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Romans 8:12-17
December 16, 2018

The Ghosts of Christmas Yet to Come

As we begin, will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, come upon us with your gift of joy as we consider the future yet-to-come.

May your joy fill us as we wait for the events of Bethlehem and approach that day when you came to us in human form that we might know that you are God.

And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God of hope, God of love, God of peace and God of joy.

Amen.

So, we are nearing the end of the Holy Season of Advent. A season of waiting and preparing for Christmas Day – for the birth of Jesus, for the day of arrival of God-with-us in human form.

And today, we conclude our “Ghosts of Christmas” sermon series, in which we’ve looked at the ghosts that visited Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve as recorded in Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.”

Through Dicken’s story, we have had a window into the world of this miser, Ebenezer Scrooge.

A person known more for being grumpy, bitter and angry, than known for his love of the holiday season.

And on a cold Christmas Eve night, Scrooge encounters these three spirits who reveal his past, his present and his future, in the hope of transforming his heart.

The Ghost of Christmas Past reminded him of all the opportunities Scrooge had missed because of his greed.

The Ghost of Christmas Present showed him the joy he was missing out on this year.

And while both ghosts caused their share of consternation for Scrooge, it was *The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* that really scared Scrooge.

Indeed, he says, "I fear you more than any specter I have seen."

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is most often pictured as a grim reaper (*certainly not an image that most of us want to spend any real time contemplating, especially at Christmas*) who is there to show Scrooge his own death and people's reactions to it.

As Scrooge stands in the presence of the *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come*, he realizes that he is about to have his life flash in front of him. But, was his a life worth seeing again?

Scrooge wasn't so sure he wanted to know the rest of his story. The *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* proceeds to take him on a tour of his ultimate demise.

Interestingly, this spirit is silent. The spirit is present, standing beside Scrooge and pointing. But, that's all, just pointing.

The silence frightens Scrooge, probably more than anything else. Now, I get that, don't you? The "silent treatment" is like the worst possible reaction I can get.

Inside your own head, you just go crazy thinking of the worst-case scenarios. The lack of information, the lack of feedback is, frankly, deadly.

And that's what Scrooge sees. He will "reap what he sows" and his story will not end well.

Scrooge is filled with fear because he doesn't know what to expect from this ghost, and at the same time he also is beginning to know just what to expect, and that scares him even more.

Scrooge is really being forced to ask what the legacy is he leaving for those around him. Is the world going to be better off because he was in it or not?

He discovers that few people were upset to see his demise and that many were glad to see him go.

He sees his servants and others stealing from his home, he sees people joking about having to be paid in order to go to his funeral, and he sees people wondering not about him, but instead about how much money he left and do they get any of it!

Scrooge is fearful. But it's not just the ghosts that frighten him, it could be argued that Scrooge has led most of his life in fear, fear of spending too much and more importantly, fear of not having enough.

It is fear that drives his relationships with others, and it is fear that drives his relationship with money.

I'll bet, in that, Scrooge is not alone. Many of us are driven by fear, and many of the same fears that Scrooge has, especially around our finances.

The fear that we don't have enough or won't have enough, especially when we are constantly being marketed to and told that if only we had this, then we would be truly happy.

But what is the first thing we hear about the coming of Christ? Any ideas???

Fear not. It's what is told to Zacharias and Mary and Joseph.

And it's what is told to the shepherds who are out in the fields abiding. What they are abiding, I have never been able to figure out.

Scrooge asks the Spirit – is this the vision of what will be or what may be? And that is it. That is the whole point.

Scrooge asks the key question of the whole story ... Can I change the story of my life? Can I change my future? Am I permanently stuck in who I am today?

Talk about an ultimate existential question. This is it.

You probably know people in your life who are stuck. You also probably know people who are doing the hard work to change. Maybe you are one of them.

To change the habit and quit smoking is no small feat.

To change the course of a disease and overcome an addiction – it takes everything within your soul working in the same direction.

To change the behavior of road rage and become a courteous and defensive driver – it's a 180 degree turn (no pun intended).

And look at what Scrooge has to overcome – hoarding all of this wealth, building wealth based on the poverty of others, isolating himself as a hermit, and moving from *Bah Humbug* to *Merry Christmas*.

Almost insurmountable, don't you think?

Yes, this is the big question. Can he be redeemed? Can I be redeemed?

Scrooge then pleads with the Spirit – “I am not the man I once was. I will not be the man I must have been.

“I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future.

“The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”

And there it is.

The possibility of redemption, of change, of unlocking the chains that have held you and me back and living into the new day.

And then, after the visit of The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is concluded, early in the morning, Scrooge wakes up from the strangest dream he's ever had.

He opens the window and discovers that it is Christmas morning, and he has been given a chance to change his ways.

Now notice ... he did nothing to earn it; rather it was a gift.

He shouts to himself, "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man.

"A Merry Christmas to everybody! A Happy New Year to all the world."

Here, at the end of the story, Scrooge knows what he must do. His journey will not be complete until he humbly and selflessly reconciles with his family AND provides for his employee, Bob Cratchit's, family.

First, he sends the biggest turkey in town to the Cratchits.

Then, he approaches Fred's door, a home he walked past dozens of times without the courage to knock.

He wanders into the dining room and says, "I have come to dinner. Will you let me in, Fred?"

Fred welcomes him to dinner exuberantly, and a wonderful party ensues. When the invitation is accepted, Scrooge's redemptive journey is complete.

Now here's something I've never thought about before.

Isn't it interesting that when we think about Scrooge or call someone a Scrooge, we are always referring to the miser, lonely, crotchety, mean old man. We are never referring to the transformed Scrooge.

The story ends with a beautiful transformation of soul and yet we hang onto the broken mess of a man he was before.

It's like the proverbial train wreck – we just can't help but keep looking, staring. Maybe we think – “that poor sap, what a horrible life, thank God that's not me.”

Or maybe we think – “Oh yeah, that's me all right. I'm like him, but I'm just better at covering it up.

“If people really knew me though, they would know that I am also a broken mess.”

So, here's the first thing I want you to remember: Scrooge woke up on Christmas morning a changed man.

You see, Christmas is an invitation. Christmas is an invitation into relationship with God.

Christmas is an invitation to a new beginning, a redemption of our past, and a gift for our future.

Christmas is a gift from God, calling us, pointing us to respond in the world with love.

Scrooge knocked at the door and asked to be welcomed by his family, and with joy, he was.

If Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we! This transformed, redeemed, new version of himself now sees Christmas as an invitation and now desires nothing more than to keep Christmas well.

And I guess that's our second invitation: to keep Christmas well.

We keep Christmas well when we light our Advent Candles and live out the messages they bring.

We keep Christmas well when we learn how to love our enemy and break bread with the outcast and forgotten.

We keep Christmas well when we accept this crazy and radical invitation for a world upside down...

... Where love dispels evil, where humble service affirms our humanity, where compassion opens our hearts and we share all that we have and all that we are for a hurting and broken world.

Yes, Christmas is just such invitations. May we be open to where God is leading us.

And, may God bless us everyone.

Amen!