

"Marley's Ghost"

Ghosts of Christmas - Messages Series for Advent 2017

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North East United Methodist Church

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*For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.
But now, O Lord, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord,
Nor remember iniquity forever;
Behold, look now, all of us are Your people.*

-Isaiah 64:6-9

In England at the turn of the nineteenth century, Christmas had almost vanished from the scene.



In part, the continued influence of conservative Reformed Christians – who believed that people should do only what the Bible commands, and therefore should not celebrate Christmas, especially given its popular excesses – meant that for many in England Christmas was not a valid holiday. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the festive gatherings were much different from those we associate with this time of year. They

were rather like the worst of office parties, rife with drunkenness and sexual license, combined with the hooliganism we see in some extreme celebrations of Halloween. Even many Anglicans were outraged by what they saw. The Reverend Henry Bourne of Newcastle lamented that Christmas was "*a pretense for Drunkenness, and Rioting, and Wantonness.*"

Furthermore, the disappearance of Christmas from English culture had much more to do with the social impact of industrialization and urbanization.



As large numbers of people left their ancestral villages to move to the large cities, they also left behind most of their cultural traditions, such as the celebration of Christmas. Moreover, in the cities, bosses weren't inclined to encourage a holiday that meant a day off from work, especially a day of paid vacation.

Another implication of big city life in Victorian England was widespread poverty and human suffering.



Although many people worked in factories and offices, wages were low and living conditions poor. This was an abiding concern for Charles Dickens, especially in the fall of 1843.



Amid his busy writing career, he was working hard to raise support for institutions that educated and otherwise helped the urban poor of England. In October 1843, a trip to Manchester poured fuel on the flame of Dickens's passion for the poor. As he spoke at the Athenaeum, an institution devoted to caring for the poor in Manchester, Dickens's heart was strangely moved. Moreover, he had stayed with his beloved sister Fan (the name of Ebenezer Scrooge's dear sister in *A Christmas Carol*), who had two young sons, one of whom was frail and sick (not unlike Tiny Tim). So in October, Dickens began to write *A Christmas Carol*. According to his own testimony, his writing of this short book was rather a spiritual experience.

A Christmas Carol was published on December 19, 1843.



Dickens' contributions to our celebration of Christmas...

- Christmas as a major holiday. At the time of Dickens, it was relatively ignored by most people.

- Christmas as a one (or two) day celebration rather than the traditional twelve.
- Christmas as an occasion for family and close friends to gather for luscious food, singing, dancing, and games. Before *A Christmas Carol*, turkey was an uncommon on Christmas tables. After the book, it became the meat of choice for this holiday.
- Christmas as a time for being generous to the poor.

Dickens did not so much invent these traditions as he resurrected them and popularized them. Much of what we assume to be true of Christmas celebrations today derives from the vision of Dickens, especially as portrayed in *A Christmas Carol*.

So close was the connection between Charles Dickens and Christmas that, when he died in 1870, a young woman who heard of it was aghast. “Dickens dead?” she exclaimed. “Then will Father Christmas die too?”

But Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* goes much deeper. It does not simply address Christmas traditions and caring for the poor, but dives into sin and redemption. These themes, found in Dickens' story, will drive our messages this Advent.

PRAYER

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the country is done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Thus, the story *A Christmas Carol* begins.

Jacob Marley is dead. And then we are introduced to Scrooge.



Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge. a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Scrooge is a man so lost, so selfish, so focused on money...when asked to help the poor...his response...is that they should go to the poor houses and the prisons and when told that many would rather die than go there...Scrooge responds, "*they had better do it and decrease the surplus population.*"

And when it comes to Christmas...Scrooge's response is the response of a man most miserable..."*Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"*

The real problem is that Scrooge does not recognize his state...how miserable he is...his need for salvation. He is like so many today who go about their tasks, having never looked deeply into a mirror...If they were to sing John Newton's famous hymn it would simply be "*I once was blind...*"

But then a ghost helps him see...



