

Sermon: December 19, 2021

“The Greatest Gift”

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Scriptures: Romans 8:4-8, Matthew 11:29-30

This week, we continue our sermon series on “The Redemption of Scrooge” in which we discuss Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol*, and how themes from this fantastic story intersect with our beloved scriptures. In previous weeks, we talked about Scrooge’s greed and love of money and how different the economy of God is from our own, we talked about how Jesus came to redeem all aspects of our past. Last week, due to a rebellious appendix, we missed our discussion of The Ghost of Christmas present, so I thought for today’s message, we will get a visit from Scrooge’s Present and Future guides.

If you know the story of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is visited by his old partner, Jacob Marley, who tells him that if he doesn’t change his selfish, cruel ways, he will end up like him, doomed to suffer in perpetuity, walking the earth in chains and unable to make up for the sins of his past. Over the course of that night, Scrooge is visited by three ghosts: the ghost of Christmas Past, who we’ve discussed, and the Ghosts of Christmas Present and Future, each meant to show him where he’s been, is, and will be.

The Ghost of Christmas Present appears as a jolly giant, a friendly and cheerful spirit who welcomes Scrooge on the next journey. Dickens imagined this character as being similar in appearance and manner as

England's own Father Christmas. In our own twenty-first American context, we can imagine he might be a somewhat more rustic version of our own Santa Claus. Who wouldn't want to go with such a merry old soul? He is, in every way, a personification of the Christmas Spirit.

During the Advent and Christmas season, we are filled with this Christmas Spirit as we go about all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. As Christians, we might also think of it as the spirit of Christ, the greatest gift, one of overflowing abundance which we and we tend to share by giving gifts. Sometimes to loved ones and to co-workers at the office Christmas parties. If we're really in the Spirit, we might also give through acts of goodwill, doing what we can to help those who are suffering or in need or who may not be as fortunate as we all surely are.

But sometimes our commitment to abundance and our Christmas Spirit misses the mark. When I was a teenager, which is a time when most people are typically egocentric, we went to celebrate Christmas with family. I remember opening one particular present that turned out to be a sweater. Now, I can't even remember what the sweater looked like, it probably had something really busy on it, something perhaps a bit louder than I typically prefer, but I do remember that I did not like it—and was typical of me at the time, my emotion was written all over my face. I wish I'd had to wear a mask back then! My mom made some comment about it and tried to make me feel better, but I was already an anxious kid and putting me in clothing that made me more self-conscious wasn't going to make that better.

I look back now and, of course, I shake my head and laugh. I think about how silly it was to get upset over a stupid sweater, but more importantly, I

think about how ungrateful I was for this *gift*, which was given to me out of the kindness and generosity of someone's heart. I wasn't a child who wanted for much and here I was sulking around because the *gift* given to me wasn't my taste. I didn't think about all the children who wouldn't receive gifts that year, who would wake up in clothes a size too small, or go to bed without bellies full of food.

Ebenezer Scrooge had never thought much about this either. He looks in on the less fortunate as the ghost of Christmas Present whisks him through the English city streets, showing him the joys and sorrows experienced by the average person. Eventually, he takes him to peer into the window of the Crachit family. Bob Crachit, as we discussed weeks ago, is Scrooge's employee, a man he has treated abhorrently with unfair wages and long, painful hours even on holidays. Bob is a happy soul, a man married to a lovely woman with children, the youngest of whom lives with a disability and limps around using crutches. This boy, Tiny Tim, however, strikes Scrooge as odd because, although he is clearly one of the least of these, he is nonetheless filled with the holiday spirit. As Scrooge gazes upon this loving family, who, though they have little, remain joyous and grateful, the Spirit informs Scrooge that Tiny Tim will die unless things drastically change for the Crachit family.

As they watch the Crachits, Scrooge notices that the holly, jolly ghost of Christmas present is able to stoop beneath the low roof of the Crachit's home to see clearly what is happening inside. It seems impossible that such an enormous being would be able to get down to that level with such ease. Scrooge's notice of this aspect of the ghost's massive presence reminded a minister by the name of Geoffrey Rowell of the way that God

stoops down to be among us incarnate in the infant Jesus. It seems impossible that a God so all-encompassing, a being so powerful and vast, could or would want to bring himself down so lowly. This God comes to us as a lowly infant in a manger just so that he can be among us, love us, and teach us, to save us from the very life and eternity Scrooge is facing in this story. This is the God on whom we spend all of Advent eagerly awaiting.

