



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"For Christmas, Christ"

Psalm 96.1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19; John 1.1-4

Rev. Dr. Peter Haas

Sunday, December 25, 2011 – Christmas Day

What did you get for Christmas? That was the first question that came out of my mouth this morning when my sister called from Milwaukee, Wisconsin and my two little nephews, 8 & 6 years of age, were in the background playing with their new Lego set and I asked them, "What did you get for Christmas?" Of course, they said their Lego set. It is kind of interesting to think about that question. What did you get for Christmas?

You know the English language is interesting. Some of the most important things get mixed up. If you think about the word soul, am I talking about sole the lowest part of the human being that touches the filth of the earth? Or is it soul? It is kind of interesting, isn't it? How about the word presence? Wow. Am I talking about what you got for Christmas underneath the tree – presents or the presence of the living Christ in each of us or the power of the Spirit? It is kind of interesting how that is in English. How the most wonderful holy things can get turned around. What did you get for Christmas?

I have to tell you that this Advent season was one of the most quick I've ever experienced. I kept thinking that the meaning of Advent would land in my heart and that I would feel connected to Christ. But it is as if it zip right by and as it was zipping by, I knew it was zipping by. I knew I wasn't quite centered in presence. I had set kind of an aim for this Advent season that I would somehow feel and experience the mystery of Christmas more. Just what was it that happened at Christmas, that first one? What is the mystery of Christmas? It is a lifelong passion of mine to live into that question and that mystery - giving to be a seeker, to know more what it is that Christmas is, was and continues to be.

I don't if you've, like me, had a difficulty connecting with Advent this year or perhaps with the idea of Christmas all together, perhaps as in the English language things get turned around. Well you can't blame us. Our culture is designed in such a way that we are quite noisy and busy, quite distracted from the heart of things. It is not that things are bad; that work or shopping is bad or that the holidays are bad. It is not about that. It is just where we are giving our attention. I've discovered that this season that I've given my attention to things other than Christ.

I wanted to share with you a little devotional that help me get centered the other day. I read this little devotional, it is called *The Magnificat* and this is a devotional written by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, a Greek monk who spends his time praying and writing. This is what he shared with me and now I share it with you.

"And yet a paradox is involved here, the greatness and depth of God can be perceived only by babes, infants – those who have no words of their own and not by those who are wise and possess understanding according to the logic of the world. Not in vain does St. Bernard write, 'Christ's infancy does not console the powerful and fulfilled.' But to those of innocent heart, babes empty who need so much, to these God reveals His inmost secrets as to intimate friends and dear children. There is a clear affinity between God and children. This truth is at the center of the mystery of Christmas. When God is revealed in the form of a

baby, more than affinity, this is actual identification.” That is something we’re going to come back to here in just a moment.

“The eternal God becomes what God loves on earth the most – children, God’s children. And this is no mere sweet sentimentality on God’s part. If God loves the childlike it is because they are empty enough to receive what God wants to give – the mystery of Christ, the Word. Thus if in the depths of your soul, my soul, if we were to keep a quite silence the all powerful Word would flow from the Father’s throne secretly to you. Happy then is the person who has so fled the world’s tumult and shopping, who has so withdrawn into this solitude and secrecy of interior peace, that that person can hear not only the scriptures and the law and the Voice of the Word, but the Word Himself – not just John the Baptist, but Jesus. The first effect of the birth of God’s Word is thus to take away our own thoughts and words and fill us with the vision of God’s own heart. Do you remember when St. John the Baptist said, ‘I must decrease and He must increase.’ Remember that? Do you know what feast or what day we celebrate on the church calendar on the summer solstice? The opposite of the winter solstice that we are celebrating now that has become associated with the Birth of the Light of the World, Christmas? Six months from this festival, the festival of Jesus Christ. Do you know what festival it is? It is the festival of John the Baptist, the longest day of the year, June 21st, the shortest day of the year, December 21st and bracketed by the One who consummated the law and the traditions of the prophets and God’s promise to Abraham and then its fulfillment in the coming of the Son, Jesus.”

Now, pagans celebrated their festivities often times around these summer and winter solstices. It doesn’t mean that Christianity just adopted it. But there is an ancient principle that says, “As it is above in the heavens, so it is below.” You might recognize that principle from Jesus’ prayer, when He taught us to pray that the will of God would be done on earth as it is above. This principle is very clear to us – while we may have seen in the heavens the changing of the seasons, shortening and darkening or maybe a particular planet, like Saturn appearing at this time each year, we needed it played out on the stage of human history in a very personal way. So, as it is above became as it is below. The principle of that identification that I just we just heard in the devotional, I think we all need analogies to help us connect more with what Christmas is because it can kind of get worn down and the ideas lose their power in our lives – at least they have in mine. I’m always open and looking for new analogies to understand the essence of Christmas.

