

## December 2020 – Artists Almanac

We are well into advent.

Advent is described as a season of expectancy. Too often today it has become four weeks of “Black Fridays - a mad season of shopping and worrying whether we have just the right gift for each person and concern about how to pay for the big month’s credit card charges so fraught are we with obligations we forget what we are celebrating.

Son Dan tells of the time during his turn as a bellringer for The Salvation Army, when standing among the surge of shoppers on a busy corner of Church Street on a cold day in downtown Nashville, ringing his little bell and pleading for contributions to fill his kettle of change. Suddenly he noticed a scruffy man in rags, obviously homeless, with trembling hand, reaching for the kettle. He watched as the man, instead of taking out drop into it a handful of coins begged by him for the benefit of others who knew as he did the stark reality of cold hunger.

As a young boy I spent each Christmas at my Mama’s in Kentucky with my little cousin. Each Christmas Eve, he and I lay wakeful on the studio couches on the mezzanine overhanging the staircase several feet from the magical fragrant tree we could smell from our midnight perch. We would sleep and dream, sleep and waken, whispering in hushed tones, warned not to come peeking lest we scare Santa away. In our snatches of dreams, we were on tiptoe with expectation of the great celebration of Christmas morning when we would finally go down to the lighted tree to see what wonders there for us to behold.

Advent is a season of expectancy. Later, as adults, we kept this spirit of anticipation alive for our children with a little cardboard Advent calendar with foldout windows, each showing a different image we

could never quite remember from year to year, making each opening a special time of morning surprise and delight at breakfast. Then, on each of the four advent Sundays, a family would gather at the altar in the church to light the week's candle in the progress towards the big day.

This year we have a new delight to remind us the night when our Creator took flesh and came down to earth to save us all from sin and death – the Christmas star – the same one that drew the wise men from the east.<sup>1</sup> This event is the final act that closes the Christmas season. The word *Epiphany* is still in general use today; Webster tells us it is “*a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something*”.

When the Medes and Persian watchers of the heavens to the east of Palestine saw this brilliant star in the west, they took it as a sign – a sign of a new king or ruler to the west. They commissioned three of their diviners, or *Magi*, to follow it west and report back what new ruler or king might be found under that brilliant star. They took the traditional gifts used to appease a foreign ruler and persuade him not to attack their nation – gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

It was like looking for the end of the rainbow: they knew when they reached the general district where it should be, but not the exact spot. Needing local directions, whom better to ask than the local ruler of the Jews – Herod? Consulting his own priests, they told Herod it was prophesied that the king would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. Imagine their surprise when they found at the foot of the star's powerful light, not a royal birth, among servants and courtiers, but a homeless couple, in a barn outside a crowded Inn, with their infant lying in a feed trough, surrounded by donkeys, sheep and ragged sheep herders. Overcoming

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<sup>1</sup> See your internet reference for the rare conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn an hour after sunset on December 21<sup>st</sup> this year, the first such phenomena since 1623.

their shock, they knelt before the King of Kings and offered him their gifts. But just because they were wise men, they knew the ways of a megalomaniacal ruler and what he was capable of, and decided to return to Persia by another way, avoiding Jerusalem altogether. Joseph, warned in a dream, took Mary and the child to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath.

Months later when Herod discovered the Magi had tricked him, he was troubled by this unwelcome news of a younger rival for his power, rising in his territory to supplant him in his infirm old age. A hateful ruler, he had already had his wife and sons murdered on suspicion of disloyalty, so he called his own trusted wise men to ask where this new "king" might be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea, the ancient scriptures tell us," they replied. Good! He responded. "Then order my Palace guards to go there and slaughter every male child under the age of two!" he thundered. Thus, these young children of Bethlehem became the first Christian martyrs – The Holy Innocents – whose feast day is celebrated December 29<sup>th</sup> this year. Joseph, being warned in a dream, of the wicked ruler's rage, had fled with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they remained until Herod's death.

No wonder the story of this, the greatest event in the history of the world up to that time. is so thrilling, John 1, v4-5 summarizes all that came about:

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

His birth was not announced in the social register but by a multitude of angels praising God and saying:

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased. (Luke 2:13-14)*

Right click on the hyperlink below then press “open hyperlink” to hear the angels sing Close each after each piece, as you wish.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhhYIZJj6rk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI6dsMeABpU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLT9dSt8cwg>

Twelve days later when the wise men arrived bearing their diplomatic gifts for the newborn king this was the precedent for our gift giving at Christmas and symbolized the extension of the good news to the gentiles, but also prophetic: the gold of our most precious metal used in our altar crosses down through, the ages; the frankincense used to perfume our altars and ceremonies, and the myrrh, the spice used to preserve Christ’s body at this burial. The term *king* later got him crucified when Pilate, who resisted all other shouts from the crowd, gave in to their accusation that he threatened Rome’s kingship. This wrongful accusation is still wrongly used today by China and other tyrannies.



So, when you pass our church and hear us singing carols in early January, remember that the twelve days of Christmas do not begin until December 25<sup>th</sup> and end on Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, when the wise men arrived to bring the news to all of us.

A blessed Christmas to each of you.