

WHO CAN WE FOLLOW?

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We must follow the star.
Even on godless nights
when there is no star
we must follow the star.
-John Moriarty

"Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." *Luke 2:19*. This is my favorite line from the story of the birth of Jesus in *The Gospel According to Luke*. Mary had many things to ponder as an unwed mother with a new baby. She was engaged to a man who was not her baby's father. Foreign invaders occupied her country. Her infant son would come of age as a Jewish man in the occupied, historic land of his forefathers and foremothers. How would this baby make his way?

Luke tells us that when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be circumcised, a holy man said to family "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Mary had many things to ponder. Palestine in the first century had many gods, but the spirit of the land was godless, some would say forsaken. There was poverty, cruelty, violence, intolerance, and repression. The great Emperors of Rome ruled Palestine from a distance with their legions and governors.

First century Palestine was a hard place to be a radical rabbi, challenging the authority of the Roman Empire. Jesus placed his God above Caesar and reached out to tax collectors and prostitutes, adulterers (Who among you can cast the first stone?), and after some re-education on his part, gentiles. What is also clear is how little he cared about "orthodox" or "right thinking." Jesus chose a universal love that was devout, inclusive, and attentive to human need. We are told this was the love of his Father. What we know is that it was and is a love not recognizable to all.

One of my colleagues recently suggested to me that leadership is not about marginalizing people. As he says, "That's easy. Hating gays, Jews, blacks, Muslims, immigrants, anyone can do that. Anyone can shut someone else out." Anyone can find a passage in the Bible that validates misogyny, slavery, homophobia, religious persecution. Instead my colleague suggests that true leadership is inclusive, encourages diversity, and ultimately positive human and societal transformation.

The New York Times reports that a fifth grade teacher named Mr. Williams wants to instruct his public school class on President's Bush's proclamation of national prayer day, the reference to "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and Easter. Mr. Williams' principal is notably concerned about the separation of church and state. As a minister I also find Mr. William's orthodox, evangelical faith irrelevant to the larger concerns of humanity. His expression of faith is exclusive. Anyone can shut someone out.

We must follow a star but whom can we follow? The celebration of Easter, the affirmation of "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and a national prayer day? In this crazy world these problems don't add up to a hill of beans. They are not the leadership, religious or otherwise, that is called for when a mess tent explodes killing twenty individuals, Iraqis and Americans are dying, and our deficit is climbing.

If religious leadership were to take on the challenge of its own relevancy it would not send sex offenders to the priesthood, it would admit there is no difference between hating the sin and hating the sinner (it's all just hate to me), and the faithful would not be told they are going to heaven if they implement a suicide bombing. Religion is sinking under its orthodox irrelevance because we have neglected Jesus' vision of a devout universal love that is attentive to human need. Universal love is powerful and risky, powerful because it can change the world, risky because relevance comes with human compassion and sacrifice. What is the sign of leadership we can follow? A sword will pierce our souls.

Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva lives every day with the memory of his own poverty, his mother's tears, and then sees the poverty and tears of his fellow countrymen and women. A man of sincerity and intelligence, the public is already impatient with the slow rate of change. Raising the ire of his countrymen he encouraged his government not to raise the minimum wage because Brazil, staggering under debt, cannot, as much as it also needs to, pay for the increase. Two of his government's coalition parties just withdrew in protest. No wonder he is tired and sweaty. Leadership hurts. A national prayer day? The word "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance? What exactly is their relevance when children go to bed hungry and mothers cry because they cannot feed them? I wonder what Lula's mother pondered in her heart when her son became president.

In this dark night, a night after snow on snow, a night when the snow storm kept us from the grocery store, from shopping, from finishing our work, in this confusing season of hope, and light, and beginnings, may we each remember that leadership comes with sacrifice, and that to those whom much has been given, much is expected. This hurting world needs our Unitarian Universalist vision of a universal love that cares for the human needs of all.

O come, o come Immanuel, God with us and among us. Come here to fill our lonely hearts, our fearful minds. Remind us of the price and responsibility of our power. Remind us that God has no side, only the human condition. Remind us that leadership takes sacrifice, and some of our greatest leaders have paid the ultimate price for their vision. Remind us religion is relevant, when we give a little bit to human need and for the greater good of all. Even on godless nights, this is the star we can follow.



—With grateful acknowledgement to Rabbi Robert Barr for suggesting that hate is easy and real leadership is about inclusivity.