

"Ghost of Christmas Past"

Ghosts of Christmas - Messages Series for Advent 2017

December 3, 2017

North East United Methodist Church

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Last Sunday we met the main character in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge.



Scrooge is described as *"...a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone...a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"* And we heard how Scrooge was visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley...



...who told him that he would be visited by three spirits...three spirits whom without Scrooge would wind up walking the same path as Marley for all eternity, shackled by an even larger chain of his own making.

The first chapter of Dickens' tale ends, *"Scrooge closed the window, and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was double-locked, as he had locked it with his own hands, and the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say 'Humbug!' But stopped at the first syllable. And being, from the*

emotion he had undergone, or the fatigues of the day, or the glimpse of the Invisible World, or the dull conversation of the Ghost, or the lateness of the hour, much in need of repose; went straight to bed, without undressing, and fell asleep upon the instant."

And then...

At the sounding of the clock striking one, "light flashed up in the room upon the instant, and the curtains of his bed were drawn."

Before Scrooge was "a strange figure - like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions...."



...Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin."

Scrooge asked, *"Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to me?"*
"I am," replied the Spirit.

Scrooge then asked why the Spirit was there. The Spirit replies, *"Your welfare... Your reclamation... Take heed!"*

I had to look up that word "Reclamation" since many of the film versions change this word to "redemption"...Reclamation means *"returning something to its former or better state."* Reclaiming.

Isn't that the message we find throughout the scriptures as humankind falls prey to temptation?

- Sin enters the world...and we are cast from the garden which holds the tree of life.
- God then begins to set in motion a plan...which includes the birthing of a nation, Israel. God calls a people to get to know Him...to understand that God is holy and they, we, are not...to understand their need for a Savior.
- God prepares the people for this Savior through God's law, through sacrificial worship, and through the prophets.
- And then God births a Savior...Jesus...who will die a sacrificial death and will rise again.
- The scriptures end with Christ's triumphant return and God's gathering His people to the Holy City, where we are told that in the center of that city, "*on each side of the river, [stands] the tree of life.*"

Someone once said that the Bible was a tale between two trees.

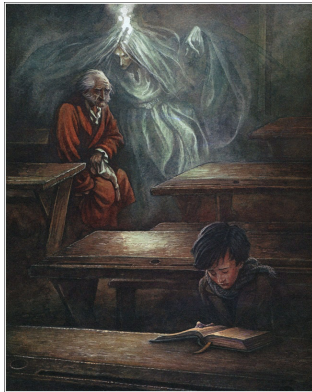


It is the story of our fall from the garden, from intimacy with our Creator, and God's plan of reclamation...working to get us back to the garden, back to Him.

A Christmas Carol is that same story. In this case, the Spirits, working for the reclamation of Ebenezer Scrooge...working to get him back to a former and better state...a state where his sin, his chain, is broken...and his heart is not cold and unfeeling, but filled with joy, generosity, and love...filled with the things of God.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge on an amazing journey into his past helping him remember the last time he felt such a thing as joy...the last time he witnessed and benefited from another's generosity...the last time his heart loved.

He sees the loneliness of his childhood as well as the joy when his sister, Fan, comes to take him home...



...Scrooge witnesses once more the generosity of his old employer, Fezziwig...



...and then comes face to face with the woman, Belle, who he loved but replaced with his love for money.



The ghost shows him what he could have had...a family, children...if only he had not been filled with greed...if only his heart had not been hardened. Scrooge cries out to the Spirit, *"Remove me! I cannot bear it! Haunt me no longer!"*

Scrooge weeps with regret when he realizes how his greed has ruined his relationships...when he realizes the joy he has missed...the generosity he could have easily offered...the love he could have had. Perhaps Scrooge could have related well to the Christian rock band Reliant K's song entitled, *"Who I Am Hates Who I've Been."*

The scripture for this first week of Advent comes from the gospel of Matthew 3:1-12...

***Now in those days John the Baptist came,
preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,***

***"The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
'Make ready the way of the Lord,
Make His paths straight!'"***

***Now John himself had garment of camel's hair and a leather belt
around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then
Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district
around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan
River, as they confessed their sins.***

John the Baptist calls on the people to repent. Repentance is turning away from sin and turning toward a fruitful life. It can be defined as ***"a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief, which results in fruit in keeping with repentance."*** Repentance involves turning around, a new direction, a change of heart, a new commitment.

