

# **San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ**

**Sermon: Ghost of Christmas Past**

**Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook**

**Sunday, December 4, 2016**

## **A reading from the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 9, verses 2 and 6.**

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. . . . For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders.”

## **A reading from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2, verses 8 to 14.**

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, “Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

**This ends our reading from the holy scriptures. Thanks be to God.**

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This is a Holy Season – a 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. This year we are looking at the Christmas story through the lens of Charles Dicken’s “A Christmas Carol.” That famous and favorite tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man whose name is synonymous with greed and isolation, with bitterness and more than his share of “Bah Humbug.”

Through Dicken’s story, an anonymous narrator offers us a window into the world of this miser, Ebenezer Scrooge. A person known more for being grumpy, bitter and angry than known for his enthusiasm for the holiday season. Dickens describes Scrooge as: “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner.” And then, 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.

A bell rings and a ghost appears as a candle talking with him and pulling him on a journey into his past.

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, come upon us with your gift of hope as we travel from darkness to light. May your love 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 you are God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O God of peace and God of hope. Amen.

So you probably think you know the Christmas story pretty well by now – all of those years of going to church, attending Christmas Eve services – this is a story you could probably repeat from memory. So let’s test that theory. I’ll even give you a hint – only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have stories about the birth of Jesus. So you automatically have a 50/50 chance of getting the right answer.

1. Which Gospel tells Mary she is pregnant?
  - a. Matthew
  - b. Luke
  - c. BOTH Matthew and Luke
  - d. NEITHER Matthew or Luke

Only the Gospel of Luke has a story about the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is pregnant.

2. How did Joseph find out about the pregnancy?
  - a. Matthew
  - b. Luke
  - c. BOTH Matthew and Luke
  - d. NEITHER Matthew or Luke

Only the Gospel of MATTHEW tells us that Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. In a dream, an unnamed angel appeared to tell Joseph that he was to get married to Mary and name the child Jesus.

3. Which Gospel mentions Magi from the east?

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- a. Matthew
- b. Luke
- c. BOTH Matthew and Luke
- d. NEITHER Matthew or Luke

Only MATTHEW talks about the Magi from the east.

4. And when to the magi arrive in Bethlehem?
  - a. Christmas Eve (December 24)
  - b. Christmas Morning (December 25)
  - c. Epiphany (January 6)

Most scholars say that the Magi from the East arrived three years after the birth of Jesus on January 6 – what we call Epiphany or Three Kings Day. Remember, the Magi didn't even see the Star of Bethlehem until after Jesus had been born – so then they had to set out on their journey to Bethlehem.

So the truth is that we know a story from our past and we mix up some of the details, we move around parts of the story, we blend the chronology and actions to become our memory of the event or moment.

But I have to admit that I am not a purist when it comes to the Christmas story and the nativity scene. My nativity at home and here in our office has an angel announcing a pregnancy and it has the baby in the manger and it has the three Magi at the stable. All together. At one time, in one place, as if that's the way it happened.

So let's go the past. Let's re-remember a moment. Like Scrooge, you hear the bell and see a light and travel back in your mind to a moment or event from your past.

It certainly happens to me. All of a sudden, in the middle of the day, for no apparent reason at all, I'll remember being in seventh grade Social Studies with Mr. Hobbs. As a surprise to no one here, I was a good student, not exactly in the clique or "in-group" of popular kids, but I was smart and I liked going to school. Within a couple of weeks of the semester, I started getting sick to my stomach either just before class or within the first five or ten minutes of class. So sick that on occasion I had to go to the nurse's office. So sick that once a week or every other week my Mom would have to come pick me up from school. I would get home and within an hour or two, I would be fine.

I remember going to the doctor and, after some tests, he told my Mom that I had an ulcer. At 12 years old. I had an ulcer. Something was wrong – and it wasn't just about my stomach any more.

You see, my seventh grade Social Studies class was what you would call unruly. And Mr. Hobbs responded by throwing things at students – erasers, books, pencils. Mr. Hobbs responded by yelling and swearing in class. This was more than I could bear; or, more precisely, this was more than I could stomach. To see a person in authority become violent, threatening and unpredictable. To see my classmates take on a mob mentality. This was not good.

