbus, OH, p.22 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion matters – and How to Talk About It*, Penguin Books: 2007, p.179 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ann Weems, “Star-Giving” in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, The Westminster Press:1980 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)