Often we are tempted to call sin by other names and to blame other people for our problems rather than accepting responsibility for our sins. Such an attitude denies the reality of sin and thus offers no escape from it. This is

how Adam and Eve responded when they sinned...Genesis 3:13: *"The serpent deceived me, and I ate"...*

Other times we are tempted to bury our sins...bury the past...this is what Scrooge had done...it took the Ghost of Christmas Past for Scrooge to face once more his sins and the pain they caused. Burying our sin denies the fact that our past is part of who we are...that our past does not go away. We have to bring it to God so He can heal us. We have to allow God to use our past and our hurts for His purposes. Proverbs 28:13: ***"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."***

Lastly, there are times we beat ourselves up for the mistakes, the sins of our past. We live our lives reliving over and over those moments we failed God. We feel like the psalmist who cries out...Psalm 38:4-8: *"I am drowning in the flood of my sins, they are a burden too heavy to bear. Because I have been foolish, I'm utterly worn out and crushed, my heart is troubled."*

John the Baptist invites the people...invites you and I...to not blame others, bury our sins, or beat ourselves up over the past, but to make a radical break from our sinful past and to turn afresh to God. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

The Ghost of Christmas Past, the Holy Spirit, has certainly visited me on many occasions...shown me moments when sin took hold of me, carried me far from God...moments I cannot blame others for or bury deep within my self...moments I must not beat myself up for, but instead allow God to use...

I have always been forthcoming with my past...fathering a baby at the age of sixteen, hurting my parents, even a night in jail...

- Moments I chose self over God, brought to the surface by the Holy Spirit, just as Scrooge's past was brought to the surface by a Ghost...
- Moments I lifted up to God, crying out for His forgiveness, and in His mercy I experienced His grace anew...

- Moments God has used to make me into His vessel, teaching me compassion, empathy, mercy, patience, and love so that I might witness and connect to others, that I might not judge, leading them to the One who saved me...

Think of a car...we can see what is behind us by using the rear view mirror...that rear view mirror is very small compared to the windshield which allows us to see ahead, to where we are going...Every now and then we need to look back to see where we have come from...what God has brought us through...but our focus must be forward...looking ahead...to what God has for us...to how we can serve Him and make a difference in this world...

Paul wrote, Philippians 3:13-14: "***...but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.***"

The Ghost of Christmas Past showed Scrooge the rear view...but only for a moment...its purpose was not to hold him there in a storm of emotions and regret...but to prepare Him, to prepare His heart, for what was ahead...

We Are Not Who We Were

We can choose to allow the mistakes we have made define us...we can choose to believe we can't change...our tomorrows will be no different from our todays, our yesterdays. Or we can have hope.

- Hope that God can work through our past to redefine our present and open up our future.
- Hope that we are not limited to either staying the same or running from the past.
- Hope that God presents another option, to help us claim who we were as a part of becoming who God wants us to be.

Yes, you and I have made mistakes, and those mistakes are a part of our story, but they don't have to be the whole story. We can reframe our past regrets as a small part of a larger story of forgiveness and growth.

2 Corinthians 5:17: ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"***

Scrooge let himself be defined by his past, but that's only one part of his story. The Ghost of Christmas Past reminded Scrooge of the pain his actions caused both him and others...reminded him of what he had missed...as a way of setting the stage for him to look forward.

As one author writes, *"For us, the birth of the Christ child brings the hope that our past doesn't have to be our present, and that our future is pregnant with the possibilities God has for us."*

I read a story about a pastor named A.J. Gordon:

While he was pastor of a church in Boston, he met a young boy in front of the sanctuary carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously.

Gordon inquired, *"Son, where did you get those birds?"*

The boy replied, *"I trapped them out in the field."*

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to play with them, and then I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have at home."

When Gordon offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, "Mister, you don't want them, they're just little old wild birds and can't sing very well."

Gordon replied, *"I'll give you \$2 for the cage and the birds."*

"Okay, it's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain."

The exchange was made and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. Gordon walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire coop, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue.

This is what God has done for us. I Peter 1:18-19: ***"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."***

God has bought us with the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ in order that we might be freed from a past that holds us captive and might fly into a bright and glorious future...

The story of Ebenezer Scrooge is our own. This Advent season, the Ghost of Christmas Past comes to visit us...



...asking us to look back through time to what we have blamed others for...to what we have buried...to what we continue to beat ourselves up with...and embrace it...embrace it and hand it over to God so that we might be healed...that we might be made new...redeemed...that God may use our past to lead us and others into a glorious future...

Scrooge, talking to the ghost about his former employer, Fezziwig, says, *"He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up: what then? The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."*

God wants us to understand that this describes all our futures...that our futures have the power to render the world happy or unhappy...to make the service of those around us light or burdensome...a future that can give out happiness worth more than any fortune...but the only way this future can be ours is if we are willing to lay our past, our lives, before God...and like Scrooge...exhausted from the experience...simply trust and wait for what God will do next...