

Tom Coop
Matthew 1:18-25
December 2, 2018

The Ghosts of Christmas Past

Here's a trivia quiz for you. What do these actors have in common?

James Earl Jones, Jim Carrey, Patrick Stewart, and Bill Murray?

What if I add George C. Scott, Cicely Tyson, and Tom Hanks? Got it yet?

Here's one final hint, maybe the greatest actor of our generation:

Scrooge McDuck.

All of these outstanding thespians – and thespi-ducks – have had the honor of playing the role of Scrooge in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

It's probably the most famous Christmas story outside of the Bible, and it's been retold countless times because it's a timeless story about looking back, looking forward, and redemption.

In one fateful night, Scrooge is confronted by his past, his present, and his future, all for the purpose of helping him change his greedy ways and catch the Christmas spirit.

And his companions for the journey are three ghosts, each with their own personalities and purposes.

All that being said, let me ask you, how's your Christmas spirit doing so far this season?

If you're like me, the oncoming rush of the holidays has me feeling a lot more Scrooge-ish than usual. If I'm honest it might also have a lot to do with DeLynn being in Georgia all month. And a little fall I took last week!



So, if that is all true, maybe we need to see some ghosts ourselves to help us open up our hearts to what is truly coming this Christmas.

For our Advent sermon series this year, we're going to be spending some time with Scrooge as we peer into the past, ponder the present, and yearn for what is yet to come.

Kind of like our Stewardship campaign this year ... just no pledge cards to fill out this time.

As the story goes, the ghosts were able to help change Scrooge's focus from the pull of materialism and money to the true spirit of Christmas.

The ghosts did it for Scrooge in one night. We're taking a bit more time. I'm hoping we can do it over the course of four weeks.

If you're not familiar with the story, Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly old man whose love of money has left him leading a lonely life.

Dickens describes him this way: "He was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"

Yikes! Not a pleasant description in any language!

He mistreats his employee, Bob Cratchit, and dismisses an invitation to his nephew Fred's Christmas party with a scowling, "Bah humbug!"

On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley.

Scrooge learns that Marley has been condemned to walk the earth carrying heavy chains because of the greedy life he led.

Marley warns Scrooge to avoid the same fate, and says that three ghosts will be visiting him that night.

The first ghost to arrive is the *Ghost of Christmas Past*, a strange childlike phantom with a brightly glowing head.

The spirit escorts Scrooge on a journey into the past to previous Christmases from the curmudgeon's earlier years.

Some were wonderful memories, some weren't so great. There was the Christmas he spent in school alone. There was the Christmas his sister escorted him home.

There was the Christmas that he partied with old Fezziwig, a former jolly boss. And there was his engagement to Belle, a woman who leaves Scrooge because his love of money was greater than his love for her.

Scrooge is moved to tears by both the joy and the regret he experiences.

Truth be told, we all probably feel the same way when we think about our past Christmases. There are memories that fill us with happiness and memories that would just as soon forget.

Sometimes those memories are captured in our decorations themselves. We'll put up our Christmas tree, and each ornament carries a story with it.

Then, we have ornaments that were given to us when we were little, by relatives no longer with us.

My mother had many such ornaments. When I look at them today, I am reminded of her, of her faith, and her love. I miss her!

We have ornaments marking rites of passage, like "Baby's First Christmas" or handmade ornaments from our children when they were little.

DeLynn has some that Austin and Danielle and Jacquie made when they were very, very young ... that are just awful. I have one from my daughter Kristen ... that is just as awful.

But not when you connect them to the memories they elicit.

Just putting up the tree can be a trip down memory lane.

Like Scrooge, we too, can be moved to tears by both the joy and regret of the past.

That's the kind of power our memories hold over us. Our past can shape how we perceive the present and how we move forward into the future.

For Scrooge, his complex past shaped who he was and how he lived, as his love for money, developed at an early age, calcified his heart and his ability to love others.

The past had the same power for Joseph in our scripture passage.

He was committed to be married to Mary, only to find out when she returns from a trip that she is four months along in a pregnancy initiated by the Holy Spirit.

Imagine that first conversation! “Honey, I’ve got some good news and I’ve got some bad news.

“The bad news is, I’m pregnant and you’re not the father. But the good news is, neither is anybody else!”

If you were Joseph, how would you respond to this? He wasn’t quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knew it had nothing to do with him.

