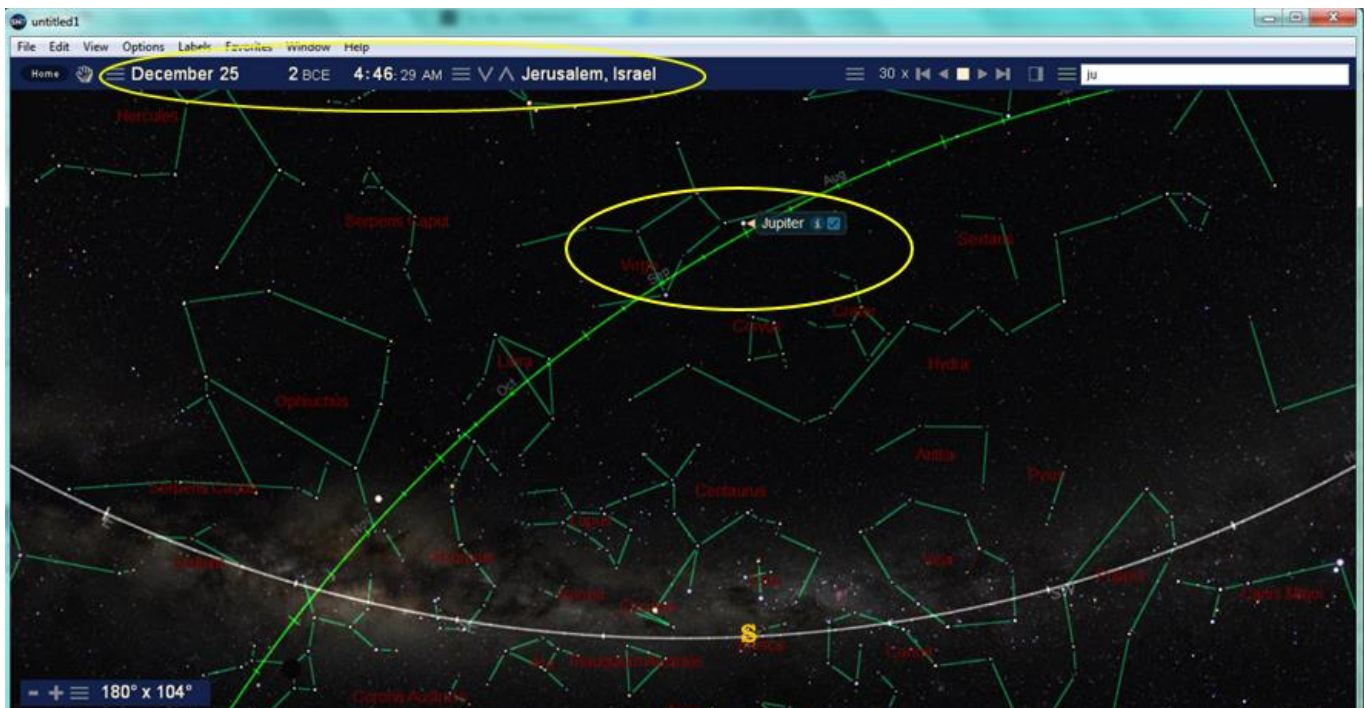


Dave's Laptop

January 6, 2015

Well, today is Epiphany on the Christian calendar, which marks the end of “the twelve days of Christmas.” As I’m sure you know, Epiphany also commemorates the visit of the Magi, which we’ll think about (among other things) during Bible study tomorrow evening, weather permitting.

According to the calculations of Rick Larson (www.bethlehemstar.net), Jesus was born on June 2, 2 B.C. and the Magi’s visit was on December 25 of that year (yes, really on December 25, according to him), when Jesus was six months old. If you’ve seen the film *The Star of Bethlehem*, you’ll remember that Larson’s theory is that Jupiter is the main player in this pageant, and that on that date it was “stopped” (i.e., in full retrograde) over Bethlehem as seen from Jerusalem (and in the constellation *Virgo*, appropriately enough).¹



Changing subjects entirely, I’m very happy to report that Barrie’s calculations are that we did in fact end 2014 “in the black,” and the ADMIN team will work Thursday night on final distributions of missions monies for the year. We’ll give you all the specifics when we have them. THANK YOU for your faithfulness.

