

"Ghost of Christmas Present"

Ghosts of Christmas - Messages Series for Advent 2017

December 10, 2017

North East United Methodist Church

Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

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.

Last week, 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...the last time he witnessed and benefited from another's generosity...the last time his heart loved. The ghost showed 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 was never able to move past who he WAS to who he COULD BE. He allowed his past to define him.

After his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge falls into a deep sleep and awakes to a ghostly light coming from under the door to the adjoining room. He softly shuffles to the door and when he places his hand upon the lock, a strange voice calls him by name and asks him to enter.

Scrooge enters a room that looks quite different then he remembered. We read...

The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove; from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there; and such a mighty blaze went roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrification of a hearth had never known in Scrooge's time, or Marley's, or for many and many a winter season gone. Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam. In easy state upon this couch, there sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty's horn, and held it up, high up, to shed its light on Scrooge, as he came peeping round the door. "Come in!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Come in, and know me better, man."

SHOW VIDEO CLIP - *Ghost of Christmas Present*

<https://youtu.be/k8pF8qHHQnA>

Scrooge is taken to his clerk, Bob Cratchit's house and sees their small home and their meager feast...



...and witnesses the innocence and joy of Tiny Tim, Cratchit's crippled son. He learns that Tiny Tim will not live much longer.



Their next stop is the home of Fred, Scrooge's nephew. Scrooge turned down an invitation to dinner at Fred's house, so Scrooge sees the party he is going to miss. Dickens describes Scrooge as having become "*so [jolly] and light of heart*" that he did not want to leave and asks the Ghost to stay until the end of the festivities.

One of the most damning lines about Scrooge is in the 1984 movie adaptation, when the Ghost of Christmas Present says to Scrooge, "*You've gone through life not noticing a lot.*"

One of the biggest challenges to being faithful today is the constant presence of distraction. We are a distracted culture, our attention dissected 100 different ways, unable to prioritize what's important because we're told everything is important, which means nothing is important.

In a couple weeks, we will come together on Christmas Eve, and we will hear the scriptures read...we will hear the angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds..."*Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*"...To you is born THIS day. Not tomorrow. Not yesterday. This day.

I wonder if you and I would respond with the same urgency as the shepherds..."*Today? Hmm. That's really not good for me. I've got a 9 a.m. coffee, some Christmas shopping to do, I need to pick up my kid from school and run by the grocery. I'm free at 3 p.m. Wednesday. Can Jesus wait until then to be born? Do I have to see the Christ child NOW?*"

The distractions of this season, the distractions of this life, keep us from being present to the miracles all around us every day.

When the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge out into the night...he takes him not only to Bob Cratchit's and to his nephew, Fred's, but the Ghost takes Scrooge across the land to the homes of miners who work in the depths of the earth, to two men who work a lighthouse set upon an island of rock surrounded by the ocean, to the crew of a ship out at sea, to place after place...and Scrooge sees that regardless of their location, their situation, their lack of worldly things...Scrooge sees men and women who grab joy in the moment...each one celebrating this very special day of the year...Christmas...

Scrooge's eyes are opened to the fact that your surroundings, what you have, do not determine your ability to feel joy...peace...blessing...your surroundings do not determine your ability to celebrate...even in the most miserable of surroundings, of situations, one can see reason to give thanks...Scrooge's eyes are opened to the lesson Paul learned and taught others...Philippians 4:12...***"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."***

Scrooge's eyes are open to things he had never noticed before...Dickens describes what Scrooge sees...

The sky was gloomy, and the shortest streets were choked up with a dingy mist, half thawed, half frozen, whose heavier particles descended in shower of sooty atoms, as if all the chimneys in Great Britain had, by one consent, caught fire, and were blazing away to their dear hearts' content. There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet was there an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavoured to diffuse in vain.

