

‘A Wide Open Heart’  
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist  
First United Presbyterian Church  
January 4, 2015—Epiphany Sunday  
Matthew 2:1-12; ‘Dear Matafele Peinam’

It was one year ago on Epiphany Sunday (do you remember?) when I stood before you, in this spot, as the candidate of your Pastor Nominating Committee, to become your next installed pastor.

It snowed that weekend, too. (Although much worse than today!)

And the Scripture for this Sunday, the story of wise ones following a star, to find a child, was before us that weekend, too.

Do you remember what I said? [Pop quiz: an extra slice of birthday cake baked by Seneca if you can remember my sermon title]

‘Where Is The Child?’

Do you remember?

And of course, as an answer, you could have pointed to the picture on the front of your bulletin: the same one that is there today, of three cute kiddos dressed smartly for winter, with their fur coats, and their ‘wise men’ gifts disguised as cups of hot cocoa.

[look closely, you’ll see what I mean!]

“Where Is the Child?” I asked that Sunday.

And I shared the story of the Mennonite Church I had worshipped with in San Antonio during the Season of Advent that year. I shared that the children of that congregation (a beautiful mix of ages and races and genders, just like our children here at First United) sat front and center together on the floor at the front of the sanctuary, throughout the entire service, as the literal lens through which that congregation worshipped.

Do you remember?

And I invited us to do the same, here at First United, in our ministry together. To put our twenty-three children and youth ‘front and center’ in our sanctuary. Metaphorically, at least, if not literally. Not to put them on the spot or embarrass them in front of their parents and their peers. But to worship the God we must serve in the world through the lens of *their* lives and a vision for *their* future.

Which is what we just did, if you remember, in the Season of Advent we just celebrated together. Every one of our twenty-three children and youth represented by a stone:

Kylie  
J.J.  
Everest  
Elaine  
Caleb

Kate  
Irene  
Gregoire  
Aubrey  
Dele  
Charlie  
Seneca  
Rufus  
Serge  
Sergio  
Georges  
Breanne  
Casey  
Hannah  
Kylie  
Amivi  
Gavin  
Brendan  
Akossiwa

. . . and extras for the multitudes we expect to throng our fellowship once word gets out that children are celebrated front and center here at First United!

In fact, it was the greatest compliment your not-so-new Pastor could have received, at the end of our recent Christmas Eve service, where we baptized Baby Kylie, when a woman I consider to be a pillar of this church commented to me that 'no child could have left here tonight without knowing how much they were loved.'

And may that be the truth after *every* worship service here at First United!

The truth is, of course, that we do love our children. As we must. Because they are our future. And . . . well . . . because they are '*ours*.'

All twenty-three of them.

But what about all those other children of the world? The ones who aren't really 'ours'? The ones we never really have to look at if we really don't want to?

What about Matafele Peinam, for example? Born in the Marshall Islands. Whose mother sang the twenty-first century version of Mary's Magnificat, about lifting up the lowly, and scattering the proud from their thrones, at the United Nations conference on Global Climate Change this past September.

'they say you, your daughter  
and your granddaughter, too  
will wander rootless  
with only a passport to call home''

this modern-day Mary cries. Because the lagoon-of-our-identity is rising too high. And the water that once wrapped us in God's 'Beloved' embrace is now threatening to drown us.

Through no fault of our own . . .

And the question for us is, are our hearts open wide enough for her, too?

Does 'Matafele Peinam' get a stone on the communion table, too?

Not just as another child that Jesus loves, because 'Jesus loves all the children of the world.' But as one of *our* children. Who we will fight tooth and nail to protect from any harm. Because her future is our future. And her life is our life.

I say she does.

I say Matafele Peinam is the baby born in a Marshall Island manger today, clothed in sunlight instead of fancy clothes, unsafe in her own land, in the spotlight only because her way of life is at stake.

And I say, we who are in sacramental communion with her, and with all of our children, have the chance right here, right now, to follow her star, and claim her future as our own, and protect her from the Herods of the world, who hide 'behind their platinum titles, 'who like to pretend that [she doesn't] exist.' Because they care only for their own children. And are threatened by the rising star of another.

And I say, if we want to be wise, we will find another way home, like the magi in the story of Jesus, meaning that if we want to be wise, we will find another way to *live* in our home, meaning that if we want to be wise, we will find another way to live the font of our identity, here in our home, so that she may continue to live the lagoon-of-her identity, there in hers.

Because she is just a baby.

Just like our babies.

And her 'eyes are heavy with drowsy weight.'

And she, too, has the God-given right to 'sleep in heavenly peace.'

So let us work to make it so.

Amen.