One of the ideas is that of railroads. When our country was first being settled, one of the first things that we did to develop our country was we started to lay down the tracks so that the steam engines, and later the locomotives could get across from New York to Philadelphia to Pittsburg to Chicago to Milwaukee to St. Louis. Finally, they got over the Continental Divide and all the immigrant labor that it took to lay those tracks down. This is God’s work in human kind. It took a long time for the tracks to get laid down before any steam engine could come along those tracks and deliver the goods. God had to be laying down the tracks to reach us. What did that look like? How about this? “Abram, Abram follow me and I will make of you a great nation. I’m going to try and see if I can cultivate in one group of people, God devotion. A people that is totally committed to me and will center their lives around me and my ways. Abram, will you be person to begin my plan – laying down the tracks.”

Now Abram, who becomes Abraham, didn’t know where the trains was going. He could have never envisioned John the Baptist, much less Jesus. But, he trusted God and the tracks became to be laid down and more tracks were laid down in the prophets – revealing more of who God was. Then more tracks were laid down by King David who wrote the Psalms who revealed so much about the heart of God to us. More and more tracks were laid down over thousands of years of people listening, waiting and trusting in God.

One day the tracks were complete and the train was laid down on the track – the great engine of Jesus Christ, the steam engine that could. Jesus Christ was like the first of its kind. There was no other like it. It was like God's IPO – everyone can get in on this one. It was a beautiful gift and this train landed on the tracks and it surprised a lot of people who built the tracks because they didn't expect it to be like this. They were thinking it would look a little different. They were thinking it would do something different, but this engine became to go on those tracks that were laid down over the centuries. It began to take the goods to people that previously didn't have access to any of those goods, just like the people in Denver didn't have access to all the goods in New York until the tracks were laid down. It got even better. This engine that we are calling Jesus didn't do this on its own. It wasn't just so that we could build a model train and bow and put it in a museum and say, "Look at this train how wonderful it is. Look at this engine, let's worship this engine. What an amazing engine." Actually, it is that word identification.

This analogy breaks down because we are not engines. We are human beings so, God becomes one of us. I know that is hard to believe. It doesn't make sense here to me, but it is true. Here is where the analogy has to shift a little bit. You have to think of this in terms of the finished line, all the stops along the train line and if you want to go across the country, you've got to stop at all the towns and then you can say that you've completed your journey. This is what Jesus had to do. If you think about it, He had to experience everything that a human being experiences – not just so that he could say, "I did it." But has if He was going through every stage of human development, from infancy, childhood, adolescence to adulthood. Every stage psychological, sexually, spiritually and emotionally. It is as if He was bringing healing to every town that He crossed through. His very journey was one of healing human nature – the human nature that He took for Himself for us. The ancient Creeds say that for us and our salvation He became human. This means so that He could heal us. Heal human nature and obtain wholeness and salvation. This journey that he took as it was stopping at every stop along the human condition, every single one that you can think of He experienced. Not externally, He didn't experience everything you experience externally, but on the inside, internally – your psychology, your spirituality, the thing that makes you and me human, that is what he experienced.

Not only that, it as if as He was going across the tracks, stopping at every stage along the way of human development, He said, "Come with me. Follow Me. Hook up to my engine. Participate in my journey, join me." St. Paul uses the language of union. Anyone who is united with Christ, who is in Christ [Carol read the scripture] is a new creation. That is not just poetry. I'm becoming a new creation. You are becoming a new creation. This is really true. It is really transforming when we hook up and get connected to the living Christ. He is the engine. Actually, we don't know who the caboose is, I'm just one train along the track connected to Christ who is my leader and that train extends for many generations, throughout many eras and includes cloud of witnesses of all who've passed before us. They too have gone on their journeys and we do not know how long the train will stretch.

We are talking about time – yes, that God laid down the tracks on human history leaving us messages, clues, preparing us to receive the Christ in human form and when the Christ came he was fully human so that everything could be healed so that you wouldn't have to become perfect or divine yourself – you just hook up to Christ and He would feed to you His divinity. He will feed to you His life. He will feed to you His light. He will feed to you and give to you and nourish you – everything you need to become a participant as St. Peter says in 2Peter, Chapter 1, "of the divine nature." Not your human efforts striving to become divine, but faith connecting, hooking up to the Divine One who is Christ and He nourishes you with everything you need for this life. I'm telling you all that is required for this journey to begin to have a more profound effect in each of our lives it just to say yes, more and more every time, every moment. Like Mary,

she sends the model to us, “Yes, Lord let it be in me according to Your Word. Let Your Word be born more and more through me.” She had the privilege of doing this physically & historically. We have the privilege and opportunity of doing it spirituality by grace.

What did you get for Christmas? I got a telescope. I want to peer into the heavens and be reminded of where I come from and where I’m going. Oh, remember, Jesus said it this way, “Unless you are born from above, you cannot see and enter the Kingdom of God.” That Kingdom is both here and there and everywhere. It is known, felt, experienced, touched and lived by the power of faith and love. I give thanks to God for the gift of Christ – this tremendous mystery played out on the stage of human history and in so real and humble ways in the person of Jesus who is for us our life, our everything because we needed to see it. We needed to touch it. We needed to really know that it happened. We needed to know that the tracks were laid down and that someone could get cross-country and make the journey all the way for us and our salvation Christ came down from heaven to lift us all the way up, internally and one day, when each of us dies, physically.

Merry Christmas. Amen.