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**December 3, 2017**

**The Redemption of Scrooge**

**Bah Humbug! Making Change**

Advent is a season of waiting, and preparing, of anticipating what is yet to come... all the while telling age old stories of shepherds and wise men coming to visit a baby born in Bethlehem. Waiting for something that has already happened is a curious practice. The advent season plays with our notion of time. The church gathers in the present to ponder the past for a future hope. 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. Advent is like living in the space between what was and what will be. Living into this tension of remembering the gift of Jesus' very life among us and what he came to show us, and at the same time anticipating the way Christ continues to come into our hearts and lives each day, and the kingdom that Christ came to usher in; a kingdom that turned the world's expectations upside down.

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**Isaiah 9:6-7** - For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

**Luke 1:46-47, 52-55** - And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

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Most of us have read, seen, or at least heard of Charles Dicken's story, "A Christmas Carol." It is a holiday favorite of many – with a twisting storyline, following the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge from a stingy, greedy, old grouch to a man with a new outlook on life and his relationships with others. Have you ever realized though, how strange the title of this story is? "A Christmas Carol"... Actually, the original title was worse, "A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas." A curious title to say the least... This is the only CAROL I know of that is not a song, nor was it ever set to music... well, until it was remade into an opera and musical theater. So why did Dicken's call it a carol? Well, there's something timeless about carols – they are probably the best known body of music in our culture... and while new versions keep popping up each year, they are still the age-old words and sentiments, conveying the heart and message of Christmas. Although Dicken's "carol" isn't set to music, or based on rhythm, meter and rhyme, he uses the power of story, like Jesus did in his teaching through parables, to remind us that there is no soul too gruff, too cold, or too cantankerous for God's redeeming power. Perhaps Dickens wanted his story to be shared over and over again, year after year, like a familiar carol in order to share this great story of redemption and spread Christmas joy.

As the story begins, we're told 4 times that Jacob Marley is dead, and while Marley's business partner, Ebenezer Scrooge is not physically dead, the narrator's description of him makes us wonder what kind of life, if any, he had. "But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! (Stave One) He is described as a character that is so hard and unfeeling, especially toward the people around him... that his heart is as good as dead. His entire life is limited to cash boxes and bills of sale, he underpays and bullies his clerk, and any sentiment of kindness, generosity or tenderness he experiences, he dismisses as "humbug."

Just before leaving his office on Christmas Eve, Scrooge's nephew, Fred, pays him a visit. His nephew is full of joy and merriment during the Christmas season, and he cannot understand why Scrooge is so, "Scrooge-like." Christmas – in Fred's eyes - is not about gaining wealth and prosperity; rather it's a season that celebrates the gift of life and of shared hope, kindness, and charity. Fred is grieved at his uncle's lack of understanding and compassion, but sees that it will take much more than a simple conversation to thaw Scrooge's cold heart.

Later that evening, Scrooge is startled with the appearance of Marley's ghost, fettered in weighted chains. Scrooge asks why he carries chains, and Marley responds that the spirits of all people must walk with their fellow human beings, if not in life, then in death. "Any human spirit not aware of the good it may do, even in its own small sphere of influence, is captive, bound, and double-ironed in chains." Through their conversation, it is clear that Marley has finally figured it out, if not a little too late, that rather than being focused on dollars and profits, his business should have been concerned more about "charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence." Marley's punishment in death is his inability to find rest and peace, tasked with helping others experience this revelation before it is too late for them to experience transformation.

Charles Dicken was known not only as a British author, but also a social reformer, deeply concerned with the harsh plight of the lower and working classes, especially the health, treatment and well-being of children – a situation he sought to remedy through his writing and social recognition. This concept of "raising up the lowly" is one that is very familiar to us – as our Old and New Testaments are full of commands and parables about caring for the least of these. In our gospel lesson this morning, we heard part of Mary's song, which has come to be known as the Magnificat, where she praises God for what God accomplishes through the Messiah. She celebrates that God lifts up the lowly, scatters the proud, and sends the rich away empty. Mary sings of the transforming power of God to turn things upside down, the power of God to bring justice, the power of God to bring peace to a world torn apart by hatred and pride. How stark a contrast to the Ebenezer Scrooge that we meet at the beginning of "A Christmas Carol", who sends the poor away empty while continuing to hoard for himself. Scrooge's only love is money, and Marley warns him that this misplaced love will become nothing more than heavy chains in the afterlife. Before Marley's ghost leaves Scrooge, he prefaces the visits of the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future with these words, "I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate." Even Scrooge, hard as his heart is, is not beyond redemption.

I don't know about you, but it is so easy for me to get caught up in what my family and I need and the things I have to do, that I can become a little like Scrooge and get easily irritated, not making time for those around me who need care and attention. What an amazing Christmas this would be if our world could experience the heart transformation of Scrooge, one that allows us to see the needs of our neighbors as our business... the needs of the immigrant, the native American, the refugee, the poor and disenfranchised; so that no matter the color of our skin, our gender or orientation, no matter the walls we erect or labels we use to divide us, we see ALL as worthy of love, care, and God's blessing, and take action to live out of that conviction. When we really see that, then the peace that Mary sings about is really possible. Our lives can be transformed, and as we allow our lives to be turned upside down, then we too can turn this world upside down. May we all be able to say "God bless us everyone" this Christmas. Amen.