

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Ghost of Christmas Present

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, December 11, 2016

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-18.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

This ends our reading from the Gospel of Matthew. 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.”

Through Dicken’s story, we have 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 clock chimes and a ghost appears first as light from under the door and then as laughter and an invitation to enter. Come in – come in and know me better. The Ghost of Christmas Present.

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, come upon us with your gift of love 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.

I’m sure you have heard it said, “There’s no time like the present.” For those of us who are more prone to procrastination, this is often a loud voice in our heads trying to shake us from complacency. “Hey, Annette! There’s no time like the present. Do it now. Don’t wait.”

Yet “the present,” to be in the present, is a fleeting, momentary thing. Each second and nanosecond goes by so fast. Truth be told, the present moment is also a gift – so you could say that the present is a present. It is the gift of here and now. It is the gift of connection within yourself and connection to the world. It is a gift of letting go of old habits and anger and hurts; and it is not living into the worries and anxieties of the future. Yes, the present, this moment, is a gift. This is where all of the action happens – it happens in the right now.

The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge on a journey, offering Scrooge a window into the way things are that he could not experience by himself. If anyone can tell it like it is, the Ghost of Christmas Present certainly can.

As Scrooge falls out of bed and awakens from sleep, he realizes it’s time for the next ghost to appear, the clock strikes one but no spirit appears. It is several minutes before Scrooge sees light shining under the door and is wooed by the Ghost of Christmas Present into another room, a room transformed with signs of life. The lights, the color, the glow and the laughter.

And there at the very tip top of the Christmas tree is a giant, a jolly giant with long dark brown curly hair. He is wearing a fur-lined green robe and on his head is a holly wreath set with shining icicles.

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The giant is carrying a large torch, made to resemble a cornucopia of abundance. And around the room is a great and sumptuous feast. And then there is a laughter.

Given the experiences of Scrooge up to this moment, when we hear the laughter it sounds almost sinister. It is so out of place. Laughter? Scrooge is frightened by what he sees and laughter is the last thing on his mind. But the Spirit says, "Come in – come in and know me better. Look at me."

Off they go. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge around the city – a tour of the people, places, events and experiences of the moment. They see scenes of festivity – after all this is Christmas Eve. So there are family gatherings and big dinners and decorations on the streets and in our homes. And because this is the Present moment, they also see deprivation and poverty. They see illness and grieving. They see ignorance and want. They see desperation and they see despair.

The church bells ring out. As townsfolk leave their homes to gather in the sanctuary, the spirit begins to sprinkle incense upon the families' meals as a means of blessing their food. But why, asks Scrooge, why do you offer more incense to some and less to others. The spirit replies without reservation that the poor need it the most.

The spirit's simple gesture offers us a moment to pause and consider how God works in the world. God is always in the now. God's now is perpetual, eternal. God sees and knows and feels the joy and love and God sees and knows and feels the suffering of now.

That's the problem with living in the moment, with being present, we are forced to see the world as it is – the world is both festive and joyful AND the world is broken and in pain. Right now. Right here. Families are hungry. Children sleep in the family car because the family has no home. Young adults try to find their way in an economy that offers few jobs that pay a living wage.

Right now 41% of Californians live at or very near the poverty line. Right now 11% of Californians are still without health insurance. Shockingly, this means we do not have to travel very far with the Ghost of Christmas Present to see the kind of pain that Scrooge also saw. From the ten or so houses or apartments on your street where you live, four of those households live in poverty and at least one household has no health insurance coverage at all.

Sometimes it is easy to get distracted with the decorations, lights, and festive music of Christmas; but at its heart, the first Nativity is also a story born out of poverty, where scarcity is transformed into abundance by a God who will stop at nothing to be with us.

We experience pure joy as Mary sings the Magnificat: "Gloria, gloria in excelsis Deo." We remember that the angels are singing to shepherds who were the poorest of the farm workers. That's the contrast, then and now.

In those days the palace ruled the world, but on this Christmas day, the world is being turned upside down. In those days the shepherds were less than unimportant, but on this day, the shepherds received a gift from the angels of God!

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In those days we simply read about a miracle. On this day we expect a miracle. In those days we tried to make our traditions and material gifts perfect. On this day we let go of the anxiety of making things perfect so that we can make room for God.

In those days our Christmas list was full of material things for friends, family, coworkers. On this day our list contains what Jesus wants. It is his birthday, after all. Jesus wants the proclamation of good news, release, recovery, freedom, and compassion. In those days we worried about what's under the tree instead of the tree itself. On this day we see clearly the Giver of Life breaking into this world.

Simon Tugwell, in his book entitled Prayer, says it well: "If we keep clamoring for things we want from God, we may often find ourselves disappointed, because we have forgotten the weakness of God and what we may call the poverty of God. We had thought of God as the dispenser of all the good things we would possibly desire; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except God's self."

The visit to the Cratchit home was a visit see and know poverty. It's not pretty – this living in the present. It's not all happiness and good cheer. Scrooge was forced to visit his nephew's household – the family of his clerk, Bob Cratchit. A family living in poverty and without a means for health care. He asks the Ghost of Christmas Present if Tiny Tim will be spared, if he will live. The spirit answers, "I see a vacant seat . . . in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die" (Stave Three).

Scrooge trembles at the thought, pausing only to hear his own words spoken back to him—"If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (Stave Three). You can see and feel the cracks starting to open up the heart of Scrooge. Scrooge is moved to pity. Scrooge was, maybe for the first time, beginning to see the spirit of Christmas for what it is—a glimmer of hope in a hurting world.

If we look at the world as Herod did, then fear grabs hold of our souls and our prayers can quickly become "kill them before they kill us." That was Herod's fear of the events. The birth of Jesus brings the transformation of the world – a world where love will win, a world where enemies are invited to the table, a world where bridges are built to create community. But this world also meant that Herod would not be able to wield power only to his advantage; it means a world of justice and of mercy; it meant a world of compassion and peace. For Herod, this was a horrible and frightening thought. All of the children in Bethlehem would have to die in order to protect his power and greed.

Some say Bethlehem is an ancient place where countless children were slaughtered at the hands of a fearful king. Some say Bethlehem is on the eastern coast of Africa, in Sudan, where the vulnerable often do not survive. Some say Bethlehem is outside the Green Zone in Baghdad, where suicide bombers are a daily reminder of evil. Some say Bethlehem is an abandoned warehouse in Oakland burned to the ground that was used as a place of art and expression and living in these desperate times. Some say Bethlehem is a child who lives in the family car because their parents have no affordable options for housing.

The sacred text of scripture says Bethlehem was the place in which God came to earth, in human form, in order to transform the hearts of God's people and show us a path of peace.

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Like Scrooge, we visit our town again for the first time. We see houses that look bleak and ask: How can I address the housing crisis in the Bay Area? We feel the cold and rain in the air and ask: Where do the homeless go in this weather and what can I do on their behalf? We see the hateful graffiti drawn on the walls of buildings to threaten and intimidate those who practice a different religion or those who come from a different place in the world and we ask: Is there any room left for love and acceptance?

Maybe the gift we offer this Christmas is asking difficult questions of why so many children are on the Salvation Army's stocking list.

Maybe our gift is offering blessing of joy and abundance to others before we fill our own stockings and put presents under our own tree.

Maybe the gift we offer this Christmas is the courage to stay in the moment and acknowledge the pain and suffering long enough to express our compassion.

Maybe the gift we offer is being living proof that it is better to give than to receive.

The story of Christmas is a story of a God who gave us life and love and the hard work of transformation – not only for ourselves but also for the world. In the midst of a suffering and broken world, God enters in.

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

Amen.