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**December 17, 2017**

**The Redemption of Scrooge**

**The Life of Christmas Present: Look Upon Me**

As time passes, week by week, slowly counting down the days to Christmas, we continue our season of waiting – waiting for Christ, waiting for hope, waiting for love and light. As we move forward in our Advent series, The Redemption of Scrooge, the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present challenges US to look around at the realities of our present day surroundings. Scrooge is asked to "look upon" the reality of the world and it cracks him open a bit as he sees the blessings surrounding him, even in the midst of poverty and struggle; and as his eyes are opened, his compassion grows. I wonder what we will see as we "look upon" our communities and how God is calling us to live out the Christmas spirit of love, hope, peace, and joy amid our neighbors.

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**Deuteronomy 15:7-11:** <sup>7</sup>If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. <sup>8</sup>You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. <sup>9</sup>Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. <sup>10</sup>Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. <sup>11</sup>Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

**Matthew 2:1-18:** <sup>2</sup>In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

<sup>13</sup>Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the

prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

<sup>16</sup>When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup>"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

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I think we've all heard the phrase, "There's no time like the present." It's meant to convict us of the fleeting nature of time... that we can't wait for the perfect circumstance or scenario... we can't hold off on our dreams for the future, we need to put our hopes into action TODAY! This *carpe diem* thinking not only applies to actions, but also attitude... we could spend our days wishing our present circumstances were different, better than we currently experience but wishing and longing for something you don't have, or fearing something that could be, has a way of tainting our perspectives on life. The main character in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge has spent his life bound by fear of poverty and solitude. As we spoke of last week, he has become a grouchy old humbug, incapable of seeing the blessings of life... only having eyes for a profit – even at the expense of the happiness and wellbeing of others around him. He may not have always been like this, but his outlook has so poisoned him that he has become blind to the needs of others.

We pick up in the story this week as Scrooge is visited by the second of three Spirits... the Ghost of Christmas Present, who shows Ebenezer, with scene after scene, the present day reality taking place all around him, offering him a window into the way things are that he could not experience by himself. Scrooge's first excursion with the Ghost of Christmas Present takes him into town, among the hustle and bustle of people doing last minute shopping for gifts and groceries on Christmas Eve. One of the first things that Scrooge notices is the bleakness of the scene. The dirty snow. The black houses. The dark windows. The smoky soot particles hanging in the air. And yet ... he also notices a spirit of cheerfulness and merriment. Folk were shoveling the snow gleefully, while snowball fights took place all around. Food is in abundance, with beautiful produce in the shops and the smell of roasting meat permeates the air. It was as if there were two stories happening at once. Joy and pain. Frivolity and hardship. Abundance and scarcity. Such an intertwining is foreign to Scrooge...

The Spirit takes him to the home of his clerk Bob Cratchit. And Scrooge sees that even while they do not have a penny to spare, that doesn't stop them from having a wonderful day together enjoying their goose and carrying in their Christmas pudding blazing in ignited brandy. Even the poor health of Tiny Tim cannot dampen the celebratory atmosphere – they seem to be living each day for the blessing it is!

After witnessing the family celebration at the Cratchits, the Ghost brings Scrooge to a number of other happy Christmas dinners in the city and beyond, to a group of miners gathered around a fire and singing, to the lighthouse on the coast where, even surrounded by battering waves and mounds of seaweed, they are drinking a toast and wishing each other Merry Christmas!, and then out to sea where sailors on a vessel hummed Christmas songs, reminisced and offered kind words. So much joy to be shared, no matter the circumstances or locations people find themselves in. Scrooge is then taken to his nephew Fred's house, where Fred tells his wife and his sisters he feels sorry for Scrooge, since his miserly, hateful nature deprives him of pleasure in life. Scrooge's niece plays a tune on the harp, which softens Scrooge's heart. Scrooge even joins in for some of their games, though they are not aware of his ghostly presence. The Ghost pulls Scrooge away from the games to a number of other Christmas scenes, all joyful despite the often meager environments.

