

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Bah Humbug! Making Change

Preached by Rev. Candace Frawley

Sunday, November 27, 2016

A reading from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 6 and 7.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

This ends the reading from Isaiah. Thanks be to God.

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Today is the first Sunday in the Holy Season of Advent and it is wonderful to share this special day with each of you. As we move from our season of dreaming we continue to hold all the dreams we have for ourselves and for our church and we carry them together on a new Advent journey. Each Sunday through Christmas morning we will step into the famous Christmas story, Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*.

A Christmas Carol is a timeless story, not only because we hear about Ebenezer Scrooge's past, present, and future, but because generations have told and retold this story in their own way. Just as a new artist might interpret a 200-year-old carol in a new key, *A Christmas Carol* has seen many adaptations through the years. Perhaps you have seen one version or another at some point in your life. It is a story that many of us can relate to. Everyone knows what it means to be called a *Scrooge*, and poor little Tiny Tim still has the ability to pull on our heartstrings.

A Christmas Carol is a tale of redemption that will be with us for a long time to come. For those of you who may not be familiar with this classic tale, you will become familiar with it throughout this season and together we will look at the many ways in which this timeless story still speaks to us today. It is a beautiful story that has been a part of popular culture for over 100 years now and for the next four weeks this story will become a part of our story as we explore together the ways in which the past, present, and future all come together in one transformative night.

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, come upon us with your gift of presence as we travel from darkness to light. May your hospitable love encompass us on this journey to Bethlehem to find new life, the Light of the World. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O Holy One.

So what comes to mind when *you* think of Christmas? Maybe it's a tree decorated with ornaments, or oversize socks hanging from the mantle? Maybe you picture a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger? I think one of the first things that comes to mind for many people when thinking about Christmas is the carols. Right around the end of November, many radio stations change their formats to offer 24 hours of nonstop sleigh bell accompanied music.

Interestingly, very few of these songs are new. Sure, you will find new arrangements and new artists, but many of the most popular songs of the season, such as "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Joy to the World," and "Silent Night, Holy Night" are all about 200 years old or older. There's just something about Christmas carols that transcends generational divides and connects us all. Maybe the carols' longevity is closely linked with all the other elements that are so ever present and familiar during the holiday season—many of the same elements that are a part of our family traditions year after year.

There are many variations for the definition of a carol, but I particularly like the one that defines carol has "an old round dance with singing."

Just like a circle has no beginning and no end the carols of our faith seem timeless. Now Charles Dickens's classic story *A Christmas Carol* is not a song, though like a traditional carol, it is divided into stave's, or verses, with each section offering an independent thought.

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Perhaps Dickens wanted his story to be shared over and over again year after year like a familiar carol, to bring people together in joy. A tradition well worth preserving.

And yet, *A Christmas Carol*, is not your *traditional* Christmas story. Right? The story begins with the words: "Marley was dead." A rather unconventional way to welcome the holiday season don't you think? I mean what goes better with Christmas than creepy ghosts right? But, by the end of Ebenezer Scrooge's journey, we find that Scrooge has found New life. And so, as odd as it may seem to start a Christmas story with death, by the end, it all makes perfect sense.

An anonymous narrator offers us a window into the world of the miser, Ebenezer Scrooge- a name that has become synonymous with being grumpy, bitter, angry, or less than enthused about the holiday season. Through the tale of Scrooge, an old man whom Dickens describes as: "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner," we are taken on an unlikely adventure. On a cold Christmas Eve night, Scrooge encounters three spirits who reveal his past, his present and his future in the hope of transforming his heart.

Now I have done some research and ghosts really are not a part of the Advent story; however, this concept of time, past, present and the not yet future to come certainly is.

The four Sundays before Christmas Day, we gather and we wait for the Christ child's birth. During this time we read stories from the Hebrew scripture, where we believe God laid out the plan to send a messiah to save God's people. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "A Child is born to us, named Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace."