Several people have indicated to me that their plan is to increase their giving through CBF in 2015. If you’re not yet at the tithing level of 10%, we really need you to increase your giving, too, if you can. We’ve committed as a congregation to increase our giving to missions out of our undesignated offerings by 1.5% per year until that amount represents at least 10% of our budget (over and above designated giving to missions); and we can’t do that as a congregation unless we’re also doing it as families.

¹ This software is *Starry Night* (www.astronomy.starrynight.com). Learn about Larson’s current research into the earthquake at Jesus’ crucifixion (Matthew 27:54) at www.christquake.com.

I was interested to see a recent magazine sidebar from the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* that listed the top twenty U.S. states in charitable giving. Utah was #1, with 6.56%, and D.C. was #20 with 3.15%, but Maryland didn't make the cut.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I went to the *Chronicle's* website to see how we did in Howard County.² Our giving ratio in Howard County for the period of the report was 2.71%, with income breakdowns as follows:

AGI up to \$25,000 = 7.62%
\$25,000-\$50,000 = 4.94%
\$50,000-\$75,000 = 3.58%
\$75,000-\$100,000 = 2.91%
\$100,000-\$200,000 = 2.38%
Over \$200,000 = 2.66%

Against Howard County's average of 2.71%, our neighbors did this:

Prince George's County 5.24%
Baltimore County 3.91%
Montgomery County 2.69%
Anne Arundel County 2.56%
Frederick County 2.31%
Carroll County 2.18%

You can draw your own conclusions from these numbers. The really important thing is whether the Lord views what you and I are doing with the resources under our management as "faithful" (Matthew 25:23). As you might suspect, God's measure of faithfulness turns the world's measure on its head. Our culture teaches us to:

1. **Earn** our money
2. **Enjoy** it (usually we over-enjoy it), which lands us in debt.
3. **Repay** the debt from overspending.
4. **Save** for future needs once you're out of debt.
5. **Give**, if and when there is anything left over.

The biblical order looks a lot more like **Earn, Give, Save, and Repay**, with **Enjoy** coming all along as we discover the peace of financial freedom and the gladness of generosity. *Try it. You'll like it* ☺.

Let me close with Henry Blackaby's devotional for Epiphany. I thought it a very good way to begin the day. The text was Jeremiah 18:6:³

"God knows how to bring salvation to your family, your friends, your community, and your world. Accordingly, He looks for those who will allow Him to shape them into the instruments He requires to do His divine work. Clay has no plans of its own, no aspirations for service, nor reluctance to perform its given task. It is just clay. Moldable, pliable, totally submissive to the will of its master.

"At times we excitedly announce to God: 'I've discovered my strengths and gifts, and now I know how I can best serve You!' At other times we inform Him, 'I am aware of what my weaknesses are, so I know which tasks I'm not capable of doing for You.' Yet this is not

² <http://philanthropy.com/article/Interactive-Explore-How/149107/#county/24027>

³ Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Experiencing God Day by Day* (Broadman & Holman, 2006).

characteristic of clay. God is not limited to working with our strengths (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10). He can mold us into whatever kind of instrument He requires. When God's assignment demands humility, he finds a servant willing to be humbled. When His work requires zeal, He looks for someone He can fill with His Spirit. God uses holy vessels, so He finds those who will allow Him to remove their impurities.

"It is not a noble task, being clay. There is no glamour to it, nothing boastworthy, except that it is exactly what Almighty God is looking for. Compliant, moldable, yielded clay. If your tendency is to tell the Father what you can and cannot do for Him, submit to His agenda and allow Him to shape you into the person He wants you to be. Like clay."

May it be so, O Lord.

Dave

P.S. There will be no *Laptop* for the next two weeks (try to contain your disappointment). I'm going to be on vacation ☺. Jill and I are headed to Oregon to visit Nathan and his family. Pastor Neville will preach on the 18th, and Francine Johnson and Dan Trollinger will lead the Wednesday Bible studies while I'm away.

P.P.S. Please mark your calendars for Sunday afternoon, January 25, when Rabbi Bernstein and I will host a study of "The Number 40 in Scripture" in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Oakland Mills Interfaith Center.

