

Connecting With God
Kippax Uniting Church
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We are now in the season of Epiphany, celebrating the Christ Child. An epiphany is an experience of a sudden and striking realization, such as a scientific breakthrough. The original Epiphany, when the wise men came to see Christ, gave a new and deeper perspective on the relationship between God and the world, how Christ connects us to God.

As we join with the wise men from the east to welcome the presence of God in the world, we also reflect on another epiphany, as the presence of God breaks through into the world in the baptism of Christ by John. In my reading of these wonderful accounts, two great themes arise, how the story of Jesus Christ connects us to our natural cosmos and its orderly patterns, and how our baptism connects us to eternity and to God. I will look at these themes of connection through a discussion of the Star in the East that guided the Magi to Bethlehem.

As a boy in Sydney, I developed a love of the southern stars. My mother Marie Tulip had an old book that had belonged to her father Robert Grant, called *Stars of the Southern Heavens*. Mum taught me to see the constellations as described in this wonderful guide to visual astronomy.

One of my favourite constellations is Argo, the great southern ship. Argo is the biggest traditional star group. In Australia, Argo sails beautifully across the zenith, with its bright star Canopus near the south celestial pole, as seen in this star map I made using SkyGazer astronomy software. As a southern constellation, Argo is not visible in Europe. In my view this has distorted our knowledge of it. From the holy land, Argo rises to sit like a ship upon the southern horizon, where in ancient times it was apparently known as Noah's Ark.

I developed my own imagination of the ship in the sky, with the bright star Canopus as the prow, and the group of four stars known as the false cross as the keel, and other stars forming the mast and deck. I thought this ship shape was simple and ancient, like the Greek depiction of Orion the Hunter, or other famous heroes and animals and objects imagined in the stars. But there seem to be no ancient descriptions of Argo, except Plutarch's comment that these stars are the ship of the Egyptian God Osiris, as seen also on a star map from Egypt. The traditional picture we now have is actually quite modern – it was invented by the Portuguese when they sailed their galleons across the equator and added Argo to European star maps.

The modern picture is in the reverse direction from how I imagined the ship myself. It seems like the constellation was forgotten as astronomy moved north from Babylon to Europe. Studying the ancient sources, I found the name Argo came from India, where Canopus is called Agastya. The ancient connection to Noah's Ark is proved by the star Phact, the Arabic name for dove, right next to the ship, symbol of the end of the flood.

This research led me to look at Argo in relation to the Bible story of the Magi. One clue to justify this approach is that the Lord's Prayer tells us the will of God should be done on earth as in heaven. Perhaps, I wondered, this teaching suggests that watching the regular movement of the stars contributed to the story of the birth of Christ on earth.

So how does the Magi story compare to the stars of the night sky? Here is a map I have made of the sky from Jerusalem at the traditional date when Christ was born. After dusk we see Orion's Belt in the east, like the Magi. Orion's Belt is known in Australia as the base of the saucepan, and is also

widely called the three kings. As they move west through the December sky, the three kings point toward a star in the east, the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, like the star of Bethlehem. This star in the east is above the constellation Argo, seen everywhere in the world south of Europe. As I mentioned, in Jerusalem, Argo sits right on the southern horizon. Now, the Bible tells the wise men to seek the manger below the star in the east. My question is whether observation of the nightly westward movement of Argo, Sirius and Orion could be linked to Matthew's story of the Magi and star at the birth of Christ.

Comparing Noah's Ark to the Manger of Christ, we find some important shared themes. Both Saviour figures, Noah and Jesus, are in a wooden box surrounded by animals, and both stories tell of God's covenant with humanity to save the world. This similarity between the stories made me wonder if perhaps the ancients may have imagined the manger in the stars of the Ark. Looking at the stars that form the deck of the ark, it is certainly possible to see these as like a cradle, even with a line of three stars at one end in the position of the three kings arriving to present their gifts to the infant saviour. To me this is a plausible solution of the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem, opening interesting avenues of enquiry into the thinking of the authors of the Gospels, and how some of this connection of Christian origins to astronomy may have been lost.

The awesome presence of the stars in their quiet orderly simplicity and grandeur can be a powerful natural symbol for the presence of God. The underlying theme of the story of the epiphany is that God is present in the world, and present most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, who connects the shifting currents of history with the stable order of the eternal God of the universe.

The story of the Baptism of Christ develops this core idea of our connection to God seen in the wonder and awe and reverence shown by the wise men from the east at the holy cradle. The Baptism is an epiphany, a sudden and striking realization of the grace of God. At his baptism in the Jordan River, the heavens are torn apart as Jesus emerges from the water. The Spirit of God marks this unique moment of divine harmony by descending upon Jesus like a dove, and the voice of God expresses great pleasure in the beloved Son, in a wonderful epiphany of grace and love. Eternity is revealed as present within time.

The meaning of our own baptism reflects this same presence of eternity within time that we see in the baptism of Christ. Baptism symbolises stability in the midst of change, permanence in the midst of loss, connection in the midst of isolation, and the beyond in the midst of the world. The grace of God breaks through into the world in the holy sacrament. Baptism is about a community recognising the perspective of the eternal, acknowledging the enduring values of God that alone can bring our salvation. The connection of Christ to God was revealed in the epiphany of his baptism by John. So too our own authentic identity emerges through our connection to God, a connection that we symbolise in the water of baptism, opening a path to dissolve our sin in the forgiving love of Christ.

As the authors of the Gospels reflected on the messianic dimensions of the story of Jesus, the message of the Epiphany is central, that God was in Christ, working to reconcile the world in peace and love. The fallen state of the world means we cannot see that grace is how we are meant to be. Bringing the message of the overflowing grace of God into our world requires that we see the story of Jesus as the focus of what it means to be human. Through faith in Christ as our connection to God, we can build the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of the world, seeing the transforming vision of Christ as a real epiphany for our times.

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The Pilgrimage of the Magi

[\(Micah 5:1–6\)](#)

[1](#)After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, [2](#)asking, “Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east^{[a](#)} and have come to worship Him.”

[3](#)When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. [4](#)And when he had assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

[5](#)“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

[6](#)‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of My people Israel.’^{[b](#)}”

[7](#)Then Herod called the Magi secretly and learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. [8](#)And sending them to Bethlehem, he said: “Go and search carefully for the Child, and when you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him.”

[9](#)After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the Child was. [10](#)When they saw the star, they rejoiced with great delight. [11](#)On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[12](#)And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they withdrew to their country by another route.

Genesis 1:1-5

1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

1:2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

1:3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

1:4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

1:5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29

29:1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

29:2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.

29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.

29:4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

29:5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

29:6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

29:7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

29:8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

29:9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

29:11 May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Acts 19:1-7

19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

19:2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

19:3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

19:4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

19:6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--

19:7 altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

1:5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

1:7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