While the beginning of the chapter talks about people rushing to church for Christmas Eve worship, most of Dickens' focus is on the family and community celebration of the season, focusing on the blessings even amid the struggle. Dickens wants to show that giving does not deplete the giver, but rather enriches the blessings and joy for all. Love, community, fellowship, and laughter trump poverty – any day of the week, but especially at Christmas time! Scrooge is, maybe for the first time, beginning to see the spirit of Christmas for what it is—a glimmer of hope in a hurting world.

Unfortunately, too often, we miss seeing the hope because we're too consumed by fear... fear that there won't be enough to go around, fear for our own security, fear that someone will infringe upon our power. We see how fear drives our society in our political battles all the time. Fear of the stranger, of the immigrant,

those who look, act, talk, or believe differently than us... we allow our fear of the unknown, or our past hurts determine our future interactions. This week, we just observed the \_\_\_\_\_ anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school... one of the deadliest mass shootings in US history, and despite the senseless deaths caused by assault rifles, people are still fighting for their right to protect themselves, to bear arms – in all sorts of public places; on college campuses and even at churches. The issue, which has certainly become a political battleground, is all about how we respond in the face of fear – whether we allow our fears to dominate how we live, or whether we can set aside our fears for the sake of the community – living into hope and love, rather than fear.

We spoke last week about the fear that is so often glossed over as we tell the Christmas story – this fear to which we hear the angels speak repeatedly, "Do not be afraid." In our Gospel reading this morning, we went beyond the place we usually stop – when the wise men find the Christ Child and present their gifts. As we kept reading, we heard more about the cruelty that Israel is experiencing at the hand of Herod. The gospel writer tells us that Herod is so afraid of the baby Jesus that he orders all the babies under two to be slaughtered. Herod's fear plunged himself and all of Jerusalem into a frenzy that was so bad that an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him to leave the country. Jesus became a refugee. While the warning of the angel gives them a chance to escape, we often forget those children who were left behind to be slaughtered in the wake of Herod's fear of this child born king... Herod's fear of loss of power is devastating for the people of the land. Instead of fearing our enemies and having an attitude of "kill them before they kill us," Christ will go on to teach us to pray for God's forgiveness of our enemies. We are made for love not fear.

We do not have to give over to the power of fear and let it dictate our living – rather, we are invited to allow the love and light of Christ in to transform our fear into hope. Doubt, insecurity, and sin causes us to be afraid that we won't have enough, so we buy more food than we need, more clothing than we can wear, and more shelter than we can maintain. A fourth-century monk, Basil of Caesarea, once said, "This bread which you have set aside is the bread of the hungry; this garment you have locked away is the clothing of the naked; those shoes which you let rot are the shoes of him who is barefoot; those riches you have hoarded are the riches of the poor." In our nation, where the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer – these words resounds with truth and pain. Our abundances are the wants and needs of others, if we dare but look.

This visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present has awoken Scrooge to the realities of the world around him – and helped him to see that abundance and wealth are not the only blessings to be gained in this life. The blessings of joy, community, and love can be shared – no matter our bank balance or station in life. All the while during the Ghost's visit, this boisterous and jovial spirit seems to be aging, and toward the end, he remarks that he doesn't have much time left. The Ghost's brief life reminds Scrooge, and the reader, that time is fleeting, that we must act quickly if we are to change the present and impact the future. "There is no time like the present" to make a change in your life – to more fully live out the love of God made known through compassion and justice. Scrooge is starting to see life in "seize the day" terms – as each moment offering an opportunity to change the lives of the less fortunate, right now, in the present.

I pray that we all awaken to this same urgency and desire to share the joy and blessings of life this Christmas. May God bless us everyone!

*Let us pray. God of the present, open our eyes to all the ways you are present in our world, particularly the ways you are at work through other people. Open our minds so that we can learn from those who embrace blessings that we take for granted. We pray these things in the name of your Holy Spirit, who is always with us. Amen.*