

**Blue Christmas Service – Ascension Lutheran Church, Thousand Oaks, CA**  
**Sermon by Pastor Jack Ledbetter**  
**December 18, 2011**

*Luke 1: 26-33; Isaiah 40: 1-5; Ps: 63: 1-8*

"If we could discover some pure, contained, narrow, human, own little strip of orchard in between river and rock. Rainer Maria Rilke. Pg. 33.

Today I stand before you asking for your prayers, as you ask for mine, because I, too, would like to discover some "pure, contained, narrow, human own little strip of orchard in between river and rock." And, we say to each other, "Who wouldn't?

Our concerns today, like the concerns of people since Adam and Eve looked at their two boys and asked, "Whose idea was it anyway?"

And then did they laugh? At least smile? I hope so, because then they would be truly human. To laugh, smile, cry and pray are human emotions caused by the presence of, or absence of, that "pure, contained, narrow, human, own little strip of orchard in between river and rock."

And then, when we've suffered too much, endured more than mind and heart can bear, we fall on our knees and pray that God is listening. And I would like you to hear Rilke's next statement after wishing, needing, craving that quiet little strip of orchard between river and rock." He writes, "Who, I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear." Pg. 21.

-Rainer Maria Rilke, DUINO ELEGIES

Had you every thought of that? I had not, but I think it's one of the most powerful statements or questions I have ever heard. And especially the last line: "For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear."

There are times when we would settle for a little beauty. Even a very tiny bit of beauty. I know, not from what I've read, but from my own life, that there are times when we just bury our heads in our hands over money, kids, their kids, their kids' kids, the dog or the cat or the parents or the grandparents..the job...the lack of a job, the best friend who just kicked you in the teeth,--we grieve over someone's wife or husband who has broken your heart--and we rejoice when the brokenness is healed, that we can now go on, face the trials and the sorrows knowing someone we love is beside us. And we grieve that we have not found that someone. I tell you today that you will feel the love of Christ even in this, especially in this...did not Christ grieve over the world; did not God grieve over his only Son for us? Yes, our heads are in our hands with grief, and yes I know that when we're suffering almost any book will help, and when we're not suffering, we don't need any book. Except the Bible. That's where we find lasting advice and grief, happiness, life lessons, and salvation.

Thank God for friends, lovers, soul mates; thank God for the arts. Remember when you heard music you could barely stand for the beauty of it, the overpowering majesty, say, of Handel's Messiah, or a love song remembered so long afterward, or the call to service to our country when the speaker's words persuades your mind and your heart responds--or, more likely, your heart responds and your mind agrees. A painting, a sculpture, a view of ocean, desert or mountains: can you remain inside yourself at the view when you come out of the tunnel into Yosemite National Park! How about a particular moment when someone or something suddenly appears new, grand, lovely beyond words that you can't speak, a new baby, the pride that brings tears when someone succeeds past all odds?

We hear, see, feel so much because we have the ability--not, not ability--NEED to respond to the beauty that we can barely manage it. But we do manage it lest we dance with our cart in the market or weep uncontrollably, or grasp our heart for fear it will break with joy or sadness.

Such is the power of the imagination, the human will to respond to nature and to sorrow, our own or another's. And thank God we have that inborn need to respond, to add ourselves to the Other! Even in our own sorrow, we give of ourselves, and say "Yes" to another.

Today, we gather in this Blue Christmas service to say "Yes" to our God, and to acknowledge that we suffer even while we give ourselves to another. But even then we wish we were this or that, or that fortune had smiled a little brighter on us.

Wanting is natural to the human condition. As St. Augustine reminds us, "The heart is restless until it rests in God."

But we also want long life, happiness, success, family. But perhaps it helps to remind ourselves that wanting is not always a good thing. Let us listen to the 12th century philosopher, Boethius in his *THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSOLATION*

"No one is entirely satisfied with his lot; each finds something lacking, or something which gives pain."

"Honor is not paid to virtuous men because of their rank; on the contrary, it is paid to rank because of the virtue of those holding it."

"Nothing is miserable unless you think it so; and on the other hand, nothing brings happiness unless you are content with it."

"In the end, we reach the same conclusion about all the gifts of Fortune. They are not worth striving for; there is nothing in their natures which is good; they are not always possessed by good men, nor do they make those good who possess them."

Such thoughts are easy to have, and easy to dismiss. Pain awakens them, suffering prolongs them, until we are unable to steer a steady course. Then are we most vulnerable; then are we most human; then are we on our knees before the throne of God, but with lifted face thanks to the intercession of Jesus Christ. We find this truth in St. John, Chapter 14. v.2: "In my Father's house are many mansions. I go there to prepare a place for you."

I like the NEW LIVING TESTAMENT translation: "There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?"

The question is not satirical, it is not frivolous; it is very, very serious. It asks if we have faith. It cuts through language, discussion, self-doubt and the aridity of the mind and the leaps of a desperate imagination: it asks if we have faith to accept Jesus at his word.