When the ghost of Jacob Marley visits Scrooge, at first he doubts what he sees. Scrooge argues that his vision is probably "*an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!*" Yet with loud cries and a horrifying change of appearance, Marley's ghost prevails upon Scrooge's good sense. He finally believes that the ghost is real.

Scrooge's first response to this recognition is fear and trembling. His fear grows when he learns that he is destined to wear even heavier post-mortem chains than the ones that Marley himself is forced to carry. "*Speak comfort to me, Jacob,*" Scrooge begs, in his first real demonstration of some sort of human vulnerability. Yet Marley can offer no real comfort.

As Marley continues, he explains that he has come to warn Scrooge so that he might escape Marley's dire fate. To this Scrooge responds, "*You were always a good friend to me, . . . Thank'ee.*" Here is the first bit of tenderheartedness directed by Scrooge to someone other than himself. He feels gratitude to Marley. It is here we first see the frosty heart of Ebenezer Scrooge begin to thaw.

Before Scrooge is visited by Jacob Marley, he shows not the slightest bit of kindness or tenderness. His heart is hard. His focus is utterly self-centered.

He has nothing to offer others but scorn and an occasional “*Bah, Humbug!*” Scrooge now shows the tiniest morsel of positive feeling to anyone.

It’s Marley’s gift of undeserved kindness that first touches Scrooge’s soul. Marley extended grace to his former partner. In no way did Marley owe Scrooge anything. And there’s no reason to believe that Marley stood to gain anything for himself in helping Scrooge. Moreover, in no way whatsoever had Scrooge done anything to deserve Marley’s help. Marley’s intervention was simply an act of grace.

{Here is another message which I do not have time to preach this morning - how might you and I be God's vessel taking grace to another}

It is this act of grace that not only begins to soften Scrooge's heart so he can hear the message the other spirits will share with him, but is this act of grace that helps Scrooge to discover a truth so important that there can be no salvation without it...that he is a sinner...

This is what the nation of Israel has recognized in our scripture this morning...

***For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.***

-Isaiah 64:6-7

The prophet Isaiah speaks for God and for the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel, all of us, because of our sin, are not only obnoxious to God’s justice, but odious to his holiness. Isaiah takes it further stating that all our righteousnesses, or, justifications, are as filthy rags — rags, which not only cannot cover us, but filthy rags, which also defile us. The prophet understands that even our best works and actions have so great an alloy of imperfection, that they cannot justify us before a holy and just God. A wind

that withers both leaves and fruit, or that sweeps away all before it has taken the Israelites (and us) away — In the case of the nation of Israel, this wind (sin) has not only scattered them geographically but has scattered them from God's favor, into a state of condemnation and wrath.

Centuries later, Paul would reiterate Isaiah's words, making sure we understood they applied to all of us, "*All fall short of the glory of God.*"

Ask people what they must do to get to heaven and most reply, "Be good." Jesus' stories and teachings contradict that answer. Like Peter, sinking beneath the waves, we must simply lift up our hand to Christ and cry out, "Help!"

Perhaps this is like after being told that his chain, forged "*link by link, and yard by yard...girded [by his] own free will...was as heavy and as long as [Marley's], seven Christmas Eves ago...It is a ponderous chain*"...Scrooge cries out to Marley's ghost..."*Speak comfort to me, Jacob.*"

In order to cry for "Help," we must first have our eyes open, like Scrooge, to our own sinful state...that we all fall short...all of us. There is not a day goes by that I do not experience pride, or selfishness, or greed. The Bible tells me that these sins push me away from God. Nothing I can do will make up for my sins...they are too many...and if I could make up for them by serving in the church, reading the Bible, giving to charity, being a good neighbor - the whole time I was making up for my past sins against God I would be committing new sins - it would be an endless cycle - one of which I old never win.

