

"He Knew How To Keep Christmas Well"

Ghosts of Christmas - Messages Series for Advent/Christmas 2017

December 31, 2017/New Year's Eve

North East United Methodist Church

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While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

-Luke 2:6-7

Then the Angels appeared to the shepherds watching over their sheep and...



The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

-Luke 2:10-11

The wise men actually did not visit Jesus until a year after His birth, but our Christmas cards show the three of them, bearing gifts, standing with the shepherds, visiting the Christ child, in the stable.

After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

After coming into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

-Matthew 2:9-11

The wise men visited the Christ child...

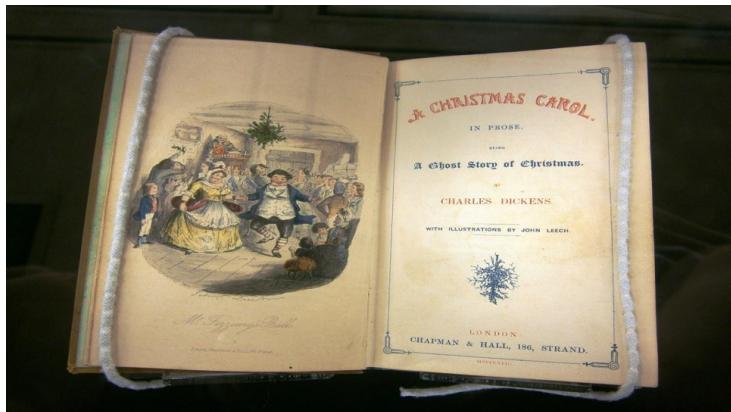


...not to get something from Jesus, but to give something to Jesus...They did not arrive simply with words of praise and worship, but with a tangible

expression of the faith they expressed...gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh...

What gifts do we bring the Christ child? How do we honor Him? How do we show Christ that our faith is more than simply words?

In Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol...



...Ebenezer Scrooge is shown what he might have had by the Ghost of Christmas Past...He is shown the Spirit of Christmas shining even in the poorest of conditions, including Cratchit's meager home, by the Ghost of Christmas Present...He is shown his own death and the failure of his life to make any difference by the Ghost of Christmas Future.

After experiencing all the three ghosts showed him, Scrooge falls down before the third ghost and cries, "*Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life? I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.*"

And at that moment Scrooge finds himself back in his bedroom.



"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect Laocoön of himself with his stockings.



"I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

Scrooge's transformation is beautiful and amazing as his frozen heart melts and he acts with generosity, gives to the poor...



...cares for Bob Crachitt and his family, embraces his nephew, and genuinely cares for his neighbors...as joy...the Spirit of Christmas...the Spirit of the Christ-child...enters his heart...

Dickens ends A Christmas Carol...

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more, and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!

He knew how to keep Christmas well.

This is the gift we bring the Christ child! This is how we honor Him? This is how we show Christ that our faith is more than simply words?

We live a life for which the same that was said about Ebenezer Scrooge might be said of us..."*He knew how to keep Christmas well.*"

What must you and I do...so the same may be said of us?

First, **LOVE**. Love is the foundational piece to "*keeping Christmas well*".

Dave Simmons tells the following story...

"I took Helen (eight years old) and Brandon (five years old) to the Cloverleaf Mall in Hattiesburg to do a little shopping. As we drove up, we spotted a Peterbilt eighteen-wheeler parked with a big sign on it that said, "Petting Zoo." The kids jumped up in a rush and asked, "Daddy, Daddy. Can we go? Please. Please. Can we go?"

"Sure," I said, flipping them both a quarter before walking into Sears. They bolted away, and I felt free to take my time

looking for a scroll saw. A petting zoo consists of a portable fence erected in the mall with about six inches of sawdust and a hundred little furry baby animals of all kinds. Kids pay their money and stay in the enclosure enraptured with the squirmly little critters while their moms and dads shop.

A few minutes later, I turned around and saw Helen walking along behind me. I was shocked to see she preferred the hardware department to the petting zoo. Recognizing my error, I bent down and asked her what was wrong.

