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Meditation: Christmas for God

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Peter Hiett

Several years ago, I was sitting in a large La-Z-Boy recliner, feet up in the air, watching a Broncos game on a big screen TV in Los Angeles, California. I was relaxed and comfortable. I didn't have to be somebody for somebody else, or project an image—the pastor persona. Susan and I were house-sitting for the Moomaws. Don Moomaw was the senior pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church where I worked. So it was *his* La-Z-Boy chair, *his* big screen TV, and *his* telephone that rang.

Susan went into the kitchen and picked up the phone. She was gone a minute or so, and then she came running back into the room out of breath and in a panic. I jumped up as she blurted out, “Peter! Nancy Reagan is on the phone! Go talk to her!” I said, “What do you mean?” Susan said:

I picked up the phone, and a voice said, “Nancy Reagan calling for Don Moomaw from Camp David,” and before I could say he wasn't here, I heard a voice say, “Don, Don? Is that you?” It was *Nancy Reagan!* And I didn't know what to say, so I said, “Just a minute” and put the phone down. She's waiting on the phone in the kitchen. *Go talk to her!*

I knew it was true, because Don Moomaw had been the Reagans' pastor when they lived in California, before he took some big job out of state. I said, “*You* go talk to her. *You* picked up the phone.” She said, “Yeah, but you're the man.” I said, “No way! You talk to her.” It was just too much. I wasn't ready. Nancy Reagan is a big deal! What if I messed up? What would I say?

So I said again, “I'm not talking to her. You go talk to her.” And Susan said, “No, you go talk to her. I'm not talking to her.” We went on like that for quite a while, while Nancy Reagan, the First Lady, the most powerful woman in the world at that time, waited on the phone in the kitchen.

Well, I won, so finally Susan walked back in and said, “I'm sorry. Don is out of town. Thanks for calling. Good-bye.” And she hung up.

So, you see, in the end, neither of us really did talk to Nancy Reagan the *person*. The persona—the form of Nancy Reagan in society—was so imposing, it was hard to talk to her as a person or even comprehend her words.

I imagine that's part of why so many famous people are really lonely people. The self they've created (or society has given them) is so wondrous and immense that no one connects with the

spirit, the heart inside. It remains hidden. And other people are so intimidated by them, they can't reveal their hearts either. They're discombobulated.

A girl from the Midwest, on a trip to Hollywood, California, ran into Paul Newman in an ice cream store. She couldn't believe it. He was *so gorgeous; so famous!* She tried hard not to stare. She tried hard to be cool. She paid for her ice cream cone and casually walked out of the store. When she got outside, she took a deep breath and then realized she'd walked out without her ice cream cone. Already feeling silly, she decided to wait outside until Mr. Newman left the counter. When she saw him move away, she went in to find her ice cream cone. As she got to the counter, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned, and it was *him*—Paul Newman! He flashed his famous smile and said, “Miss, if you're looking for your ice cream cone, you put it in your purse.”

- “And the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush . . . and he said, ‘Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’”
- “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who are you to question God?’”
- “In the year that King Uzziah died, [Isaiah] saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up . . . ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”
- “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.”

And, behold, in all those cases, they didn't know quite what to say. And they all put their ice cream cones in their purses.

Have you ever wondered at how God could relate to us, being so powerful, so famous, so beautiful, so good, so large; and how we could relate to Him, being so fragile, so weak, so easily frightened? How could we truly relate heart to heart? Does God ever feel like Nancy Reagan waiting on the phone? Or Paul Newman buying ice cream? Or one of those lonely supermodels you read about? “The central theme of the great part of the Old Testament,” wrote Chesterton, “is the loneliness of God.”

Martin Buber the theologian wrote that we only have two kinds of relationships: “I-it” and “I-thou.”

1. An “I-it” relationship is when I relate to others as objects or selves (personas) in the world of space and time, as “its.”
2. An “I-thou” relationship is when I encounter another, not just as an “it,” but as a subject, spirit, heart in the present moment, a “thou.”

A person is like a spirit, breath of God, other worldly, an “I” that only exists in the eternal now. It's “I” that observes the self, and “I” produces a self, a me, an “it” in time and space (like a 6'1", 200 lb. pastor who likes the Broncos). You can know all about that me—that self—that “it,” yet

“I” may still not be known by you. I must be encountered to be known truly. And I long to be encountered and loved as I am. “All real living is meeting,” wrote Buber.

