



# First United Church of Oak Park

## The Reason We Follow This Star

Matthew 2:1-12

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One of the most influential theological voices of the last generation is that of Frederick Buechner: preacher, novelist, and autobiographer. Buechner is a beautiful and moving writer. If you read him long enough, you realize that he has a serious moral and intellectual project that undergirds his writing. His project is to understand and explore the way that Jesus and his gospel teach us to be human - open, vulnerable, loving, generous. Again and again, as he cracks open his Bible and tries to make a connection with your life and mine, he does so in ways that opens us to the kindness and decency and love for others that Jesus invites all of us to embody.

As I talk about this, it doesn't necessarily sound like learning how to be human, in Jesus' terms, is such a big deal; especially when those of us here this morning are pretty loving and decent people, most of the time. But when we open this morning's text and think about the backdrop to this story, perhaps we can remember how much we need the sort of help that God offers us in Christ.

The narrative of the wise men is one that we retell every year at Christmastime. On the surface, it's a lovely story. Jesus' birth is foretold in the stars, and it's interpreted by astrologers from the East. These scientists are so intrigued, and so compelled, that they follow the star, find the baby, worship him, and give him gifts. The journey of the wise men is an essential part of our Christmas narrative. The camels belong at the creche, and so do the three figures carrying gifts.

But underneath and behind this narrative there is a political drama that plays out and it is a really creepy, horrifying part of the story. That's the bit about Herod, who is the guy the Romans have put in charge of the country where Jesus is born. Herod is vicious; he's like a character out of Game of Thrones, with all the compassion of a Ramsey Bolton or a Cersei Lannister, which is to say that the only way Herod knows how to deal with a rival is by death. Because he sees the baby boy as a rival, Herod goes after the child, to kill him, and when the child and his parents flee to Egypt and Herod cannot identify the boy, he decides to slaughter all the baby boys in Bethlehem. It's a horrible story.

I only wish it were an unusual one.

Children die because they are on the wrong side of political disputes all the time. Sometimes we know their names, like three children who died recently in U.S. custody.

- Mariee Juarez, 19 months
- Jakelin Caal, 7 years
- Felipe Alonzo-Gomez, 8 years.

I do not know the names of the children who have died in Yemen, but I do know it's estimated that approximately 85,000 children age 5 and younger may die from starvation in that country. That's like the whole population of Oak Park and River Forest combined. That's a lot of children, and not one of them is old enough to feed themselves.

Kids aren't old enough to feed themselves or help themselves, and they are often the first casualties of war, or disease, or the peril of cramming too many people into small boats and trying to sail across the Mediterranean.

How do we get ourselves into these messes?

John Paul Lederach is a Mennonite who has spent his adult life working for peace, justice, and reconciliation. He has worked all over the world, and in the late 20th century spent considerable time in civil war zones in Central America. In his book, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*, he writes about a time when he was in an airport in Honduras. A helicopter landed, and out walked a military official, a big, brash man whom Lederach immediately categorized as part of the military dictatorship, and Lederach was working for the other side. He immediately stereotyped the man as being dangerous, murderous, on the hunt for the people with whom he worked. The man disappeared for a couple of minutes, and when he reappeared, he was accompanying a young girl, about 10 years old, who was wearing leg braces and trying to walk, smile, and wave all at the same time. The man was helping her, and Lederach realized that the man was the girl's father. Suddenly he felt a kinship with the man and that surprised him. It also made him examine his own conscience and ask himself why he was so quick to pigeon-hole the man as an enemy, why he was so ready to define the man only in political and military terms and not in terms that fully embraced his humanity.

He draws some interesting conclusions about how easy it is for any of us to deceive ourselves and imagine ourselves to be better than others. Lederach says there are three steps we take when we conceive of others as enemies.

1. We separate ourselves from them. We begin to be blind to what we share with other people, and, instead, we concentrate on how we are different from them, and we highlight the differences in them that we perceive as negative.
2. Next, we begin to see ourselves as superior. We view ourselves, in distinction to other people, in positive terms.
3. This results in the third step, de-humanizing these other people, in our minds. We lose sight of their full humanity. Once that happens, all sorts of other things can follow. In some cases, we commodify these others, as our ancestors did in the days of chattel slavery. In other cases, we ghettoize them and restrict them to segregated communities. Or, we build walls to keep people in some places and restrict their freedom of movement; whether we do that in Berlin, or on the border between Gaza and Israel, or on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, we do this. In the worst cases, we kill people; we allow children to die, except we don't really think about them as being children or even human anymore. They are the number written on their arm, or whatever other abstraction we have imagined them into.<sup>1</sup>

When I describe this to you, and repeat Lederach's analysis, it sounds shocking. Disgusting. But, however shocking it is, we human beings do this to each other all too often.

Children die at the border because we have dehumanized them, turned them in our minds from human beings into future rapists and murderers and terrorists. Children died 2000 years ago in Bethlehem because Herod imagined them not as the beautiful baby boys they were, but as abstract threats to his power; that made them expendable.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul Lederach. *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014), 69-81.

Jesus is born right smack in the middle of this mess.

He is born in a way and lives in a way that fails to provide a quick fix. Claiming the Christian faith as our own - joining a church or reciting the Apostles' Creed and meaning it; stuff like that does not suddenly erase our negative, hurtful, inhuman impulses. We are slow learners, and God knows that. That is why God comes to be with us in Christ and in the Spirit. God comes to show us the way, and the way is called Jesus.

Though he is despised and rejected by others, Jesus never sees another as an enemy.

He does not separate himself from others, instead he welcomes those who might be called "other" into his company: poor fishermen, women with questionable reputations, tax collectors and sinners, children, Roman centurions, even Pharisees. Jesus does not wall himself off from other people. He welcomes them because they are people, and he invites us to do the same.

Jesus does not consider himself to be better than others. Instead, he considers himself a servant to other people. He does not come to be served, but to serve. He calls us to do the same. He calls us to serve the poor, the widow and the orphan, the immigrant, the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, whoever might need a helping hand from us. Jesus calls us to serve each other. He never counts himself as being better than we are.

Thus, Jesus never falls into the dehumanization trap. He comes close. That story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman is a troubling one, but Jesus never completely dismisses her; he listens to her and empathizes with her story, and so he learns and grows. He resists that human urge to pigeonhole, to stereotype, and ultimately to dehumanize. He calls us to follow him in that, too.

Kermit the Frog says that it's not easy being green.<sup>2</sup> He's got a point. It's never easy to be ourselves, whoever we are. It's not easy being human. But Jesus shows us a way: a way of openness and hospitality, a way of service and compassion. He doesn't just point the way; he walks with us on that path.

May the year ahead be for all of us a year in which we walk on that path, by ourselves and together. May it be a year in which we live more fully into the people God calls us to be. May the year ahead be a time for us of blessing, blessing received and blessing shared, in the name of our brother Jesus. And on this journey of discipleship, may God grant us peace.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRZ-IxZ46ng>