She looked up at me with those giant limpid brown eyes and said sadly, "Well, Daddy, it cost fifty cents. So, I gave Brandon my quarter." Then she said the most beautiful thing I ever heard. She repeated the family motto. The family motto is in "Love is Action!"

She had given Brandon her quarter, and no one loves cuddly furry creatures more than Helen. She had watched both of us do and say "Love is Action!" for years around the house. She had heard and seen "Love is Action," and now she had incorporated it into her little lifestyle. It had become part of her.

What do you think I did? Well, not what you might think. As soon as I finished my errands, I took Helen to the petting zoo. We stood by the fence and watched Brandon go crazy petting and feeding the animals. Helen stood with her hands and chin resting on the fence and just watched Brandon. I had fifty cents burning a hole in my pocket; I never offered it to Helen, and she never asked for it.

Because she knew the whole family motto. It's not "Love is Action." It's "Love is SACRIFICIAL Action!" Love always pays a price. Love always costs something. Love is expensive. When you love, benefits accrue to another's account. Love is for you, not for me. Love gives; it doesn't grab. Helen gave her quarter to Brandon and wanted to follow through with her lesson. She knew she had to taste the sacrifice. She wanted to experience that total family motto. Love is sacrificial action.

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

If such words are to be said about you and I, we must first love sacrificially...

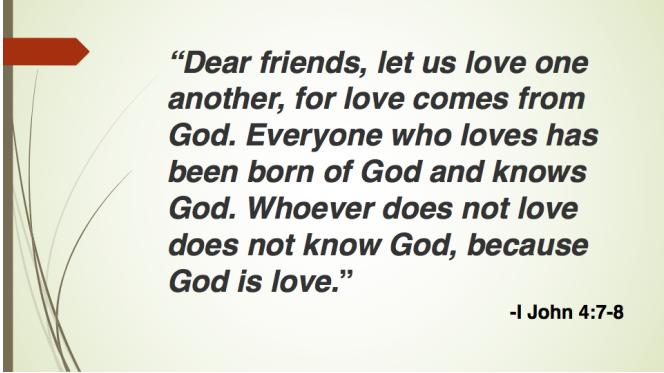
Maybe you can look back at a time in your life where you felt a lot closer to God, where you felt a lot more passionate for your spouse, where you felt a greater capacity to love the stranger, where you felt closer to your friends and family. Perhaps those you are now feeling distant with haven't moved. Certainly, God hasn't moved. Usually, it is us that has moved.

Revelation 2:4-5 reads, “***...You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.***”

Love is not a feeling. Love is a choice, love is an action. To keep Christmas well throughout the year, we must choose to rekindle our love for God and for others.

Choose to do the things that will rekindle your relationships with God and others. Choose to read the Bible...choose to pray...choose to worship...choose to serve...choose to make the phone call...choose to write that letter...choose to forgive...choose to visit...choose to help...choose to love.

When we choose to act with love, passion comes back into our friendships, our marriage, our relationship with God.



“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

-I John 4:7-8

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

Secondly, to live such a life we must have **Integrity**. Integrity is simply integrating what I say I believe...and if I believe God and His Word...integrating what the Bible says...into my daily walk. Our lives on Sundays cannot be different than our lives Monday through Saturday. The opposite of integrity is compartmentalizing your life.

Think of your life like a pie. There are all these different slices in the pie. There is a slice representing your career, one representing your marriage...a slice representing family...perhaps slices representing hobbies, politics, finances, health, and education...and then there is a God slice.

But God says I don't want to be just one little slice in your pie of life. God demands first place in your life or no place at all.

Mark 12:30..."***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.***" ALL.

God wants to be at the center of every slice, every area, every decision, every battle, every relationship, every choice, every day. We must live with integrity, making sure God is integrated into every area of our lives.

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To live such a life we must have **Forgiveness**...