Well, anyway, I think that’s why famous, powerful, beautiful people are often such lonely people. The “it” of that person is so large it hides the “thou”—the spirit—the heart—the real me of that person. So everyone talks about and knows about Nancy Reagan, but who knows Nancy? And Paul Newman must wonder: Everybody loves my face, my abilities, my salad dressings, but who loves me, the *real me*?

Nancy Reagan or Paul Newman,
 whose form is so large, so intimidating,
 that most people would forget the person,
 overwhelmed by loving, fearing,
 and admiring the persona.

I wonder if God ever feels like Nancy Reagan or Paul Newman or a lonely supermodel.

Have you ever seen baby pictures of famous people, and you find yourself almost shocked by the fact that—oh, yeah—Nancy Reagan, Paul Newman, Cindy Crawford were once *babies*, naked *babies*, helpless persons? And that’s what’s really so amazing about babies, for what is a baby but a person without much persona. That is, they are an “I” without much accumulated “me.” They haven’t had time to accumulate a self, yet we love them as persons, as valuable as any other.

When I was a baby, I was just as much *I* as I am now; however, *I* hardly had any *me* (6’1”, 200 lb. pastor). No credentials, no abilities, nothing I could offer, no history, nothing I could do. But my mom and dad loved me just because I was. And I still long to be loved just because I am.

Last night I returned from a quick trip to China with Tom Larson and Brett Edwards. On the plane from Beijing to Vancouver there were something like *forty-eight* Chinese babies and a hundred and some adoptive parents and friends. It made for a challenging and poor sleep environment, yet no one seemed to mind too much. Everyone (especially the parents) was just enamored with all these babies—holding babies, cooing at babies, communing with babies—forty-eight persons without much persona. Now, if they had been forty-eight *adult* persons making all that fuss on the plane, the story would have been different.

There are over 1 billion persons in China, but we treat them differently than babies, for they are 1 billion persons with 1 billion personas—selves—lives. Perhaps inside of each life hides another baby—a spirit—a breath of God longing to be loved, valued, and communed with like the babies on the plane.

Our Gospel is that God loves each person beneath the persona. Each person is priceless despite their great accomplishments or terrible failures. James 4:5: “He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us.” He loves us beneath all the garbage we have created, all the pompous self we project. And we must become like children to enter His kingdom: that is, to receive His love. We must lose ourselves to commune with Him.

God loves each of us like that. I'm just wondering if *He* longs to be loved like that . . . not that His self is corrupt like ours, which hides our hearts in arrogance that is shame, but that His self—His attributes—are so tremendous that they hide His heart to us with glory.

I'm saying I long to be loved just because I am, and I'm asking:

Does God long to be loved just because He is . . . I AM?
Does He long for that kind of communion?
Is God in some way lonely for us?

One night after a busy day with my busy job, seeing lots of people who said lots of nice things about the big pastor kind of things I did, one night feeling lonely, I tucked my daughter Rebekah into bed. She was about three. As I did, she pulled my head down on her chest saying, "I'll be the big mommy, and you be the little baby." And for a few moments, I was the little baby, and she patted my head and said, "I love you, little baby."

She didn't know how the sermon went, she didn't care about the church budget, she didn't ask for anything, and for a moment I wasn't the big father but her baby. She patted my head and talked baby talk and knew me perhaps better than anyone that day. She knew me, loved me, and communed with me; I drank her in, and she drank me in.

I wonder if that's how God felt as Mary held Jesus to her chest—Baby Jesus, small, weak, no credentials, no favors to be done, no prayers to be answered, just baby, just person. I wonder if that's how God felt as Mary, His daughter, held Jesus, His heart, close to her chest (her heart) and talked baby talk and whispered, "I love you."

God certainly has a form that is imposing and discombobulat-ing: Creator, Holy Other, Absolute Light, Fame and Fortune . . . But who is He really? What is His person, His Spirit, His heart? How is He made known?

John 1:1:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
(Yahweh, I AM)

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
(They wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and
laid Him in a manger.)

