

"Ghost of Christmas Future"

Ghosts of Christmas - Messages Series for Advent 2017

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North East United Methodist Church

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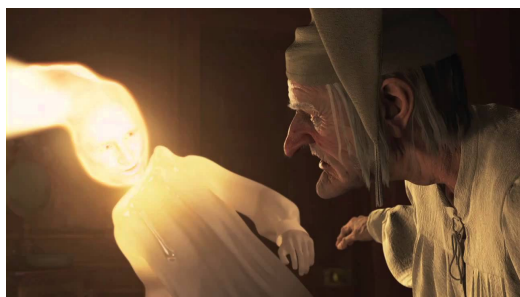
Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, "*a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!*" who gets the chance, through the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, to be redeemed...to have his hard heart softened and his eyes opened to the things of God.

We have heard how the ghost of Jacob Marley...



...like a prophet of old, came to warn Scrooge, to show him the fate that awaited him if he continued living the life he was living. Marley announces to Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts.

We heard how the Ghost of Christmas Past...



...took Scrooge on an amazing journey into his past helping him remember the last time he felt such a thing as joy and love...to the annual Christmas

party with his former employer, Fezziwig...The ghost showed him what he could have had...a family, children...if only he had not been filled with greed...The Ghost of Christmas Past, like John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"* wanted Scrooge to understand that he could make a radical break from his sinful past, just like you and I can, and begin to turn afresh to God.

Then we met the Ghost of Christmas Present...



...who opens Scrooge's eyes to the world around him, a world that because of his greed and self-centeredness he has never seen. He realizes as he sees the impoverished Cratchits, the hard-working miners, the lonesome lighthouse keepers, all singing of Christmas, all hearts filled with joy, that joy comes from somewhere other than what we have, than what Scrooge had spent his life trying to acquire.

We compared this to Mary, the mother of Jesus, after being told she would have a child, found herself with a shattered reputation and an uncertain future; yet, Mary was able to open her eyes to God above...She did not allow her situation to determine whether or not there was joy in her heart, but instead by focusing on God and His blessings, God's plan for her life, her heart was filled with such joy that she was not able to keep quiet..."*My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*"

Today, we find ourselves alongside Scrooge as he is visited by the last of the three spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.



"The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently, approached. When it came near him, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded with a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

He felt that it was tall and stately when it came beside him, and that its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread. He knew no more, for the Spirit neither spoke nor moved."

"Ghost of the Future!" Scrooge exclaimed, "I fear you more than any specter I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart."

The Ghost of Christmas Future is the most ominous of the three ghosts to visit Scrooge...Scrooge tells him, *"I fear you more than any specter I have seen."* Wouldn't we say the same? For many of us, the future is a frightening thought. It is a ghost that haunts us, worries us. Uncertainty and fear hang like a cloud over the future.

Think for a moment about Mary and Joseph. Mary, visited by an angel and told she would give birth to a child...unmarried...no earthly father...that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would have a boy...and would call him Jesus. Even though Mary accepted the angel's pronouncement with faith, I am sure there were many moments the thought of the future scared her...how would people treat her...how would Joseph, her betrothed, react...would they be cast out of their village...where would they end up...would she be a good mother to this child of God...and what did it mean to be a mother to one who was divine...

And what about Joseph...Matthew 1:18-25...

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

I can only imagine what went through Joseph's head...I am sure he was also concerned about what the future held...how people would react...how would they treat him, for taking Mary, a pregnant woman, as his wife...where would they go...how would he raise this child that wasn't his..."*She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will*

save His people from their sins"...Would he be strong enough to raise such a child...to protect this child in the midst of a harsh and unforgiving world...

The future is a scary place...for all of us...and when you add Jesus to the mix, your future...like Mary and Joseph's...becomes even more uncertain...

Now, don't misunderstand...when Jesus comes into your life, your eternal future is certain...And it is incredible...absolutely amazing...But Jesus doesn't offer that same future security in this life. In fact, Jesus can take what seemed to be a very secure future and throw it into total disarray.

Suddenly Mary and Joseph's plans were shattered...the future uncertain...less than nine months later they found themselves traveling to Bethlehem...pregnant...close to giving birth...shortly after Jesus was born, they found themselves running from King Herod...running into Egypt...leaving their families, all that they knew behind...Throughout their lives, it would be God...it would be the Christ child...that would direct their steps...and one day, with women wailing, soldiers pushing, the Pharisees shouting...in the midst of great chaos...Mary would kneel and watch as her son was crucified...

The future is scary for all of us because it is uncertain; therefore, in an effort to make our future more certain, we try to control everything. We attempt to take control of our finances, our careers, our relationships, our health...plan everything out...

This is the problem with Jesus...when we add Jesus to our lives, our secure futures are thrown into disarray...because Jesus doesn't call us to take control...Jesus calls us to give up control...Jesus demands...just as God demanded of Mary and Joseph...that we relinquish control in our lives...

In Luke 16, Jesus Himself said, "***No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.***" We cannot serve Jesus and ourselves. Jesus and I cannot be co-masters of my life.

It is scary to give up control.