But we are not alone. No one tonight is alone who feels pain, sorrow, disappointment, frustration, defeat. We strive to be God-like as far as our human natures will permit; we strive to be Jesus for others, and we try to be comforters to others. We spread angelic wings to cover and comfort those who are in need. Yet it is not we who do these things, it is God who works through our humble intentions and makes them whole, good, shining.

We do not have to worry ourselves sick with the feeling that we are inadequate: say the good thing, do the good thing no matter the place or the time or the season. As remember Martin Luther says, "The spirit is where it loves rather than where it lives." If we do these things for others in love, the spirit is with us and with the person we help.

In *FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED*, the psychologist M. Scott Peck, wrote: "In my practice, my patients would sometimes say to me, not in a psychotic way but in an ordinary existential way, 'Gee, Dr Peck, I'm so confused,' and I would say, 'That's wonderful!' And they would say, 'What do you mean? It's awful.' And I would say, 'No, no, it means that you're blessed.' And they would say, 'What? It feels terrible. How can I be blessed?'"

And I would say, "You know, when Jesus gave His big sermon, the first words out of His mouth were: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' "There are a number of ways to translate "poor in spirit," but on an intellectual level, the best translation is 'confused.' Blessed are the confused. If you ask why Jesus might have said that, then I must point out to you that confusion leads to a search for clarification and with that search comes a great deal of learning."

Dr. Peck says that "The most succinct words ever spoken about depression were spoken in the twelfth century by Jalalu-Din Rumi, a Muslim mystic, who said to a person severely depressed: "Your depression is connected to your (insolence

and) refusal to praise." And by insolence, he was referring to narcissism or that kind of perverted pride which underlies depression."

'Anima plus est ubi amat quam ubi animat.' The spirit is where it loves, rather than where it lives."

Martin Luther suffered a great deal, but his sense of humor was not to be denied. About his doctors he said: "I commend doctors who are anxious to defend their rules. But they should not blame me either if I do not always obey, for they want to make a fixed star of me when I am a straying planet." Martin Luther

He also reminds us that, "...all emotions and passions that are excessive exhaust the body. The body without the spirit is dead; it is a horse without a rider. But a quiet spirit preserves the body. Therefore oppressive thinking is to be resisted as much as possible. My most strenuous struggle consists in fighting oppressive thoughts." Luther

Are you displeased with yourself tonight? Are you disappointed in your body or your mind? Do you wish you were like another? Saint Therese of Lisieux said "If you are willing to serenely bear the trail of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter. "

But trials are not easily borne, are they? And the thought of death is a grim thought for all of us no matter how strong we are. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Priest and paleontologist, wrote powerfully about his death. This is what he said about the final struggle:

"Now the great victory of the Creator and Redeemer, in the Christian vision is to have transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor. God must, in some way or other, make room for himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us. And in order to assimilate us in him, he must break the molecules of our being so as to recast and remodel us. The function of death is to provide the necessary entrance into our inmost selves. It will make us undergo the required dissociation It will put us into the state organically needed if the divine fire is to descend upon us. And in that way its fatal power to decompose and dissolve will be harnessed to the most sublime operations of life. What was by nature empty and void, a return to bits and pieces, can, in any human existence, become fullness and unity in God."

"After having perceived you as he who is 'a greater myself', grant, when my hour comes, that I may recognize you under the species of each alien or hostile force that seems bend upon destroying or uprooting me. When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself."

"The more deeply and incurably the evil is encrusted in my flesh, the more it will be you that I am harboring-- you as a loving, active principle of purification and detachment. The more the future opens before me like some dizzy abyss or dark tunnel, the more confident I maybe be--if I but venture forward on the strength of your word--of losing myself and surrendering myself in you, of being assimilated by your body, Jesus.

You are the irresistible and vivifying force, O Lord, and because yours is the energy, because, of the two of us, you are infinitely the stronger it is on you that falls the part of consuming me in the union that should weld us together. Vouchsafe, therefore, something more precious still than the grace for which all the faithful pray. It is not enough that I should die while communicating. *Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.*"

Now listen my friends, with our hearts quiet, our minds at rest: listen to our Savior:

"There is more than enough room in my father's home. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?" Jn. 16:7. That home is yours, my friends.

And this: "I tell you the truth. It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Comforter will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you." You are the comforter, my brothers and sisters. We are all beating hearts and thinking minds of comfort for one another.

God grant us grace tonight, and peace, and a strong and abiding faith in our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Creator God, we come to you now with prayers for peace in our hearts and mending and strength for our minds and bodies. We ask that you make us comforters to each other, remembering we are all children of you, our Heavenly Father, and through your son, Jesus, heirs of eternal life. In his death, Jesus taught us that death has no sting, no power over our immortal souls. In the power and the majesty and beauty of his resurrection, he lifts our hearts and teaches us how to live. In his holy name, Amen.