For, the people who were shovelling away on the housetops were jovial and full of glee; calling out to one another from the parapets, and now and then exchanging a facetious snowball -- better-natured missile far than

many a wordy jest -- laughing heartily if it went right and not less heartily if it went wrong. The poulterers' shops were still half open, and the fruiterers' were radiant in their glory. There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made, in the shopkeepers' benevolence to dangle from conspicuous hooks, that people's mouths might water gratis as they passed; there were piles of filberts, mossy and brown, recalling, in their fragrance, ancient walks among the woods, and pleasant shufflings ankle deep through withered leaves...

How often do we miss the sights...the smells...the miracles...all around us? How often are we so distracted we miss God? We find ourselves discontent? How often is this season, not a time to see God, but simply a time to get through?

One author compares attentiveness to God with birdwatching. He said, *"if you are walking through the woods, and your goal is to get from point A to point B, you'll get from point A to point B. Sometimes the Christmas season feels that way. "Just get me to Dec. 26!"* [I would add that sometimes all of the seasons of the year feel that way]. *"But,"* he said, *"if you are birdwatching, then when you walk through the woods, they come alive with robins and bluejays and whippoorwills and doves. The same woods that could be simply an obstacle to traverse instead overflow with life, each flap of the wings sounding like the whisper of angels."*

For Scrooge, being present in the moment for him was a waste of time. His focus was either on the past and what didn't get done or on the future and what needed to be done. His head was always in his ledger, his eyes on the bottom line, his employee simply a cog in the gear of Scrooge's money-making machine. And, as the ghost showed him, Scrooge missed the overflow of life around him, the *"whispers of angels"* that got drowned out by his own greed.

How often do I...do we...miss the "*whispers of angels*"?

I remember last year, Deb and I decided to stop everything and take two days in Williamsburg, Virginia. Now this is a very busy time of the year for both of us so this was not routine. But what an amazing time we had. It was amazing because we stopped and took in the sights around us...felt Christmas instead of just rush through it...held the moments as well as each other...

I was so relaxed and caught up in the moment I experienced and thought about things I normally push back in the hustle-and-bustle of each day's activities and to-do lists...We went to the Kimball Theatre in Williamsburg and saw "It's A Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart on the big screen. The film touched my heart, made me think about my life and the impact I pray it has had on others...made me think about the blessing of family and friends, leading me to give God thanks...and by the end of the film I was bawling my eyes out, trying not to embarrass myself too badly in front of Deb. The next day we were at Christmas Town in Busch Gardens, and we spent the day going to all the shows...and the first show we saw...A Christmas Carol. The story came alive for me because I was focused...in the moment...no distractions...and by the end...once again...the tears were flowing...perhaps, sitting there with my wife, the distractions of life pushed away, I was able to see things, feel things, sense things that normally would be missed...and perhaps the tears came because I was hearing "*the whispers of angels*"...

Not just at Christmas, but throughout the year...we fail to see God around us because we are so often distracted by constant activity...distracted by television, work, gossip, health issues, kids' sporting events, finances, upkeep of our homes and automobiles...LIFE...the list goes on and on...

These distractions...

- keep us from church...
- keep us from learning about God and what He desires for us...
- keep us from growing close to God and other Christians through small groups and ministry opportunities...
- keep us from seeing God working in our lives...

- keep us from seeing the needs around us and throughout this world and how we can help...
- keep us from recognizing those in our midst that need a visit, an invitation, a helping hand...
- keep us from hearts filled with joy and hope...

In Luke 1, we read that the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she has been selected for a special job.



The Annunciation
by Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617-1682)

She is going to be the mother of the Messiah. The angel tells Mary that the child will be conceived in a miraculous way. The Holy Spirit, himself, will come upon her and she will be with child. She will name that child Jesus.

The scriptures tell us Mary lived in a very small town called Nazareth. In Mary's day, it had a population of between one hundred and four hundred people. Everyone would know everything about everybody and at that time, in that culture, everyone had high moral standards.

