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The Redemption of Scrooge

The Remembrance of Christmas Past: Hope From Heartbreak

Today we enter our second week of Advent. In this season of anticipation, amid the waiting and longing for Christmas to hurry up and come already, our desires are shaped and molded from longing simply for gifts under the tree, to a desire for the peace, hope, love, and joy that Christ's light shines into our world. This waiting tempers our souls so that we might slow down long enough to see God's blessings around us, to hear the cry of those in need, to embrace those needing our love, and to hunger and thirst for justice and kindness. In this season, everything changes, and God now invites us to slow down so that we might notice the change happening within our own hearts. This Sunday we draw from Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol" as we reflect on how our past affects our present (and our future). As Christians, our hope for humanity can transform our personal sadness into conviction and action. Will we choose to be weighed down by the disappointments of the past, or will we reignite our hope in the future through the love of God?

Isaiah 9:2, 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.

Luke 2: 8-14 - In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Memory is a funny thing... Our memories and past experiences come together with our own unique personality and beliefs to define us... where we've been and what we've experienced influences who we are, for better or for worse. But our memories are not always accurate. Sometimes our visions of the past are incomplete or misleading, emphasizing sadness while forgetting joy. Or skipping past any negative emotion or interaction, remembering with rose colored glasses the way the past unfolded. And then, there are those who simply refuse to look back and reflect on the past, afraid of what they'll see... afraid of what they'll feel... they choose to march on blindly, not even realizing the way their past influences them.

This week, as we move one step closer to Christmas, we continue our journey alongside Ebenezer Scrooge as he is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past. In the wake of his encounter with the spirit of his late friend and business partner Jacob Marley, who has convicted him of the need to change, to become a better person, before it is too late and he is bound forever by the chains he forged in this life by not caring for those in

need around him, by the coldness of his heart, even during the Christmas season – Scrooge is on guard as this first Ghost greets him.

The Ghost of Christmas Past reminds Scrooge of things that happened to him in the past. These remembrances bring both joy and pain, but they help remind him of who he was and from where he came. Scrooge seems to have forgotten his own story. He is always bitter and exasperated at the people around him, but as the story unfolds, we find out this wasn't always the case. This Ghost takes him on a journey to his hometown, and immediately Scrooge was filled with joy. His lip quivers, and a single tear falls upon his cheek. When Scrooge sees his former self he realizes, maybe for the first time, how lonely he was as a child. His friends failed to include him for sleigh rides, his family was so distant they aren't included (save a visit from his sister) in his Christmas past vision, and his own imagination was his only companion.

But instead of being filled with blame or anger against those who created his loneliness, he is moved to compassion. When the spirit notices his emotion he asks what is the matter. Scrooge replies, "Nothing. There was a boy singing Christmas Carols at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that is all." Instead of offering a dismissive, "Humbug," or angry soliloquy, he laments missing an opportunity to make a difference for another, ensuring others will have a different childhood experience than his own.

Somewhere along the way, Scrooge has become so full of broken heartedness, solitude, despair, compounded by his fear of poverty, which has worked together to form him into the grumpy old humbug that he is. Are each of these struggles a part of real life, yes... but they aren't meant to define our living! The brokenness, suffering, and heartbreak are never the end of the story, nor are they meant to define our futures. In our Christian faith, we have some pretty dark stories of suffering and pain, but it is how we choose to remember them that make all the difference. Last week we gathered around the communion table and retold the story of the last night of Jesus' life, how he sat at a table with friends and shared a meal, only to be betrayed, beaten and hung on the cross to die. While all that is true, our faith reminds us that this is not the end of the story. The story of redemption is just around the corner... even in the midst of our darkest nights, we cannot lose hope because we know the hope that can come in the morning!

Often lost in our remembrance of the Christmas story is the sense of fear and uncertainty that touches the hearts of those involved. Our selective memories hold on to a perfectly designed nativity scene, where Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus are surrounded by shepherds and their flocks, as well as wise men who bring gifts for the Christ child. Reading through our Gospel accounts, we realize that this picturesque image is a montage of the different stories told in our Bible... but when we take them one at a time, we find fear and anxiety over an unexpected pregnancy, a governmental system of oppression, a group of shepherds terrified by the visit of an angel, a ruler lashing out with a decree of infanticide because of a prophecy of a newborn king. So much fear – into which the angels repeatedly speak peace... "Do not be afraid" almost becomes their mantra. So much, that maybe it should become ours too! When challenges come, do not be afraid. When our hearts break over loss, do not be afraid. When our dreams are shattered, when all seems hopeless... DO NOT BE AFRAID! For it is our fears that hold us hostage, blinding us from the hope of a better future, the hope of new life and resurrection even for us!

Throughout the visit of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge is beginning to realize how the person he is doesn't look much like the person he once was. His bitterness and fear has consumed any hint of love or joy he once knew. After seeing the merriment and excitement at Fezziwig's Christmas party, the Spirit comments about the money spent on such a party, implying that the present day Scrooge would scoff at such a scene that couldn't be measured monetarily. Scrooge replies, "It isn't that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. ... The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune." This is the first time Scrooge has verbalized what he has long since forgot... that money is not the source of happiness. And immediately, he desires to speak with his often mistreated clerk,

Bob Cratchit, realizing that he has placed money above Bob as a person and friend, and he has been using his power to render Bob unhappy, making his service a burdensome toil... unlike what he recalls of working for Fezziwig.

This is the second time as Scrooge experiences an A-HA moment, that rather than defaulting to his throwaway phrase, "Humbug," he transforms his personal sadness into compassion for others, first for the ignored caroler, and now for his clerk. As the Ghost has shone light on his past, on who he was and what he used to believe, he opens the way for further reflection and the hope of transformation begins to dawn. Scrooge still has a long way to go, but there are still two visits remaining, The Ghosts of Christmas Present and of Christmas Yet to Come. But as we wait for the unfolding of this story, we wait with hope – with the angels speaking over us, "Do not be afraid", as Dicken's story invites us to look at our own lives, to do our own reflecting. As we continue counting down the days to Christmas, hopefully still snipping a link off our ribbon chain each day, thinking of those things we need to be unbound from, let us not be afraid to reflect on our past, on how we can find hope from heartbreak, not only experiencing transformation in our own lives, but living transformation in the world around us. Would you pray with me?

God of Christmases past, you have been at work in our lives since the beginning. Open our eyes to all of the ways that you have been at work in our memories and in the Advent and Christmas traditions that have been handed down to us. Give us the courage to examine the mistakes we've made in the past so that we will continue to grow into the people you created us to be. Amen.