Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?

“Which holiday is Christmas – is it the one when Jesus died or the one when he was born?” This real question from a real person was an early Christmas gift to me this year. Like all good gifts, the question was unexpected, made me smile and is something I will appreciate for a long time.

It’s a silly question, right? Of course, WE know which holiday is Christmas, don’t we? But think about it for a minute. If you were from another planet and were suddenly plopped down anywhere in the United States over the past week, you would see lights and decorations, people shopping, carrying bags with presents and saying, “Merry Christmas” to each other, some with a happy lilt, others with automatic perfunctory, and others with firmness hinting at righteous anger. “Merry Christmas!” You might see a bumper sticker or hear someone say, “We need to put Christ back in Christmas.” You might hear Christmas songs like “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” “Silver Bells” and “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” But none of these would tell you what Christmas is - other than that it has something to do with happy feelings, dreaming, snow and heart-felt sentiments. So that question, “Which holiday is Christmas” is not a stupid one. It is true that the person who asked the question doesn’t go to a church and isn’t a Christian, but they were born and live in the United States, in the Chicago area and have an above average intelligence. But how could they not know which holiday it is, that it the holiday when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus? Well, when the other big holiday for Christians, Easter, is about a bunny with a basket hiding pastel blue and pink colored egg, it’s totally reasonable that someone might think Easter is about celebrating a new baby. Looking at it this way, it is confusing.

For someone like me who has celebrated and experienced many Christmases, this question about which holiday Christmas is, helps me to see it in a new and revealing way. First, I think it rightly convicts, for better or worse, the superficial nature of the Christmas celebration. That’s not new. And I won’t blame political correctness for this because the church itself is complicit. Jesus and how God is revealed in him has been tamed and domesticated, like the gentle animals we put in the manger scene. Jesus has become a side show if not a “no show” in our glittering and extravagant Christmas holiday.

This is nothing new. The commercialism of Christmas has been lamented for generations. Fifty years ago, in the good old days, a voice in the wilderness asked, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is about?” The question was heard all over the United States on a December night in 1965 when A Charlie Brown Christmas by Charles Schultz first appeared on television screens. On a shoe string budget, the 24-minute script was written in just two weeks and fully animated in six months. As the date neared for the cartoon to be aired, the producers and the network, CBS, were increasingly concerned and expected it to be a disaster given its tone, pacing, jazz music and animation. But contrary to their expectations, it received high ratings.
and acclaim, won an Emmy and has aired every year since. I was 2 years old in 1965, so I don’t remember watching the premiere. But I have seen it many times. If anything, the pink and blue aluminum Christmas trees stuck in my memory.

If you haven’t seen it, the animated story begins with the Peanuts – who are young children whose pumpkin-like heads with broad mouths are matched with squat bodies and large disk feet - celebrating the start of the winter season by ice skating on a frozen pond and singing "Christmas Time Is Here." Leaning against a nearby fence, the main character, Charlie Brown tells blanket-toting best friend Linus that despite all the traditions of Christmas presents, Christmas cards and decorations, he is depressed. Linus dismisses Charlie Brown's attitude as typical, quoting his bossy sister Lucy: "Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the Charlie Browniest."

Charlie Brown's depression is only made worse by the goings-on in the neighborhood with its rampant commercialism. He meets up with Violet, one of Lucy's friends, and sarcastically "thanks" her for the Christmas card he never received. Violet proudly snipes back that she never sent him one. The next scene is at the outdoor psychiatric booth where Lucy expresses joy in the sound of jingling money, tries to diagnose Charlie Brown with various phobias, and complains that she never receives the number one wish on her Christmas list - real estate,. Her counsel to Charlie Brown is that he get more involved and recommends that he direct an upcoming Christmas play; Charlie Brown jumps at the opportunity to have a leadership role. At Snoopy's doghouse, Charlie Brown is further disgusted when he finds out that his dog has entered the doghouse into a lights and display contest with a cash prize.

Charlie Brown arrives at the rehearsal, but he is unable to gain control of the situation as everyone is dancing to an upbeat jazz tune. The cast is made up of a "Christmas queen," shepherds, innkeepers and penguins, but no identifiable Biblical figures. A displeased Charlie Brown decides the play needs "the proper mood" and suggests they should get a Christmas tree. Lucy concurs and with Linus accompanying him, they are sent to get an aluminum Christmas tree that is big, shiny and pink.