She was a single pregnant woman so she would be shunned. Her pregnancy didn't just bring shame to her, it brought shame to her entire family. Luke 1:38 is so powerful...Mary tells the angel, "***I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said***"...Mary surrenders all her personal dreams, her desires, her plans, her future, her reputation...all of it...in order to do God's will.

It is then, Mary lifts her voice...Luke 1:46-55...

***“My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
“For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.
“For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.
“And His mercy is upon generation after generation
Toward those who fear Him.
“He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.
“He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.
“He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.
“He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his descendants forever.”***

In the midst of her personal dreams ended, her desires replaced, her plans overridden, her future uncertain, and her reputation shattered, Mary sings...what is known as the "*Magnificat*," meaning "*To magnify*."

She opens her eyes to see beyond the distractions...beyond what her pregnancy means to her dreams and desires, her plans and her future, and even her reputation...she turns her sights to the God above and the future that God has for His people...She praises God with her entire being...praising God for what He will do for her, what He will do for the world, and what He will do for Israel.

As she focuses on God and His blessings, His plan for her life, she is filled with joy..."*My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*"

A millennium earlier, the prophet Isaiah cried out to the nation of Israel, prophesying a very different future...Isaiah 35:1-6...

***The wilderness and the desert will be glad,
And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus
will blossom profusely
And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
The majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of the Lord,
The majesty of our God.
Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble.
Say to those with anxious heart,
"Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you."
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.***

Isaiah spoke during a extremely difficult season in Israel's history. It was a time of great political turmoil as Assyria was expanding its empire, attacking Israel. Yet in the midst of the nation's difficulties, heartaches, and beatings, Isaiah spoke a word of hope, of joy..."Say to those with anxious heart Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come...He will save you..."

In the midst of a host of distractions, the prophet calls on the people to open their eyes to the God in their midst...the God of their past, present, and future...the God who has not and will not leave them...it is there they will find hope...joy...Isaiah shouts to us to not allow the world around us to cause us to miss what God is doing and is about to do...for "*the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.*"

This is what Tiny Tim wanted to do...



...remind those around Him that hope and joy is real...Bob Cratchit tells his wife, "[Tiny Tim] *told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.*"

Don't we all struggle with the many Ghosts of Christmas Present...

- a vanishing present as we see things changing around us...
- a painful present as we travel through a difficult and hurtful season...
- a humdrum present as we feel trapped and devalued...
- a busy present filled with distractions...

Regardless of the Ghost of Christmas Present we are struggling with...our God is with us...and our God offers us hope today, tomorrow, and forever...

We must open our eyes to what is around us...to the moment..."*Give us this day our daily bread*"...see beyond the distractions to God in our midst...not miss the "*whispers of angels*"...

Look at Mary...rather than having her situation fill her days with worry and dread, anger and fear, distracting her from God, she chooses to look up...and her eyes are opened to the blessing that is now growing inside her and she sings, "***For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. And His mercy is upon generation after generation Toward those who fear Him.***"

By stopping a moment, slowing down, taking the focus off the problem, removing the distraction, shifting our gaze from past and future to present...and looking up, opening one's eyes and heart to God...In that moment...When we slow down, shift our focus, look up and discover God's presence in our midst...in the midst of whatever craziness surrounds us on that particular day...It is there, our hearts skyward, prayers lifted, the Spirit of Christmas Present, the Holy Spirit, opens our eyes...and like Scrooge...

- We see love and hope and blessing we were blind to just a moment before when we were racing along through life...
- Our focus shifts from self to the needs of others...
- We find beauty that, just a moment ago, was covered by the dirt of life and the grime of our own self-centeredness...

Once again our Savior causes blind men and women to see...

...and seeing, we will be able to sing like Mary, *"My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior"*...we will be able to shout like the prophet Isaiah, *"...see the glory of the Lord, The majesty of our God. Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, Take courage, fear not"*...and we will find in the moment, like Scrooge at his nephew's party, that we are "[jolly] and light of heart"...and like Scrooge...we will not want to leave...