

Sermon: December 5, 2021

“Christmas Past”

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Scripture: Matthew 4:18-23, 1 Cor. 1

I wanted to start today with a Christmas Quiz: First, in how many gospels do we hear the story of Christ’s birth? It’s two!

And who knows which two gospels tell the birth story of Jesus? Is it A) John and Luke, B) Matthew and Mark, C) Matthew and Luke? Right, Matthew and Luke.

Which gospel mentions wise men from the east? Is it A) Matthew, B) Luke, C) Matthew and Luke? or D) none of the above? Matthew! Yes.

What about the shepherds? Luke, Matthew, or both? Just Luke, that’s right.

As I sat down to start writing this sermon, I began thinking about all the ways in which our memories trip us up. We have four gospels, but only two birth narratives. We often conflate the two, thinking that both mention the same things. Of course, they’re quite different with the exception of Jesus’s parents and the fact that he was, indeed, born in a manger. We’ve read these stories over and over throughout our entire lives, but many still get these stories mixed up—it goes to show how easy it is for our memories to trick us. Think back over your life and memories. It’s hard to remember every detail of every event even though we lived through it because memory is an imperfect function of humankind. This is why eyewitness testimony is so unreliable.

When I was working on my undergraduate degree in psychology, we did an experiment where we brought in a group of students, showed them a clip

from an old Hitchcock thriller (I don't even remember which one) and then asked them to do a puzzle. After they did the puzzle, we gave them a list of multiple-choice questions about the clip we showed them. Out of 15-20 people in the room, no one got all of it right and they had *just* watched it. Memory is a funny thing. I'm sure even now as I think back to that project with my small group of three, I'm not remembering it all accurately. Were there 15 or 20 other students in the group? What were my partners' names? I don't really remember and we worked closely for most of the semester.

As you know this is the second week of our Advent worship series called, "The Redemption of Scrooge" where we discuss some of the intersections of that famed story, *A Christmas Carol*, and the Bible. Now, if you haven't seen one of the films or read the book, *A Christmas Carol* is about a man named Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserable, old miser—selfish, greedy, cruel. Last time, we talked about how Scrooge's greed and love of money echoes the love of money that so many in our world seem to exhibit. We also talked about how different our economy, one that ascribes more or less worth to a person based on what they do or don't do, is to the economy of God, which holds all people as being of equal worth and inherent value. God doesn't prize me over you or you over the homeless man on the street. God, who created and loves us all, made us in the very same divine image just so we would know that, while we are all individuals, we are the same in the eyes of God. Good. Beloved. Worthy. Fearfully and wonderfully made.

This week, we turn to the ghosts who visit Scrooge after the death of his fellow money-grubbing friend, Jacob Marley. First, Marley comes to Scrooge from purgatory, heavily weighted down with chains, doomed to roam the earth tormented by his inability to make up for his lack of social responsibility and indifference to the suffering of others. Marley tells Scrooge that he will be visited that night by three ghosts who will offer him a chance to change his fate—to not end up like Marley has.

Scrooge goes to bed, but wakes up when, as the clock strikes one, the first ghost appears: the Ghost of Christmas Past. This ghost is going to show Scrooge his past. Scrooge is unmoved by visions of his unhappy childhood, but does perk up when he sees his little sister, Fan, again. Then the ghost shows him a vision of Christmas Eve with Fezziwig, Scrooge's mentor with whom he apprenticed. Fezziwig was a good and generous boss. The kind of person we all want to learn from and follow. Scrooge thinks briefly in this time of his own employee, and how terribly he treats him, but doesn't have too much time to think about that because he is presented with an image of the pain of parting from his former fiancé, Belle. At this, Scrooge gets indignant and demands to be taken home. Scrooge has been forced to reconcile not just with good memories, but with painful ones. While he doesn't like this, the ghost knows that he must acknowledge them and remember them in order to begin on his path to redemption. The ghost realizes, you see, that these painful memories and the distortions Scrooge has carried of them, have led Scrooge to become the man he is and that if he cannot face them, he cannot change.

In a very real way, this is what Jesus does with those who will choose to follow him. In our gospel story this week, we find Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee as he comes across some fisherman. Simon (Peter) and Andrew, two brothers, he calls to follow him, telling them that he will make them “fishers of men.” The gospel tells us that they left *immediately* and followed him. Then they came across another pair of brothers, James and John, and they left the boat *and* their father in the boat, in order to follow Jesus. Jesus then began teaching and preaching throughout Galilee with the disciples following him—men who had no education and would have no need for reading or writing in their line of work (Acts even tells us that Peter and John were illiterate), but they were called to follow Jesus and into God’s service nonetheless. It didn’t matter that they weren’t teachers by trade or that they were merely fisherman doing back-breaking work in all manner of weather conditions, what mattered was that they made the choice to put that past behind them, literally drop their nets, and follow Jesus. Whatever was in their past, Jesus came to redeem that and to show them a new way.

Redemption, of course, is a bit of a theme for us as Christians, because Jesus came, in part, to redeem all aspects of our pasts, too.

My first request of you this week is to be mindful that this time of year can be very painful for some folks. It might even be painful for you. It’s the whole reason why we have a Longest Night Service on December 21 (hint, hint), because this time of year can bring up memories that cause a lot of emotional and spiritual anguish. Past mistakes and losses are often brought to the forefront of our minds even in the midst of the cheer of the holiday season. Not being more cheery than causes us to feel shame and disappointment, and perhaps bitterness, like Scrooge.

But what we know is that no matter how painful our pasts, we can move through the present and into the future reassured that Jesus has redeemed all aspects of our lives, including our past missteps and losses. Jesus knows all of our faults and invites us to follow him anyway. Accepting the invitation to follow Jesus Christ doesn't mean that Christ will make us perfect—just look at Simon Peter and you'll be assured of how imperfect the disciples were as human beings—but it doesn't matter to Jesus how imperfect we are, how full of faults we might be, how broken we feel, or how horribly we've acted. What matters to Jesus is that we accept the invitation to follow him and that in that acceptance, we find and are transformed by the grace found in the almighty, merciful God who is love. Jesus invites us to share in the work that God is doing in the world and in sharing in that work, we continue to go through a process of transformation... it's not a once and done thing. We don't say a special prayer, become Christians, and then poof! we're suddenly holy! No, the work of following Jesus means accepting our pasts and letting God transform us from the inside out. Letting God continuously polish us, helping us to be the body of Christ in a Creation that is still in process, just as we are.

The Ghost of Christmas Past begins this process with Scrooge. By forcing him to face his past and to accept it, Scrooge begins a transformation that will radically change him from the inside out. This miserable, heartless, avaricious man will, by the end of this night, become something entirely new! A man who will be unrecognizable to those he will encounter the next day. But before that can happen, he must go through the process—just like

we do as we seek day after day after day to accept the things we cannot change and live into the people Jesus calls us to be.

Friends, as you move throughout this advent season and look toward the joy of the birth of the Christ child, remember who that child grows up to be and how he grows up to live. He doesn't go from birth to death and resurrection, there's an entire life and ministry in there. There are teachings that are meant to transform us: our hearts, our actions, our entire being: but only, only if we accept our pasts, listen to Jesus's call, and follow. As we continue through the Advent season, let us remember that we are still in the process of following where Jesus leads. Let us, like the disciples, drop our nets. Let's go.

Amen.