When they get to the lot, there are numerous aluminum trees, but Charlie Brown chooses the only real tree there—a tiny sapling. Charlie Brown makes his choice saying, “I think it needs me.”

Linus and Charlie Brown return to the auditorium with the tree, only to be scorned by the other children, including his dog Snoopy, who walk off laughing. In exasperation, Charlie Brown loudly asks, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is about?” Linus says he does. He walks to center stage, calls for lights and recites the annunciation to the shepherds from the Gospel of Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a
multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

After a pronounced silence, Charlie Brown picks up the tree and walks out of the auditorium toward his home. He stops at Snoopy’s decorated doghouse, where a blue ribbon has been hung for first prize in the display contest. Charlie Brown takes a large ornament from the doghouse and hangs it at the top of his tree, but it immediately droops to the ground. Believing he has killed it Charlie Brown walks off in despair. “Everything I touch is ruined.”

Linus and the other children follow Charlie Brown to Snoopy’s doghouse where they find the bent-over twig of a tree. Linus admits that he always liked the tree and says, “Maybe it just needs a little love.” He wraps his blanket around the base and the other children surround the tree and begin to hum “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” A flurry of activity ensues. Charlie Brown returns to find the tree decorated and transformed. The children shout “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!” and they all begin to sing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Even in the Charlie Brown Christmas, the baby Jesus is barely mentioned – and not even by name. But its message is worth more than a million bland “Merry Christmases.” We are here on Christmas Eve for more than an obligatory and perfunctory Merry Christmas. We are here to get a glimpse of the infinite, the meaning of life through the story of the birth of Jesus. And we should try to hear it as if for the first time, stripping away the bands of culture and church cloth that cover the manger and obscure the truth of the baby lying in it.

Luke describes the birth of Jesus with surprising brevity. All we are told is that Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. It happened during the night. There are no other details. Luke does not say where they were or what time of the year it was. There is no mention of a stable or a cave, which have been redacted into nearly every retelling and portrayal. When the shepherds returned to their fields, Mary pondered what the angel had told them, “to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

So “Which holiday is Christmas?” Of course, this is the holiday when Jesus was born. But it’s also about his death because we can’t have Christmas without Easter and Easter without Christmas. Not only do Christmas and Easter depend on each other, they also have so much in common. Jesus’ birth and his resurrection happen in darkness. The newborn Jesus is placed in a feeding trough made out of wood and he is crucified on wood of the cross. The birth of a Messiah in poverty and in the middle of nowhere is unexpected. The resurrection of a crucified and dead man is unexpected. And above all, Christmas and Easter both reveal God not as we expect God to be but as God truly is. God comes to us from within, from the womb of a woman, not without, like a fierce warrior from the sky. At Christmas, God is revealed in Jesus as weak, vulnerability and smallness. At Easter, God is revealed in Jesus as non-violent, forgiving, merciful, gentle and faithful, promising his disciples that he will be with them to the end of the ages.
Christmas and Easter together are a revelation of God, and that revelation is a scandal to our expectations, now in 2018, in 1965 and in Judea two thousand years ago. And over time, even those at the very center of our Christian religion have gone astray; they have worked and reworked the shocking revelation until it is unrecognizable, turning Jesus into what we want God to be, not what God truly is. On a secular level, Christmas has been reduced to a warm glow; on a religious level to a plump baby in a cradle surrounded by adoring animals. Easter is a fluffy bunny with eggs, lilies and trumpets. What we all want is a big, powerful God, who “reaches down” from a place far above and removed, which we have labeled “heaven.” It is a God who took pity on us and “lowered himself into our misery.” We look for God to come again in great power, like an Arnold Schwarzenegger, who in terror and violence will judge harshly those who haven’t obeyed and been subservient to Him.

Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus ends with Mary treasuring and pondering the words of the shepherds in her heart. Christmas in its unwrapped rawness calls us to follow Mary’s example and to treasure and ponder the story in our hearts – to ponder how God is revealed from within, not from without; as small and poor, not as grand and rich; as needing care and love, not as self-sufficient and apart from us. Like Mary, we are called to ponder how heaven and its angels is not far away, above us, but near, as close as your hand in front of your face. We are called to ponder how God’s weakness is actually the strength we need. Maybe the baby just needs a little love. Maybe all of us need a little love. Maybe definitely.

Amen.