

## **Bah Humbug! – What Scrooge Can Teach Us About Christmas Text: John 1:9-16**

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“Marley was dead” seems like an unusual beginning for a Christmas story, but then again, Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” is not your typical Christmas story.

An anonymous narrator offers us a window into the world of the miser Ebenezer Scrooge--a name that has become synonymous with the term “Bah Humbug!” and with being grumpy, bitter, and less-than-enthused about the holiday season. Through the tale of Scrooge, an old man whom Dickens described as a “grasping, clutching, covetous, "old sinner", we are taken on an unlikely Christmas Eve Adventure.

I’m sure you know the story: on a cold Christmas Eve, Scrooge encounters three spirits who reveal his past, his present, and his future in the hope of transforming the old sinner’s heart.

It's important to have all the pertinent facts in order to understand the story, and so Dickens wants us to know this important fact—Marley was dead—right from the very beginning. This statement sets the tone for the story and foreshadows what's to come.

This may sound a little odd, but this setup makes me think very much about the whole advent season. The four Sundays before Christmas Day, the church gathers to wait for the Christ child's birth. During these four weeks, you heard some Old Testament scripture, in which God laid out the plan to send a Messiah to save God’s people.

We’ve sung songs such as “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”—songs that illustrate the hope that God's people felt as they waited for the Savior. We lit candles of hope, peace, joy, and love—like a countdown to God’s intervention in the world. Our Sunday school children were given advent calendars. Grandkids opened a numbered door every day—another count-down to Christmas Day.

Waiting for something that has already happened is a curious practice. I think explaining the season of Advent is quite difficult unless you've ever been waiting for your first child. Before a child is born, the child is certainly real enough, even though you can't hold the baby in your arms. The mother's body changes, subtle flutters soon become kicks, and ultrasounds reveal a profile leading someone to say, “Wow! She looks just like you” or “Are you sure you aren't having an alien?” The child is certainly real, but not yet born.

Also, the advent season plays with our notion of time. The church gathers in the present to ponder the past for a future hope. So “A Christmas Carol” is a beautiful story for the advent season because it is a tale in which the past, present, and future all come together in one transformative night. Certainly the story is about Scrooge's love of money and his altruistic failures, but I believe there’s more to glean from it than that.

The first is that Scrooge cannot let go of his past. Early in the story, after establishing that Marley had been dead for some time, Dickens tells us that Scrooge never painted out old Marley’s name on the business sign outside his office. Years later it still says “Scrooge and Marley.” Scrooge seems to cling to the past because his only friend Marley represented the only things in which Scrooge trusts: hard work, frugality, (being cheap!), unwavering discipline, and actions that can be weighed, measured, and counted. Nothing even close to love, kindness and generosity.

Scrooge is stuck in the past and he can't move forward. Jesus came to save us from counting our past as our only reality. There’s an old Arab proverb that says we should write our failures and mistakes in the sand, so that they can be easily erased from your memory. Unfortunately, most of us engrave the bad things that happen to us in marble. Not good!

Richard and I were able to visit France just before I started serving here at this church. We visited wine country and I learned that in France, unlike California vintners, they do not water the grapevines. The French believe that if you don't water your vines, the roots go deep, deep, deep into the earth until they touch groundwater and become invulnerable to drought.

When we wait for the Christ child, when we worship at the manger, when we believe that God's son has come to us, we sink the roots of our faith deeper and deeper, so deep that these roots of our faith can handle our failures, mistakes, our past. We don't know what kind of harsh weather our lives will face. We don't know the twists and turns our hearts will take. But we can stake our lives on God's promises—confident in the deep eternal well of God's faithfulness. We send our roots deep into the waters of life with God. Someone once said that Scripture tells us everything we need to know, but it doesn't tell us all that we want to know. You see, all we need to know is that at Christmas God proves that he is with us and wants nothing more than to be with us. In God we find our hope, our promised land and the words of eternal life.

Among some other lessons in *A Christmas Carol*, the one that we see so clearly at the end is that there can be—is—redemption. After all the spirits are finished with Scrooge, he wakes up on Christmas morning a changed man. He shouts to himself, "I'm as light as a feather. I'm as happy as an angel. I'm as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. Merry Christmas to everybody!"

Scrooge has been redeemed. Even though theological words are rather absent from Dickens's story, redemption is a word that both Scrooge and churchgoers recognize.

But sometimes we misinterpret it. I think that sometimes we Christians think that redemption means exchange—something is offered and something is received—like when you redeem a coupon in a store. You present a coupon for 10% off, and you receive 10% back from your bill's total. In church, when we talk about redemption, the picture we sometimes present is that redemption means we give our heart to Christ and God rewards us with an insurance policy for heaven. All done!

Not really. The Bible tells us we have been saved by grace. God's love is a gift—not one we earned or deserved. Just a gift. Salvation has already been offered, and our goal is to respond to God's grace.

Scrooge actually responded well. He brings a goose for Christmas dinner to the poor Cratchits. He reconciles with his nephew Fred. He notices the poor and how he might help. And in the process he finds true joy. He's been given a new day and a new attitude, not to make amends per se, but to experience unbound joy.

When we find joy—the steadfast assurance that God is with us—we will recognize the redemption the Christ child was born to offer, and we can celebrate our own rebirth. We are to respond to God's Christmas gift with gratitude and with grateful actions and words of love. My question is this: Does the world see that love in us?

Let me close with a story about a lady stopped at an intersection—who had been tailgating the car in front of her. She was furious at the other driver. He didn't go through the yellow light, so she was stuck behind him at the now red light. She started honking her horn, screaming at the man, dropping her cell phone and the contents of her pocketbook on the car floor as she ranted in frustration.

While she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, the policeman approached her cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the "What Would Jesus Do" and "Follow Me to Sunday-School"

bumper stickers, and the chrome-plated Christian fish license plate holder, so naturally I assumed you had stolen the car.”

As Christians, we’re to live unbound, joyful lives, which means we don’t play by the rules of the world. As Dickens says, we are called to Keep Christmas Well—not just at Christmas but all year long. We keep Christ in Christmas in our selflessness, our service, and our humble witness. Christmas is a gift from God, calling us to respond in the world with love. If Scrooge can be redeemed—then so can we!

***Please keep the following people in your thoughts and prayers ....***

**Prayer List:** *Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Janelle, Garo and Bobbi.*