Ephesians 4:32 - "***Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***"

When we carry around resentment and bitterness it takes our focus off what is important...it destroys relationships...it eats away at the legacy we want to leave... Jesus is our example...On the cross, he prayed, "Father,

forgive them for they don't realize what they are doing." He forgave those who were crucifying Him.

The Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to paint a mural on a monastery dining hall in Milan, Italy. The result was The Last Supper, one of the most recognized and beloved works of art in the world. It depicts Jesus sitting with His disciples at a feast table just after He told them that one of them would betray Him.

During the time da Vinci was working on the piece, he got into an argument with another famous artist—Michelangelo...they had "an intense dislike for each other." The two were jealous of each other's work and often made disparaging comments about one another in public.

Legend has it that when the time came for Leonardo to paint the face of Judas in The Last Supper, he got the sinister idea of using the face of his rival, Michelangelo, to be the face of the betrayer. People came by as he worked and gasped when they recognized the face of Michelangelo as Judas. Leonardo felt some temporary vindication

But then came the last step in his grand artwork—painting the face of Jesus. As he tried to capture the image of Christ, he would paint His countenance but would feel dissatisfied and wipe it away. For the next few weeks, he did this over and over again. He had Jesus' body completed, but he couldn't create the right face—that magnificent countenance of mercy and kindness.

In desperation Leonardo prayed that he could paint the face that would express the love and compassion of Christ. "Lord, help me to see Your face," he pleaded with God.

Finally, a voice spoke to his heart, saying, "You will never see the face of Jesus until you change the face of Judas." Leonardo was convicted. He thought about Jesus on the cross praying for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him, and about how offended he himself had been by petty insults. He erased Michelangelo's face and painted the image we see today.



Only when Leonardo let go of his bitterness toward Michelangelo and removed the offense could he clearly paint the image of Christ.

Only when we let go of our bitterness and forgive can we see the face of Christ and can others see Christ in us.

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

To live such a life we must have **Enthusiasm**.

One of my favorite writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that nothing great ever happens without enthusiasm in life. Enthusiasm comes from two Greek words, en and theos. Theos is the Greek word for God. En simply means in. Enthusiasm literally means *God within*.

If you have no motivation, no passion, no enthusiasm, you may have to ask yourself, “Do you have God within?”

When we start hanging out with God...when we start getting excited about the things God cares about, when we start caring about the things God cares about, when we start spending time with a God who is extremely passionate...We will become excited, caring, passionate...

The Creator of the Universe is watching what we do. And God tells us, Colossians 3:23, **“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...”** Whatever you do, do it with enthusiasm. We are working for God, not for man.

Tomorrow when we go to work, when we are with our families, when we are making decisions, when we are doing the little things no one else notices...God notices...God knows...and God says that we will be rewarded one day if we do it for Him with all our hearts. We are to live lives excited about God because we have "*God within*".

Ebenezer Scrooge, thanks to God's mercy and three dynamic ghosts, got a second chance and left quite a legacy...

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

One day we will stand before God and we will see what kind of legacy we left...what is said of us...

- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our families? When our children and grandchildren think of us, what comes to mind? What did they take from us and are now able to give to others?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our marriages? How did others see us with our spouse...were they inspired by our marriages to work on theirs...to love their spouse and God more deeply?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our work? Did we build up the company we worked for? Were we generous to our employees? Did we influence others around us positively? Did we reflect Christ in our day to day encounters?
- What kind of legacy did we leave when it came to our church? Did our words lift others up? Did we help the ministry move forward or did we hold it back? Did we love those brothers and sisters who God placed in our lives as part of our church family?
- What kind of legacy did we leave? What did people see in us...How did our words and actions lift others up and point them to God?

In other words, what gift did our life bring to the manger, to the Christ child?

"...and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

I pray the same may be said of you and I...that each of us lived a life of Love, Integrity, Forgiveness, and Enthusiasm...that each of us kept Christmas well...all year-round! May we live in such a way because God first loved us...and He showed us His love by sending His Son that first Christmas morning...



Might such a life be our gift to the Christ Child!