

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, December 18, 2016

Two readings from the Holy Scriptures:

Gospel of Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
God has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Letter to the Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live.

All who are led by God's Spirit are God's offspring. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as God's children.

This ends the reading from the holy book. 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 love of 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.

In the thick fog, Scrooge walks through the gates of the cemetery. Behind him stands a faceless, silent spirit. And he has to ask: “Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?” and the spirit simply nods. Scrooge says, “Spirit, I fear you more than any specter I have yet met.”

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit, come upon us with your gift of joy as we consider the future yet-to-come. May your joy 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 hope, God of love, God of peace and God of joy. Amen.

There are some things I can only enjoy once: an easy puzzle, one of my cozy murder mysteries, a roller coaster (which I did as a kid and haven’t done since then) and so on. For me, experiencing these things for the first time is enough, because when I know the ending, I know the outcome, these things lose their appeal. I’m no longer invested because the unknown journey and unknown ending was its only offering.

Now some things I could experience over and over again, even though I know exactly what is going to happen: a sunset on the beach, the movie Casablanca, or “Silent Night, Holy Night” on Christmas Eve. I know the ending, but it doesn’t dissuade me because these experiences are so much more than just a good ending. I can do them over and over again and every time I feel the wonder as if it were the first time.

Yet when we are in the moment of living, we do not know how the story ends. We don’t know if this moment is something we want to do only once or if this is something we want to experience again.

Scrooge stands in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and realizes that he is about to have his life flash in front of him. Was this a life worth seeing again? Scrooge wasn’t so sure he wanted to know the rest of his story. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come takes him on a tour of his ultimate demise.

This spirit is silent. The spirit is present, standing beside Scrooge and pointing. That’s all, just pointing.

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The truth is that even in our holy stories of Christmas, the scriptures can be strangely silent and leave us wanting more answers, more information, more feedback. I once heard it said that “The Scripture tells us everything we need to know, but it doesn’t tell us everything we want to know.” The stories raise more questions than they answer. The stories stand beside us pointing, just pointing. We have to stop talking long enough to experience the presence of God and see the path before us.

The silence frightens Scrooge as nothing else has. I get that, don’t you? The “silent treatment” is like the worst possible reaction I can get. Inside your own head, you just go crazy thinking of the worst case scenarios. The lack of information, the lack of feedback is, frankly, deadly. And that’s what Scrooge sees. He will “reap what he sows” and his story will not end well.

This prospect is so frightening that even the Muppet Gonzo has to turn to the audience to tell us that he can’t watch; he’ll join us again at the big finale. That’s how scary this is.

Scrooge asks the Spirit – is this the vision of what will be or what may be? And that is it. That is the whole point. Scrooge asks the key question of the whole story – can I change the story of my life? Can I change my future? Am I permanently stuck in who I am today? Talk about an ultimate existential question. This is it.

You know people in your life who are stuck. You also know people who are doing the hard work to change. Maybe you are one of them. To change the habit and quit smoking is no small feat. To change the course of a disease and overcome an addiction – it takes everything within your soul working in the same direction. To change the behavior of road rage and become the generous and defensive driver – it’s a 180 degree turn (no pun intended).

And look at what Scrooge would have to overcome – hoarding all of this wealth, building wealth based on the poverty of others, isolating himself as a hermit, moving from Bah Humbug to “welcome Christmas.” Almost insurmountable, don’t you think. Yes, this is the big question. Can he be redeemed? Can I be redeemed?

Scrooge then pleads with the Spirit – “I am not the man I once was. I will not be the man I must have been. I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.”

And there it is. The answer to one of life’s biggest questions. The possibility of redemption, of change, of unlocking the chains that have held you back and living into the new day.

Do you remember at the beginning of this story? As Ebenezer Scrooge prepared to leave his office, the counting house, his nephew Fred paid 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,

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and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it is never put a scrap 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.”

And with that Fred invites his Uncle Ebenezer to Christmas Dinner. Scrooge replies “Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.” (Stave One). After his nephew presses the crotchety miser, Scrooge dismisses him altogether with the less than genuine and stubbornly repeated phrase, “Good afternoon!” Of course Scrooge declines and wants to be left alone. So very, very much like Scrooge.

And now, after the visit of The Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come, early in the morning Scrooge wakes up from the strangest dream he’s ever had. He opens the window and discovers that it is Christmas morning, and he has been given a chance to change his ways. He did nothing to earn it; rather it was a gift.

He shouts to himself, “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!” (Stave Five).

Here, at the end of the story, Scrooge knows what he must do. His journey will not be complete until he humbly and selflessly reconciles with his family. He approaches Fred’s door, a home he walked past dozens of times without the courage to knock. He wanders into the dining room and says, “I have come to dinner. Will you let me in, Fred?” (Stave Five). Fred welcomes him to dinner exuberantly, and a wonderful party ensues. When the invitation is accepted, Scrooge’s redemptive journey is complete.

Isn’t it interesting that when we think about Scrooge or call someone a Scrooge, we are always referring to the miser, lonely, crotchety, mean old man. We are never referring to the transformed Scrooge. Isn’t that interesting? The story ends with a beautiful transformation of soul and yet we hang onto the broken mess of a man he was before. It’s like the proverbial train wreck – we just can’t help but keep looking, staring. Maybe we think – “that poor sap, what a horrible life, thank God that’s not me.” Or maybe we think – “oh yeah, that’s me all right. I’m like him but I’m just better at covering it up; but if people really knew me, they would know that I am also a broken mess.”

So here’s the thing – I want you to remember that Scrooge woke up on Christmas morning a changed man. You see, Christmas is an invitation. Christmas is an invitation into relationship with God. Christmas is an invitation to a new beginning, a redemption of our past, and a gift for our future. Christmas is a gift from God, calling us, pointing us to respond in the world with love. Scrooge knocked at the door and asked to be welcomed by his family, and with joy, he was.

If Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we! So let’s hear it for Scrooge. The transformed, redeemed, new version of himself who sees Christmas as an invitation and now desires nothing more than to keep Christmas well.

We too are called to keep Christmas well. We keep Christmas well when we light our Advent candles of hope, love, peace and joy. We keep Christmas well when we learn how to love our enemy

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and break bread with the outcast and forgotten. We keep Christmas well when we accept this crazy and radical invitation for a world upside down – where love dispels evil, where humble service affirms our humanity, where compassion opens our heart and we share all that we have and all that we are for a hurting and broken world.

Yes, Christmas is an invitation. May God bless us every one. Amen.