

Jupiter, Saturn closely align to form rare 'Christmas Star'  
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The year 2020 has once again given way to an unusual occurrence. Jupiter and Saturn will align Monday, Dec. 21, the first day of winter, and be closer to each other than they have been in 800 years. NASA said the two planets will appear to be around one-fifth of a full moon apart, though the actual separation is a half-billion miles. This conjunction is known as the "Christmas Star."

The planets will be visible to the naked eye and look like one large bright star in the sky. With a telescope, and maybe even binoculars, people should be able to see both planets separately.

Though it won't be an actual star, College of Charleston astronomy professor Dr. Joseph Carson said part of why it is given the "Christmas Star" designation is because of how close it is happening to the holiday.

It could've also gotten its name from the biblical story of the Star of Bethlehem that appeared after Jesus' birth, Carson said. But either way, the bright spot in the southwest sky on Monday will likely be Jupiter and Saturn.

Lowcountry Stargazers President Jim Hoffman said the planets will be situated not far above the horizon. If people have a clear view to the southwest, they should be able to see them.

Hoffman said Brittlebank Park in Charleston will probably be one of the best spots in town to see the conjunction. Looking toward West Ashley from the park should give a clear view of the planets. But that's only if there are no clouds in the sky. "So, I would say get out around sunset and just look to the southwest, and the first thing you're going to see will be the bright spots in the sky, and that'll be Jupiter and Saturn," Hoffman said.

After Monday, Carson said the planets will start to drift apart. But people should still be able to see them in the sky on Christmas Day.

Conjunctions happen every 20 years, but typically not as close as the one happening this year, Carson said. While Jupiter and Saturn will appear close, NASA advises to remember they're actually hundreds of millions of miles apart.

"It's always a romantic event when this happens," Carson said. "And it's certainly, I think, a nice close for 2020 and kind of a symbol of hope coming up, maybe."