
A Drone or A Star? The Light of Christ!

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Christmas Eve 2024**

It's a drone!

Imagine, if you will, a drone. Imagine it was a drone, after all. Imagine that a huge drone, a supersonic drone, was speeding around the entire earth, taking pictures of the world on this night, just over two thousand years ago, when Jesus was born. What would such a drone even be seeing? What would the 24/7 news media be reporting?

Well, first of all, the Roman Empire might well have owned the news media. Citizens and slaves alike would have heard that night about new territories being claimed in Northern Africa. The drone would have seen that empire spreading all the way to the British Isles.

And, contrary to what many in the western world thought, the drone would have seen a world much bigger than the Roman Empire. In China, the first century was led by the Han Dynasty, and astronomers had already catalogued a thousand real stars, that were not drones. Some were already following the writings of Lao-Tse, who taught the "Tao," the "Way."

In India, kingdoms were rising and falling along the Ganges. The teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, were spreading into Southeast Asia. In many areas of Africa, the Iron Age was still arriving. In the Americas, the Mayan civilization was about to flourish. All over the world, tribes and clans fought and made peace, planted and harvested, lived and learned.

And, in those days, the Bible says, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. "All the world," he said! Imagine that! Emperor Augustus had no idea how big the world really was, and he did not get very far. It is the nature of empire to over-reach, to think too highly of itself, to miss the real stars of the universe.

Then, let us imagine this imaginary drone zooming quickly, to a spot not far from Bethlehem of Judea. The little town is full of hopes and fears, and there are certain poor shepherds out in the fields at night. Their faces are full of amazement! But the drone is unable to see that amazement!

I remember one night when my own face was full of amazement. I was a child, growing up in rural Georgia, where it was dark at night. And I loved seeing amazing things at night. One night, I was sure that what I saw were UFOs. Remember them? Remember the Unidentified Flying Object frenzy, which still pops up every few years? As a boy, I rushed inside to ask my father, a pilot, what was going on.

Peace, my wise father said, those lights are airplanes and helicopters. Go back to enjoying the real stars, the constellations like Orion and Ursa Major. Thus, I learned about the amazement of the actual, real, stars of the night. Not drones! Later, with my father and mother's help, I also learned about the true star, the true star that was causing amazement in the little town of Bethlehem.

Something did happen back in those days when Jesus was born. Into that world of families and tribes, and into that world of empire, dynasty, and kingdom, some very common people heard angels, and some wandering strangers saw a star. It was not a drone that they saw. And any drone would not have seen that true star, either.

Glory, glory, was all around that birth! The light was coming from the birth! Would the drone have seen that glory? No. Would the drone have seen the angels? No. Would the World News have reported that glory?

I doubt it. The odds are that no empire reported that glory. No political empire and no media empire, and no entertainment empire and no religious empire, reported that glory. It is not in the nature of empires to see angels. The world kept turning.

It is not everybody who hears angels and sees stars. Two thousand years ago, not many people at all heard the angels or saw the star. The angels were singing, "Glory!" and announcing, "Do not fear!"; but the world was not paying attention. The world is oblivious to a glory not of its own making.

And the words, "Do not fear" are not the words of empires and kingdoms and dynasties. On the contrary, empires and kingdoms thrive upon fear, and they thrive upon conspiracy fears. They depend upon it! Back in those days, the Roman Empire needed fear to survive. Angels, on the other hand, are always saying the opposite, "Do not fear!"

The false stars of that time were the same ones we generally see reported today: pumped-up gladiators, greedy kings, self absorbed attention grabbers who do violence to common sense. The world of empire and kingdom would have us focus on false stars, the stars of acquisition and violence, the stars of selfish individualism, the stars of people unable to see beyond themselves.

But God rarely works through the massive superpowers. God rarely works through the voices we hear the loudest, or the lights who shine the brightest and suck up all the energy around them.

Our God works through small voices and simple lights, sounds and stars that much of the world misses altogether. For the star of our God always shines on something other than itself. The star of wonder, star of night, always shines beyond itself; it leads to a perfect light, which is beyond us!

The true stars of the world, yesterday or today, are the stars that shine on Jesus. True stars shine on giving, not getting. God works through the light that gives us energy!

Christmas, then, does not come from the almighty powers upon which we always seem to project our hopes. It is impossible for imperialism to shine new life or to sing the song of Gloria. It will not be empire that delivers the hope of Christmas.

It will not be Caesar Augustus, demanding registration and taxes. It will not be Herod the Great, the narcissistic king insisting on personal attention. It will not be the Roman Empire. And Christmas will not come from any modern country today.

Christmas will come from below. Christmas will come from ordinary shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, strange wise men searching the heavens, young women pondering words in their hearts, couples struggling to bring new life into the world. Maybe Christmas will come from the person right next to you. Christmas comes from humanity, ordinary flesh infused with the glory of God.

This is why so many of us delight in the children's Christmas pageants each year. We already know the entire story. We have seen, so many times before, the bathrobes and cardboard crowns, the little gift boxes and the hundreds of animals.

But we go back to the pageants again and again. Why? Because the children are a new generation of angels and stars. God is always working in the new generation, in the new birth, in the lowly and unformed and undeveloped. Children give us someone to love.

It is in the lowly, and in the particular, that we truly see the light of God. God does not save the whole world all at once. God saves the world one person at a time. God saves the world through you and me, through the person sitting to your right and to your left. God saves the world starting with one person at a time.

A month ago, I was delighted to show some children the heavenly stars through a telescope. With the naked eye, we could see Orion very clearly. And we could see a very small collection of stars, known as the constellation, Pleiades, also called the Seven Sisters. And do you know what we saw in that focused telescope? Not just seven stars, but hundreds of stars! Even thousands!

Maybe like this church, and churches all over the world, who –to a drone—might look like just one ordinary light, one star, but who really include thousands of stars, thousands of points of light! Those! Those are the real

stars of Christmas! You and me who can be light in the world!

In lowly Judea, in Palestine, a child was born two thousand years ago. The world itself did not notice much. But that child grew. At twelve years old, he was leaving his parents. At thirty years old or so, he began to preach and teach elsewhere. He grew larger still. He grew into a community of confused and lowly strangers.

That child grew into the Roman Empire. He grew into North Africa. He grew into the British Isles. He grew into India and the Far East. He grew into North America and South America. He even grew into Atlanta, Georgia. He has grown into the whole world.

And now, tonight, angels are singing all around the world. Listen to those angels: "Do not fear," they sing. "There is good news here of a great joy for all people."

Tonight, one star is shining all around the world, the star of Christmas. It is not a drone! Do not fear! That star is really millions of stars, shining love everywhere, upon the person on your right, and upon the person on your left. That star is the Light of Christ! Giving energy to the world. Wherever you are, look around you. Join that light; shine your light of love on that person next to you!

Yes, a grand and holy star shines not just upon the Jesus of two thousand years ago, the lowly child born in a manger. The star of wonder shines tonight, this very night, upon Jesus the Christ, who is God made flesh everywhere. God becomes flesh in all of us! God is made flesh –incarnate, holy light—for the salvation of the whole world.

AMEN.

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