- You have a plan as to what you are going to do with your life, yet Jesus is calling you to do something else.
- You were in complete control of your relationships, but now Jesus is challenging you to break off from those relationships that are unhealthy, reach out to those who you normally wouldn't give a second glance, to forgive even when you do not want to forgive.
- You were in complete control of your finances, but now Jesus is calling you to live with generosity.
- You believed that you were kind to your neighbors, but now Jesus expands the definition of neighbor to include men and women devastated by an earthquake in Haiti, those persecuted for their faith in China, and the many impoverished children in Africa.
- You were comfortable in your political affiliation, but now Jesus is challenging you on whether or not your party's stance is in-line with His teachings.
- You were comfortable in your religious traditions, but now Jesus is challenging every tradition you hold sacred.
- Your goal was a nice, comfortable, suburban life, but Jesus is calling you to take risks, to step "out of the box," to have faith.
- You thought Christmas was just a holiday, but now you are discovering that Jesus came into this world not just to be your Savior, but to be your Lord...to be the one who makes the decisions in your life.

As Pastor Mike Edmisten writes, ***"If you feel like your future is certain and secure, then you probably haven't fully submitted to Jesus. When you look at people in Scripture who were fully sold out to God, they lived in constant uncertainty."***

When Ebenezer Scrooge met the Ghost of Christmas Future, he told the ghost, *"I fear you more than any specter I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart."*

If we are going to follow Jesus into the future...your future in this life will be uncertain...but all of us can rest in the knowledge that God will work within that future for good...will help us become more like His Son, Jesus

Christ...This is our hope...no matter what our future holds, we know who holds the future...even when the future looks incredibly uncertain, even frightening, we know that God will be there to walk with us through it...

But there is more...

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come takes Scrooge to a funeral. Scrooge knows there is something terribly wrong for no one weeps for the departed...Business associates refuse to go to the funeral unless lunch is served...a relieved couple hopes their debts will die with him, thankful the man is deceased...the cleaning woman and undertaker steal from the defenseless corpse without a hint of remorse...the only tears that are shed are for the young Tiny Tim...

Scrooge finally discovers, as he stares at his own tombstone...



...that the man...whose life ending brought no tears...was him...there is no spouse or children by his side when he takes his last breath, no friends to miss him and to speak at his funeral...no one protects his lifeless body...Scrooge realizes that he got rich off the poor, struck fear in the hearts of his debtors, and didn't lift a finger to help Tiny Tim.

He cries out to the ghost... *"Before I draw near to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be, only?" Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood. "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"*

"Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!"

Not only will God walk with us in the uncertainty and work within our lives for good...God will touch the lives of many people through us along the way if we allow Him to have control...

A Christmas Carol shows us that once Scrooge opens his heart to the Spirit of Christmas...what Dickens would say was synonymous with the Spirit of the Christ Child...his life is forever changed...and his life touches the lives...blesses the lives...of many, many people...This "*altered life*" is a life of an uncertain future, but also a life that truly makes a difference as the Spirit of Christmas is able to work through Scrooge all year round...

Dickens describes the power Death has over such a person...

"Oh cold, cold, rigid, dreadful death, set up thine altar here and dress it with such terrors as thou hast at thy command: for this is thy dominion! But of the loved, revered, and honored head, thou canst not turn one hair to thy dread purposes or make one feature odious. It is not that the hand is heavy and will fall down when released; it is not that the heart and pulse are still; but that the hand WAS open, generous, and true; the heart brave, warm, and tender; and the pulse a man's. Strike, shadow, strike! And see his good deeds springing from the wound, to sow the world with life immortal!"

Death cannot destroy a person who has given their life to Christ...who has allowed God to be in the driver's seat...that person will not only live on eternally but will live on in this world..."*his good deeds springing from the wound*"...that person will live on in the lives he or she touched, ministered to, cared for...Revelation 14:13...John writes, **"Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'"**

I have officiated over more funerals than I could count. And some people get up and talk about how the person loved to hunt or play golf...they tell a funny story or two and laughter runs through the sanctuary. But the funerals that are most powerful...are honoring the lives of individuals who truly gave God control...who moved into the future with faith, letting God work through them. I have a t-shirt that reads, "*Live your life in a way that the preacher doesn't have to lie at your funeral.*" These people have done that...Their funerals have stories of faith, stories of selflessness and sacrifice, stories of helping others, reaching out to the less fortunate, making a difference. Those funerals celebrate a life that was not wasted, but rather left a legacy...that "*sow[ed] the world with life immortal.*" This is the type of funeral I am sure the "*altered*" Scrooge had...This is the type of funeral I pray I will have...

Like Mary & Joseph, our futures may seem uncertain, even scary, but let us go into the future with faith, giving God control...the future may be uncertain but the fact that God will walk with us through it is not...and not only will He walk with us through it, but God will work through us, if we give Him control, to touch the lives of countless men, women, and children...and one day, at our funeral, there will not only be tears but celebration...our faith will be remembered, the joy we shared, the impact God made on others through us...

May the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come show us, like Scrooge, that we can change our futures today...and that our futures can change countless lives for the good...all we have to do is surrender...let God have control...