

# IT'S A WONDER-FILLED LIFE

DECEMBER 22, 2019 SERMON  
CHRISTMAS CARDS SERIES

*Matthew 18:2-4: He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

I lived in China for a year after I graduated college. At the time, this was 1999, the city I lived in was considered a small city. 6 million people. There were several British and German manufacturers in town, which meant there were other foreigners around, maybe 100, and the vast majority of them were men. So in a city of six million people, I was one of just a handful of Western women.

I was not what anyone outside our school gates expected to see when they walked out their doors in the morning. And when people who did not expect to see someone like me saw me, they would inevitably say, "Lao Wai." Foreigner. Literally, "old outsider." Some people would just mutter it to themselves, "Oh, Lao Wai." Other people would holler it out so everyone else could look, which they did. "Lao Wai!"

Some people clutched their chests and yelled it, like you might yell, "There's a ghost!"

It got really old really fast. Everywhere you went in my city was as crowded as the Battlefield Mall on the Saturday before Christmas Eve. And if I went anywhere, a good 30% of the people who saw me would say or yell "Lao Wai", so I could hear it hundreds of times a day. For a while, I stopped going out. I mostly stayed on the compound, and I stuck to the same places outside the compound, usually in the closest village, where the people came to expect to see me and stopped commenting. And that's why when I speak Mandarin, I sound like I'm from a rural village. I speak Chinese like a country girl. I stopped saying the perfect Beijing "Zai jian" for goodbye and started hollering the local village's goodbye, which was "Men zai wei!" which, I later learned, meant "Well, I'll see y'all tomorrow!"

But there was a place deep in the city I loved to venture into—the bird and flower market. At the bird and flower market, they sold birds and flowers. Beautiful flowers. And

birds that were really unusual to me, especially these black and red mockingbirds so many people kept in shops who would yell “Ni Hao!” or “hello!” as you walked in. And they sold fish, plants, and containers for birds and flowers and fish and plants. And puppies you’d keep as pets and not for other reasons. Sometimes there were kittens. It was open air. It wasn’t usually as busy as other places in town, because everyone else was there for a specific reason. I just went there to look around and be around living things. It was a peaceful place for me. A place where people left me alone. But to get there, I had to take a lot of public transit, and I’d been called Lao Wai a lot of times by the time I arrived in my peaceful place.

So I was walking around there one day, about six months into my stay, blissful in being ignored, and I walked past a stall where someone had one of those mockingbirds, and this bird yelled out, “Lao Wai!”

And I — I got mad. At the bird. And I went off — on the bird. In English. I said something like, “Look, I have to take that from every person in this country but I am not going to take it from a stupid bird. How did you know I was a foreigner, you racist bird?” And when I finished my tirade, I realized there were people watching me. In wonder. Because I was a foreign woman chewing out a bird in a foreign language. And that’s an unbelievably weird thing to see in the middle of your average day.

After that, I decided I didn’t care as much about being called “Lao Wai” wherever I went. I couldn’t even blend in for a bird. So if I couldn’t blend in, I might as well stand out. I would go out to unfamiliar places. I would speak to people who called me Lao Wai. Sometimes I even pointed at them and yelled “Lao Wai!” back at them, which really confused people. And when I rode the bus, I was not opposed to hanging out the window and waving as though I was a foreign dignitary in a parade instead of just a foreign teacher riding a bus. People waved back. They loved it. They smiled. It

was great. It was suddenly fun to be a foreigner in China.

And then the supervisor of the foreign teachers, a Chinese woman I loved, came up to me when I was with another American teacher and told me that I had to stop being so weird in public. In particular, she wanted me to stop speaking the local dialect and saying “Men Zai wei” because people thought I literally meant “I will see you tomorrow.” And in a village that small, they could say “men zai wei” for goodbye because they all did see each other tomorrow, but I didn’t always show up and people were disappointed. Bigger than that, she wanted me to stop waving and smiling at people when I was outside the compound. Because — she said — I was ruining their lives.

I told her the people I waved and smiled at could see me already. They knew I was a foreigner. I was just yelling “Lao Wai” FOR them by acting like — a foreigner. She said, “You go all over the city, not just to the places that are made for foreigners, the places you are supposed to see. And most people in the city have never seen a foreigner, let alone a foreign woman. When you wave at them, they think you must be some celebrity. So they go home and tell their wives and families, and it becomes the talk of the neighborhood, and their wives don’t believe them, and it becomes a big thing in their lives. Their grandchildren will tell their children that their granddad was the man Sharon Stone waved at out of a bus window. And it’s nothing to YOU, but it’s huge, life changing to them. You are not what they expect to see. You don’t have to make it weirder.”

I looked at the other foreign teacher, and we made an unspoken promise that we would be doing this every single time we left the compound.

Watching Jay react to the things we take for granted about Christmas — the songs, the lights, the presents, the food, the extra family time, the school break — watching him react to these things has made today’s scripture light up for me like a

Christmas tree. Because he approaches what I expect with wonder.

Pastor John Pavlovitz puts it this way:

The adage is true that when you have children, you see the world again through their eyes. Almost by osmosis you absorb some of their wonder, their optimism, their simple, undistracted joy in the present—things that tend to be elusive as you become a proper adult. When you're with them, you also (at least temporarily) discard the idea of the ordinary, because such a concept doesn't exist to a child. Every moment is a revelation, every experience some new breath-stealing discovery. My daughter regularly finds herself agog and wide-eyed at things I long ago stopped giving a second look to: the veins of a leaf, frost on the morning grass, the shape of a cloud. I can't remember the last time I gave a cloud a second glance, and that bothers me. The older we get, the more wonder-deprived we tend to become. (Pavlovitz, John. *Low: An Honest Advent Devotional*. Chalice Press. Kindle Edition.)

Christmas is really about getting down. God down to earth. Down on the floor to play. Down on our knees to pray. Down to our previous selves — you remember us, as we were, when we didn't know everything, when we hadn't answered all our questions, when we hadn't made up our minds, when we didn't understand how all the important things work, when we didn't know exactly what we could expect from a day, when we didn't know how God can or can't show up in our lives. Down to the level of a child, full of wonder. Down to the level of a child, which in God's Kingdom, means up. And GOOD. Down to the level of a child, which is how God got down at Christmas.

Wonder-deprived. Wonder-deprived. I love that phrase. We like "mature." We like "right." We like "professional." We like "knowledgeable." Wonder-deprived. We adults have become wonder-deprived with all our experience.

China was a constant experience of wonder for me. Everything was new. Everything was different. Everything seemed wrong to me but was right for them and actually worked out for them. And that supervisor, who wanted me to stop ruining people's lives — she was just wonder-deprived and thought that was the way people were supposed to be. And I did not care if people wondered if I was sane. At least they were experiencing the same wonder I was.

Jesus made a lot of people wonder. His ministry involved healings no one could explain and stories that used the most everyday stuff and turned them into lessons on how cool and wonderful God is. And their lives were never the same. Because they were momentarily like children, seeing things with new eyes. That's who He was. That's what He did. He made life wonder-filled again for the people who encountered Him. He gave them a wonder-filled life.

Do you want a wonder-filled life? Get down this Christmas. Like God got down. Down on the floor to play. Down on our knees to pray. Down to our previous selves — the ones who didn't have it all figured out yet, the ones who could see beauty in the everyday, who expect to be surprised, less wonder-deprived. Get down to the level of a child like God did at Christmas, down to the level of a child, which in God's Kingdom, means up. And good. Amen.