Once our eyes are open to the sin in our lives...we must recognize grace or we might fall into a pit of despair...Marley offers this to Scrooge, "*I am here tonight to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.*" This is grace. This is mercy. It is offered to us not by a ghost but by a merciful and loving God and by His Son, Jesus Christ.

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet

sinner, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him."

-Romans 5:6-9

In our passage today, Isaiah understands that Israel has sinned...but God can bring them back...God can restore them...so the prophet cries out to God on behalf of Israel...

***But now, O Lord, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord,
Nor remember iniquity forever;
Behold, look now, all of us are Your people.***

-Isaiah 64:8-9

And God speaks through the prophet Isaiah that He will intervene, He will bring Israel back...He will restore...redeem them...He will send a Savior...He will show grace to His people...

***"Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law."
Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
Who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:***

***"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations..."***

-Isaiah 42:1-6

Marley's ghost tells Scrooge that he will "be haunted by Three Spirits" and that in their coming Scrooge might escape his chains...

God tells Israel that a Savior will be coming...a "*light for the nations*"...one whom God has "*put [His] spirit upon Him*"...one who will "*bring forth justice to the nations*"...and in His coming the people might escape their chains...we might escape our chains...

"Might" because it is our choice...our choice to cry out for "mercy"..."for comfort"...As Paul tells us, "*Everyone who calls [makes a choice] on the name of the Lord will be saved.*"

Today is the first Sunday of Advent...meaning "arrival" or "coming"...it is the time we remember Israel crying out...searching for...waiting for the coming of a Savior...We hear the prophets announcing that one day...yes, one day...God will send a Savior...a Messiah...

You and I know that Messiah has come...Jesus...whose birth we celebrate at the culmination of Advent on Christmas Eve...so Advent is for us, not only a remembering...remembering the Israelites, the prophets, the hope of a Savior...but for us lighting the candle on the Advent wreath is looking toward the second Advent...Christ's return... Rev. Laurence Hull Stookey tells us, "*Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death, the inauguration and anticipation of what is yet to come in fullness.*"

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts to meet Him...to stand before Jesus...To recognize our need for a Savior...because of our sin our need for help...to cry out like Scrooge, "Mercy."

Advent is a time in recognizing the chains we have constructed, to turn our hearts from the behaviors behind those chains...to make, as Marley's ghost

points out to Scrooge, "*mankind [our] business...the common welfare [our] business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence...[our] business.*" In other words, to take on the "fruits of the spirit" - "*...love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" To not be a Scrooge for as Paul writes in Romans 13:11, "*Another reason for right living is that you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.*"

Let us allow the ghosts of Christmas, the spirit of Christmas, the Holy Spirit, help us build something new with our lives...something that shows others grace and points them to the Savior...let us hear the voice of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord*"...preparing our hearts to receive Him...not a babe born in a manger but a Christ, a Messiah, as described in I Thessalonians 4:16, "*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*"...

...preparing as if we received a letter that reads,

"Expect my Son December 25. Will not come in a crib, but trailing clouds of glory. This is the end. Repeat: This is the end. Prepare for his arrival. It'll be sheep at his right hand, goats at his left. No regrets accepted. Signed, Father."

As Walter Burghardt writes, "[If I received such a letter] *I suspect my Advent would be different.*"

This Christmas, may we recognize that we too are sinners...we too have fallen short of the glory of God...let us understand this without needing a ghost to visit us, to tell us of our chains...let us look in the mirror and see what we have forged that is not of God...and let us cry out for mercy...for forgiveness...for grace...

Jacob Marley is "*as dead as a doornail*," but our God is not...Our Savior was not buried with "*a stake of holly through his heart*"...but died with nails through his hands and rose again with lightning and earthquake...Not because of a ghost but because of our Savior, like Scrooge, we have been

given a chance to escape the chains we have forged in this life...Let us never find ourselves saying "*Humbug*" to such a gift...