During Advent, we sing songs such as, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus." These songs anticipate the hope that God's people felt as they waited for this Savior. Each week we light candles of hope, peace, love and joy, like an emblazoned clock counting down to God's intervention. Some of us may even have an Advent Calendar in our homes, where each day a new door is opened and something good is revealed as we wait for the real goodness of Christmas day.

Yes, Advent is all about a time of waiting. And this notion of watching and waiting is counter cultural to our societal norms. While the world around us moves at lightning speed, telling us that we must rush from this store to the next, over shopping and over spending or that we must attend party after party and make unrealistic commitments on our time, the season of Advent reminds us that what we really need to do is slow down. Slow down and wait.

The beauty of Advent is in the waiting, for it is in this waiting that we make the time and space in our lives to pause, to be present and to find our quiet center.

Something happens in that quiet place, where we're simply alone and listening to nothing but our hearts. Here we feel that solitude of the soul, where we are grounded more deeply. Here we make the time to reflect on where we have been, where we are and where we hope to be. And when we find ourselves here in this space, here where we are connected more deeply to God, we're able to connect more deeply with each other.

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This, my friends, is exactly what the season is all about. Finding that open space in our hearts where Christ can be born again into the world through each of us. It is a season of transformation.

And transformation is what we find in our beautiful story, *A Christmas Carol*. Of course, the story is also about Scrooge's love of money and his altruistic failures, but it is also a story about how Scrooge struggles to let go of his past.

Early in the story after establishing that Marley has been dead for some time, Dickens writes, "Scrooge never painted out old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: "Scrooge and Marley." Scrooge seems to cling to the past because his friend Marley represented the only things in which Scrooge trusted: hard work, frugality, unwavering discipline, and action that can be weighed, measured, and counted. Scrooge is stuck in the past, and he can't move forward. Next week we will look more closely at Dickens's ghost of Christmas past and hear how Jesus came to save us from counting our past as our only reality.

For now we find ourselves here on this First Sunday of Advent waiting together. Gathered in the present to ponder the past for our future hope. Today we lit our first Advent Candle, the candle of peace. I think you might agree with me that perhaps more now than ever, peace is something we desperately need. In a world that is so deeply divided, peace is exactly what we need.

Can we dare to hope for this together?

That familiar and dismissive response: "Bah! Humbug!" perfectly expresses the worldview of Ebenezer Scrooge, that tragic main character of our story. Scrooge is a sad man, and Christmas is not a happy time for him; but to be fair, no time during the year seems to bring Scrooge much joy. Perhaps another appropriate title for *A Christmas Carol* could be "In the Bleak Midwinter." This Christmas carol, based on Christina Rossetti's late 19th century poem, begins with a cold and barren landscape and ends with a heart offered to the Christ child. Like the Carol, Dickens's opening verse describes Scrooge with a desolate, apathetic slant, it reads: "No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No winds that blew was bitterer than he." This is how Scrooge is known to us.

Even though by the end of the story Ebenezer Scrooge is a changed person, the character remains a strong caricature of everything our Christmas celebration shouldn't be. Even though he is transformed, it seems that we can't accept that he has been redeemed. But maybe there's still hope.

Maybe over the course of this season, even Ebenezer Scrooge's name could come to mean something different to you. After all, if Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we. As you heard earlier, just prior to leaving the counting house, Scrooge's nephew, Fred, pays him a visit. His nephew is full of joy and merriment during the Christmas season, and he cannot understand why Scrooge is so, well like Scrooge. He declares,

"Christmas is a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not other another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it is never put a scrap

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of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it.”

This is a season of transformation. A season of making change. How will you make change in your life this season? When you arrived, you should have received a small bell which is affixed to a safety pin. I want to invite each of you to pin your bell to something you use every day, a key chain, a zipper, even your clothing. Keep these bells with you and let their little ring be a gentle reminder that this is a season for making change. The sky is the limit to God’s possibilities. May your hearts be opened freely to those you encounter along the way. “The miracle has just begun in YOU for the sake of the world... God Bless us Every One!”