As they stoop, Scrooge's heart begins to soften. The Cratchits are a family who have little but are joyful and thankful anyway. Why? Because the Cratchits, unlike my teen-aged self in that moment of gift receiving selfishness, unlike Ebenezer Scrooge as he denies the poor a pittance, unlike those in our society who have much but share so little, the Cratchits have the unique ability to realize what is really important.

The ghost of Christmas Present gives Scrooge something we all need: He gives Scrooge the gift of perspective.

If we let it, Christmas can give us the gift of perspective, too? Think about the first people God chose to receive the good news of Christ's birth. They were the shepherds. What do we know about shepherds in this time? We know that shepherds were members of a humble and poor community. These people were probably not the most eloquent spokespeople for a worldwide movement, right?

Yet, that's exactly who he reaches out to: lowly shepherds. The people no one wanted to be around. The people so outside, that they literally lived with their sheep. The angel of the Lord reaches out to these outcasts, these social pariahs, and this is not unique.

Over and over in scripture, God appears to those we don't expect God to appear to. People we don't think God would choose.

Over and over in Scripture, we witness the lengths God's willing to go to for God's children—no matter who they are. God decided to become incarnate in this world. God becomes embodied, God lives among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' birth is a shock to the ways of the world—it is the miracle of all miracles. It doesn't make sense that God would become human, and this incredible story is the event that turned the world upside-down then and, if we let it, can transform our lives, too.

Jesus was born so that we might find a better way. Jesus was born so that we might learn to model the love of God. Jesus was born to show us that the Kingdom of God is big enough for **all** of God's people.

Rich and poor.

Young and old.

Black, Brown, and White.

Gay and Straight.

Trans and cis.

Well and sick.

Iraqi, Japanese, Haitian, American.

Through Jesus, God has reconciled everything, from the depths of the earth to the farthest star in the sky, so that we can live with gratitude and face each day with joy and hope.

Scrooge meets one more ghost on his journey toward redemption. This ghost, the ghost of Christmas future, will appear as the grim reaper and remind Scrooge of his own finitude – this is the ghost that will force Scrooge to come face to face with the frightening realities of the unknown future of his own soul.

This final spirit represents, in many ways, our own fear of the unknown, our fear of what the future holds. This week's scriptures remind us that we can let go of the fear, because Jesus invites us to find rest in him. He tells us to take his yoke upon us, to learn from him, to be gentle and humble in heart—a lesson we can all take from Bob Cratchit, as well—and in doing this, we can find respite for our souls. Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light... We need not fear anything if we remember the promises of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we see that God has ears to hear our wants, eyes to see our needs, hands outstretched to welcome us into his rest, and lips to speak wisdom, truth, and love into all of us. Most importantly, in Jesus, we witness a God who not only has those attributes, but who desires to use them for the good of all God has created because God loves creation SO very much.

We are in the Christmas season, a time when we celebrate with loved ones. Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that we are to set our minds not just on things of this world that we desire, but most importantly on the live-giving desires of the Spirit who gives us peace and rest for our souls. In our loving Creator God, we can rejoice in knowing that God loves us so much that God became a person, Jesus of Nazareth, so that we might know a better way, that we might know peace, hope, joy, and love.

When you go home today, I want you to think about the gifts you give this season. Not just the ones that fill the stockings and sit beneath the tree, although those are fun and have their place. Think also about the gifts that offer others a place at the table and room in our lives, those that honor the God-like-ness in all people, gifts that spread the spirit of this wreath we light each Advent season. Gifts that show we are being the church in the world, living out the Way of Jesus each day. This is the redemption Scrooge seeks and finds because he allows himself to feel what each ghostly messenger shows him. This is the gift that gives Scrooge a second chance and it can give us one, too.

So, over the next few days, when things are stressful and you're rushing around, take a moment to remember what Christmas really means. Let the story of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Way of Jesus transform your Christmas spirit and share that gift with someone else. Amen.