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Mom went to the Principal at school. She soon learned that other parents had done the same. By Thanksgiving, I was no longer in Mr. Hobbs' Social Studies class and Mr. Hobbs was no longer teaching at that school. I was now doing an Independent Study in the Library for an hour a day along with two other classmates whose parents also fought for the health and education of their children. By Christmas, my ulcer had healed and I was thriving again.

Years later when my mother was working on her doctorate in child development, we started talking about this incident from seventh grade. She told me it was one of those events that, although she wished it had never happened, she had finally learned how to read my emotions and know when I was holding too much inside. She told me she hurt that I had become sick and had to endure the pain of an ulcer – but she was also, much to my surprise, she said she was proud of me for finding a way to remove myself from the situation and for finding a way to thriving in a different environment – even if it was a difficult way.

Up until that point, I had always thought of this incident as “Annette’s weakness.” Yes, of course I thought Mr. Hobbs was wrong and inappropriate and I had some anger toward him; and yes, of course, I thought my classmates were rude and offensive. But mostly I thought to myself, “Wow, Annette, what a loser. You couldn’t even stand up for yourself; instead you got sick and slinked away to the library.” My view of this moment was that I had been broken.

And so out of the blue on those days when this story from my past comes flooding back to my mind, I remember my fear and my pain, I remember my illness and all of the school meetings to solve the problem; but I no longer look at this as a story of my weakness. I look at this story and remember that my mother believed in me. My mother was my advocate when I could not advocate for myself. My mother knew that, once removed from the unpredictable and frightening circumstances, she knew that I would hold onto my love of being a student, of learning and that I would thrive if given the chance to discover my own studies.

I also now look back and wonder how hard life must have been for Mr. Hobbs. His bad behavior in the classroom came from somewhere; it had an underlying cause. My parents were both teachers and I know that most people go into teaching – especially in K-12 – they go into teaching because they love the subject matter and they love the kids. They love watching all of the light bulbs go off in their heads and one idea lights another and one set of concepts ignites new thinking and new imagination. Something went wrong for Mr. Hobbs along the way. And looking back I have some compassion for him.

Even Ebenezer Scrooge looked at his past. He revisited that his Father neglected him; that his kind and loving sister Fan brought him back home from boarding school only to die giving birth to her son. He revisited that Mr. Fezziwig was a kind boss to him and that he met his first love, Belle, during a Fezziwig Christmas party. But then he broke up with Belle as he started his obsession with money-lending and finances. As his greed grew, his relationships withered. As his bitterness grew, there was no room for joy or hope in his life.

Our memories are sometimes hard to trust because they are often incomplete, blindly subjective, and even misleading. Our minds easily conflate facts while our hearts remember the

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emotions. These inconsistencies can be confusing, and can cause us, like Scrooge, to become stuck in the past.

Why do you think reflecting on the past can cause us to move toward compassion rather than holding onto the anger and brokenness?

It is not an accident that the Ghost of Christmas Past came to Scrooge as a candle – to shed light on the past. To shed new light on the past.

For many of us Christmas can be a painful time, when past mistakes or losses are brought to mind amid the cheer of the season. It is a time when we feel most deeply the grief of loss; it is a time when we wonder what we can give to others when both our time and our finances are already stretched; it is a time when we remember the family fight or the darkness of being lost or alone.

And then there is a light in the darkness. Then there is a birth and Jesus walks among us, in our sandals and in our shoes. Then Jesus extends an invitation to redeem us – “Come and follow me” – with our past losses, even our past mistakes, regardless of who we have been or what we have done.

This is the Holy Season to pause. To stop and reflect. To let the past be remembered and then to offer that past to God. To let new light bring new hope and transform the past from brokenness to compassion. To let that compassion take root for others and to let that compassion heal your heart and your memories.

That’s what this table is all about. A table so large and so plentiful that even you and I are redeemed for this work of love in the world. A table so bold and so audacious that every child in every community might know that love wins. A table so deep and so wide that even our memories and our past cannot hold us back; that we are transformed by this miracle of Christmas.

“The miracle has just begun in you, and, for the sake of the world ... God Bless Us Every One!”

Amen.