

The Christmas Train 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10  
Advent Lunch Homily November 30, 2011 – Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 God has destined us for acquiring salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us, that all of us, whether awake or asleep, together might live with him.

Have you ever stumbled across something that you knew was there, but it still surprised you when you “found” it? Something that you had forgotten about being there all along?

That’s how it was for Ralph, one Advent season. He was rummaging around in the attic for the Christmas decorations and opened a box that was still taped. How could it be taped, still? That means he hadn’t opened it since the last time they moved – at least ten years ago. And from the looks of the tape, it might have been much longer than that.

He cut through the tape and opened the box. Oh, yeah! The ol’ Lionel train set. My goodness, it had been years since he’d had it out. He remembered that it was much more than ten years ago when he got it out to put up around the base of the Christmas tree, and found that it just wouldn’t work – not for more than about 2-1/2 seconds. Then it would short out and run backwards, for about the same length of time, and then repeat the process, only going forwards for 18 inches.

He thought about buying a new set, and he actually went looking. Amazing how many people had no idea what he was talking about. Everyone referred him to The Hobby Store. So finally he went. Nice trains! Not like those cheap plastic battery run ones that the toy store sold. But, even better, he found “the train guy.”

Norm was his name. Ralph had no idea of how old Norm was, but he knew his trains. Norm talked him into bringing the 50+ year old train set in to the shop. It was the last week before Christmas when Norm called Ralph and told him that it was repaired and ready to go.

Ralph went down and picked it up on Monday. It was December 23 before Ralph found the time to open the old cardboard box with yellow tape, into which Norm had returned his treasure.

As he pulled out the old pieces of the train, and the new pieces of train track, he remembered that first Christmas morning, when he sat under a live tree and opened the original box.

1960, it was. Just the month before was the first Presidential election Ralph remembered. He didn't know what a pope was, but he'd heard so many people saying that with the election of that one candidate, this pope thing would be running America. Well, that guy got elected, and in about a month they were all going to find out who or what it would be like when the pope was running America.

But on December 25, 1960, Ralph didn't much care. He had a train!

He wanted to set it up right away, but his father told him that it didn't run very well unless the track was affixed to the floor. Ralph was allowed to run it for just a few minutes that day and then it had to be put up, his dad said, until they could set up a train board.

Later, his dad told him that he had a really good idea for the train board – it would be hinged into the wall of the recreation room that he was going to build. Then it would fold up and down – just as soon as they got that recreation room built.

Months went by. But eventually -- long, long past Christmas, winter, summer, and almost to the next Christmas, they had it built - built it together. Ralph's dad taught him, as they did their work, all the skills of carpentry. Ralph drank it all in, all those building skills. It seemed to come naturally, once he understood what they were doing. Most important of all: measure twice – cut once.

He never thought about it back then, in 1961, no not until Ralph was setting up the train that Norm had repaired – “How did his dad learn so much about carpenter work? He wasn't a tradesman, and his father had not taught him. He'd died when his father was just a lad”

He waited that night until his wife went to bed, before he put all the pieces together. Carefully aligned the wheels of the heavy cars on the track -- none of that cheap plastic stuff they sell today. "This was the real stuff - the way God meant train sets to be built," he chuckled to himself.

It sparked, and untamed the fire by which people know electricity today. With that sparking and pungent odor, Ralph was able to understand why orthodox Jews do not turn on electric switches on the Sabbath in keeping with the admonition to not make fire on Shabbat. This was real electricity.

As Ralph lay on floor under the tree, he remembered a time when he was just five years old, in a similar position. That was before he was old enough to be trusted with a train. He knew it was when he was five, because it was the Christmas before they moved. Tonight he looked up through the branches of the tree the way he had then, when he was mesmerized, and fell in love, with wonderful bubbling lights on the uncle & aunt's tree.

But tonight, just like when he was 7: here comes the train. Chugging along at a careful steady speed that would not derail. The speed his Dad had tried to teach him, back when Ralph had wanted to always vary the speed: hot into the curves and then backing off just before it derailed. But too often he would go it too fast too long and off it went. Even now, the front of the engine had a chip missing, like the broken tooth of an old boxer, from one of those derailments that went flying off the train board, onto the floor.

As he remembered, tonight, that wreck back then, Ralph could almost see *his father's hands* carefully putting the wounded engine back on the track. *Hands he had not seen since two years ago, cold, folded, and sallow, one over the other in the casket.*

He blinked that image away, blinked again, and then looked back. Once more he saw living hands – two pair: one small, set of boys' hands, which were engulfed by larger instructional hands.

The larger hands were not setting the transformer speed, but holding the smaller hands, teaching them how to run the plane blade over the wood. A bearded man, teaching the younger the skills of a carpenter. Not building a train board but fixing a table leg in a wood shop.

He didn't know what he was seeing, but there it was. **When he awoke**, the floor had stiffened his not a child anymore bones. But the train was still running - steady and smooth.

And Ralph heard the distant echo of the evening prayer still running in his mind, like the train still running on the track: **Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake, we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep, rest in his peace.**

The next night, Christmas Eve, Ralph turned on the train, and set the speed so it would run without his supervision. Many the Ooooh's and Ahhhh's of holiday visitors at the quality of this old, old train. But never again did he see anything like he did that first night.

At least – not until the next year, when he set up the train, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December. Again he waited until after his wife had retired for the night, and he pulled the same old cardboard box down out of the closet (no more attic storage!) and put it together. Once more, as he carefully aligned the metal wheels with the current producing metal track, he was able to – first feel, then see somehow, the large father hands on the small boys' hands aligning it just right – first the train, and then, after a blink, the two pairs of hands in the carpenter shop. He began to realize that this was an incarnational thing, this was a Christmas journey which transcended normalcy.

**Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake, we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep, rest in his peace.**

Did his father understand him back then? Ralph's father? And Joseph, too. Did he understand his son?

Year after year, December 23 brought Ralph the same gift. He never could explain what was happening. And, despite its repetition, it never was taken for granted,

but was for him each year a wonder-filled surprise. It was about a sense of being, not about explanation. Two pairs of hands that joined together the legacies of the Christmas train and the old Jewish carpenter shop.

Then one year, the old train just simply quit. The train repair guy at the hobby shop died three years ago. Ralph had gone to the old man's funeral; they had gotten close over the years. But now there were no parts, no repairman.

Ralph set up the track anyway. He set the train on the track. It sat still. But he laid down once more and closed his eyes. After a few minutes he saw them again. His father's hands helping him set the transformer speed. At first, Ralph didn't notice, but then, almost absent-mindedly it occurred to him: the hands on the throttle were ***now cold, folded, and sallow, one over the other.***

Then into the frame of Ralph's vision stepped Jesus and Joseph. No carpenter tools this time. They were climbing aboard the train. All three of them. One, then another, finally all three beckoned Ralph to come. And so he took his hands off the transformer and joined them, climbing up the steps of the old green caboose.

Ralph's wife wondered why he never came to bed. Probably fell asleep putting up that silly old Christmas train. Daylight was pouring in around the window shades as she walked into the living room. There he lay on his side, not moving even a bit. One hand was on the caboose. A smile was on his face.

God has destined us for acquiring salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us, that all of us, whether awake or asleep, together might live with him.

**Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake, we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep, rest in his peace.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.