"No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

And Mary would pick Him up, pat His head, and whisper, "I love you," as He suckled at her breast. She held Him, stared at Him, encountered Him, and when she did, she knew God, the real God, the very heart of God, Spirit of God. I think she knew God better than Moses knew God at the burning bush, better than Elijah knew God on Mt. Carmel, better than the priests, scribes, and

Pharisees knew God. Yet she was not consumed with fire and glory. Was that because God somehow said to Mary, “You be the mommy, and I’ll be the little baby”?

And Joseph would not be speechless in awe and wonder and terror. He would talk baby talk. (With baby talk, it doesn’t matter *what* you say but *how* you say it.) He would blow bubbles on the tummy of the Christ without being devoured by light and fire.

In the words of Paul, “Although [Jesus] was in the form of God . . . he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men”—born a baby. Why would He do that? Could it be He wanted what all babies want: to be chattered to, tickled, held, loved, known, encountered? I AM as just I AM, heart, spirit of God, in communion with us? It seems blasphemous, yet “Immanuel”—God with us—is His name.

Of course, in history, He showed a self that held children, touched lepers, preached peace . . . a sinless self. However, He was not much to look at (according to Isaiah), and only once did He glow. He died in weakness on a cross, but mysteriously, on that cross, He gave us Himself: His self, His righteousness in exchange for our dead, sinful selves. Through the cross I commune with God forever, and He sends His Spirit now (the Spirit of His Son) into my heart crying, “Abba Father”—Aramaic baby talk—that I may know Him now.

Jesus from the bosom of the Father.
He has made God known.
He doesn’t inhabit buildings, institutions, and programs
But *people*.

In 1950 in China, the Communists drove out all western missionaries. They closed all buildings, institutions, and programs of the Church. At the time, there were roughly 1 to 2 million Christians in China. Today there are about 100 million. And I’ve met the reason why. It’s the people Christ inhabits.

They call her Deborah to guard her identity. She’s a short, stocky grandma about sixty years old. I met her two days ago. She’s not much to look at, hardly imposing or discombobulating, but ten years ago God called her to preach His Word. She now pastors about 10,000 Chinese Christians in house churches, churches without buildings and programs, churches with just Jesus.

You see, Jesus is encountered in people who love with His Word, people emptied of self, pride, and ego, who speak His Gospel. God likes being encountered in people, loved in those people—weak, unimposing people. God’s kingdom comes through people who love and are loved. Don’t think the kingdom comes through institutions; it comes through you—the Church.

Well, now it’s Christmas all over China. Perhaps God is drinking it in. Christmas is God emptied of the “form of God” to be with us in weakness, weakness that is power, power to drink us in.

God in all His power, beauty, and glory wants to be known and loved for His heart, and His heart is Christ. And that reminds me of a story . . .

It all began with a book in a Florida library. John Blanchard had checked it out to find it contained wonderful, hand-written notes in the margins—soft handwriting and a thoughtful soul, an intriguing mind. He found the name of the previous owner written on the inside flap: Miss Hollis Maynell. He located her address, New York City, and wrote her a letter inviting her to correspond.

The next day he was shipped overseas for service in World War II. During that next year, they corresponded. Her letters were life, and they grew to know each other through the mail, the word written. Blanchard requested a photograph, but for some reason, she refused. She said it wasn't important.

When he returned from Europe, they planned to meet: 7:00 PM, Grand Central Station. "You'll recognize me," she wrote, "by the red rose I'll be wearing on my lapel."

John Blanchard writes of that night at the train as a young man waiting to see who had captured his heart. He writes:

A young woman was coming toward me, her figure long and slim. Her blonde hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were as blue as flowers. Her lip and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit, she was like springtime come alive.

You see, she appeared as but a shadow of how we will all appear in our resurrected bodies in glory, more handsome than Paul Newman, more beautiful than a supermodel. Men often love women for that look; women often love men for that power. That's why so many men and women feel so alone, longing to be known for their *person* not their *persona*.

Well, John Blanchard continues:

I started toward the young woman entirely forgetting to notice that she was not wearing a rose. As I moved, a small, provocative smile turned her lips. "Going my way, sailor?" she murmured. Almost uncontrollably, I made one step closer to her, and then I saw Hollis Maynell. She was standing almost directly behind the young girl, a woman well past forty [perhaps sixty], graying hair tucked under a worn hat. The girl in the green suit was walking away So keen was my desire to follow her, yet so deep was my longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned and upheld mine. . . .