So, he faced a decision: what to do with Mary and her unborn child?

We are told Joseph was a righteous man, which means in Jewish tradition that he was a faithful follower of God’s law. And the law gave him two options.

He could follow what was laid out in Deuteronomy 22, which says, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must be put to death.”

So, one of Joseph’s options is to expose Mary’s apparent transgression and have her stoned to death. But by New Testament times, that particular punishment was rarely meted out.

Therefore, the only other option Joseph faced, according to the law, was divorce.

No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to end the relationship and sever the marriage contract.

He could honor the shaming dictated by the law and expose Mary's sin through a public divorce, humiliating her in front of her family and friends and leaving her future in question.

Or, he could divorce her quietly, with only a few witnesses, doing everything he could to keep both his and Mary's reputation intact.

But, one thing was certain, he simply couldn't stay with her.

This was just a mess for Joseph. He knew he would forever be defined by this transgression.

From that point forward, he'll be known as the guy whose soon-to-be wife got pregnant.

It only took one split-second act to change his life for the worse, and he didn't even have anything to do with it!

I know a lot of people whose lives have been changed by one bad decision. You probably do, too.

I have a friend who lost his job, his home, and a lot of his friends, all because of one bad choice he made.

That's all it takes, right?

We all have at least one thing in our past that we regret, a memory that haunts us, a decision we would give anything to undo.

Even if we've survived the consequences of it, we still know what happened, and we can never go back and change it.

I remember when I was married to my first wife and she was pregnant, I actually quit my job. I look back now at what I did and can't believe I could be that senseless.

My wife pregnant and I quit my job, lost our insurance. I mean, how could I do such a thing? I was a quitter.

And then just one month later, just days after Christmas, our daughter was still-born.

The power of the past.

Scrooge weeps with regret when he realizes how his greed ruined his relationships.

Joseph agonizes over what to do about his situation, whether to follow the laws of the past or trust what the angel is telling him about the future.

Do we have to be who we've been? Are we beholden to the ways of the past? Christian rock group *Relient K* has a song called, "Who I Am Hates Who I've Been."

But there's good news for us, just as there was for Scrooge and for Joseph.

The God we worship is not only the God of the future and the God of the present: God is the God of the past, which means God's forgiveness stretches backward, covering our past actions and altering how the shape our lives.

We do not have to be who we were.

We can choose to act like we were, to act as if the mistakes we have made still plague us, still define us.

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, I quit on jobs and on relationships all my life. I never had a job for more five years and never had a romantic relationship for more than two.

Until I came to STHPC – where I have been for 17 years today. And married the love of my life, to whom I have been married for 16 years, 4 months and 10 days.

So which person am I?

The quitter who made the mistakes, or the one who tried to learn from them and move forward?

I guess that depends on where I choose to put my focus. Yes, we have made mistakes, and those mistakes are a part of our story. But they don't have to be the whole story.

Scrooge let himself be defined by his past, but that's only one part of his story. We can reframe our past regrets as a small part of a larger story of forgiveness and growth.

God has something greater planned for us.

I liken our situation to driving a car. If you want to know what's behind you, you have a couple of small mirrors you can use.

The side mirrors and rearview mirror give you a small glimpse of where you've been.

But if we spend too much time looking in our rear-view mirrors, we miss what's coming ahead.

I think there's a reason that the rear-view mirrors are so tiny and the windshield is so spacious.

It's important to glimpse at the past, every once in a while, to know where we've been, but it's much more important to stay focused on what's in front of us.

We were meant to spend most of our time looking ahead of us, not behind.

For Scrooge, *the Ghost of Christmas Past* reminded him of the pain his actions caused as a way of setting the stage for him to look forward.

For Joseph, the angel shows him that this one action of Mary's pregnancy, so condemned by society, doesn't have to keep him from doing the right thing.

For us, the birth of the Christ child brings with it 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.

So, what will Christmas bring us this year? More painful memories, more staring at the rear-view mirror?

Or, will we look ahead through the windshield at the hope the Christ child brings?

Scrooge still has two more ghosts to go before his transformation is complete. But ours can start right now. Right now.

You are not defined by who you used to be. You don't have to be a prisoner to the past. With God's help, you and I can start writing our new stories.

And with God as the author ... what stories they can be!

Amen.