I did not hesitate. This would not be love (erotic, that is), but it would be precious, something perhaps even better . . . a friendship for which I had been and must forever be grateful. "I'm Lieutenant John Blanchard, and you must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad you could meet me; may I take you to dinner?" The woman's face broadened into a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is about, son," she answered, "but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out for dinner, I should go, and tell you that she is waiting in the big restaurant across the street."

Well, Bride of Christ, Jesus is waiting at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, waiting for you who've come to know Him and commune with Him: as a baby in a manger, a peasant on a cross,

the body broken and blood shed, the Word of God in a fallen world. He's waiting at the head of the table. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, more powerful than Nancy Reagan, more handsome than Paul Newman, more beautiful than Hollis Maynell. And when we get there, we will already know Him—the heart of God.

I believe I saw Him two days ago in China. But there was no deception as in the story of Hollis Maynell. He really *was* in the body of the little, old, stocky woman with graying hair. And He really *is* King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But it's the same heart in either place. Love Him for His heart.

It's Christmas—Jesus' birthday. What will you give Him?

There are worlds to be conquered, demons to be slain, kingdoms to be built . . . but first give Him what any baby wants. Could it be that what He wants first and foremost is:

- to be held close to your heart?
- to be chattered to in love?

- to be sung over in joy?
- to be encountered in communion?

You may find Him in the last and least of these, His brethren, and you may commune with Him in prayer, even here at His table. But this Christmas take time to be with Him, not demanding, not arguing, not asking, but just *with* Him like you're with a baby.

And by the way, that's what we think Nancy Reagan wanted that day. The next week it came out in the papers that our President Reagan, her husband Ronald, had colon cancer. She just wanted someone to talk to, and it probably didn't even matter what would be said as much as *how* it was said, like baby talk. She just wanted someone to be with her in spirit.

“And his name shall be called Emmanuel”—God with us. He *is* with us. Would you be with Him?

Picture a barn, a stable. It smells of animal dung and sweat. Flies are buzzing around. You hear a sound of a baby crying and fussing. You walk to the feed bin and look inside. There's a baby lying there. What do you want to do? Would you pick Him up? His name is Jesus. Hold Him to your heart. He made the stars, and He made you. And now He has come to be with you. May you be with Him.

For on the night He was betrayed, He took bread and broke it saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way after the supper, having given thanks, He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me. I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.”

He's waiting at the table. We invite you to come forward, pick Him up, and take Him to your heart. Worship Him.

There are two kinds of people that are hard to buy presents for. The first is someone who has everything. God kind of has everything. The second is babies. When our kids were babies, Susan wanted to buy them lots of stuff, but I said, "Susan, let's save our money for when they're teenagers." But what do babies want? They want you. They want to be held.

God has everything, and God is a baby. So when you go shopping this week, trying to figure out what to get people, remember it's Jesus' birthday. And what does He want? Well, He wants what a baby wants: Pick me up and hold me. You may find Him wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. He's *still* wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, in the last and least of these. There you can actually *touch* him, in a mystical, incredible kind of way.

I got an amazing eulogy from Clint Hill this week. It's about a guy named Ric, who Clint met down on the streets of Denver. If you've read the newspapers, you'll know that Ric froze to death in a park in Denver this last week. A lot of the kids in our youth group knew Ric. His eulogy is not to put shame on anybody; it's a testimony to how Clint was blessed by Ric and encountered Jesus in Ric. He said that one time Ric and his friend Dio said to Clint, "We're taking you out for a steak dinner and a beer!" and they did. They paid the whole \$50 in quarters.

So when you're shopping this week, maybe just stop and give someone like that a smile. If you're really brave, give them a hug. And be with *Him*. He's in the last and least of these. And He's also inside of *you*. Stop and take some time to be with Him. Instead of asking Him for stuff, just pick Him up and be with him: adore Him, worship Him, hold Him, love Him. I think that's what He wants for Christmas from you.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Lookout Mountain Community Church

534 Commons Drive, Golden CO 80401

Phone: 303-526-9287 Fax: 303-526-9361

E-mail: info@lomcc.org