

Hope is No Mere Humbug!

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“The Redemption of Scrooge”

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- Isaiah 9:6-7 ⁶ A child is born to us! A son is given to us! And he will be our ruler. He will be called, “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Eternal Father,” “Prince of Peace.” ⁷ His royal power will continue to grow; his kingdom will always be at peace. He will rule as King David's successor, basing his power on right and justice, from now until the end of time. The LORD Almighty is determined to do all this.
- Luke 1:46-47, 52-55 ⁴⁶ Mary said, “My heart praises the Lord; ⁴⁷ my soul is glad because of God my Savior.... ⁵² He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴ He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel. ⁵⁵ He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham and to all his descendants forever!”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In giving us Jesus, God offers hope that what we choose to value will more closely meet God's plan.

Who doesn't know the name of Charles Dickens, the nineteenth-century English author? We can't imagine a world of English literature that didn't include *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and a masterpiece novella called *A Christmas Carol*. *A Christmas Carol* was the first “in his series of ‘Christmas books’: five short books with strong social and moral messages that he published during the 1840s.”¹ *A Christmas Carol* introduced the world to a hard-nosed, cold-hearted, tight-fisted curmudgeon named Ebenezer Scrooge. The story told of the startling encounter Scrooge had on a certain Christmas Eve with the ghost of his long-dead business partner Jacob Marley. That ghostly encounter then gave way to a series of visitations by three omniscient spirits. There's nothing like a ghost story at Christmastime!

As we make our way toward Christmas this year our worship series will consider lessons we learn from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—lessons that will challenge and encourage us in our declared intention to live Christ-like lives. To do that, let's be sure we have a good picture of this fellow with the distinctive name Ebenezer Scrooge. Dickens wrote,

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Chimes, accessed 11/23/2016

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty...²

Scrooge cared about no one and no thing except every penny and pound he could squeeze out of every business deal possible. Yes, Scrooge had shared his work with his business partner Jacob Marley until Marley died seven years earlier – on Christmas Eve to be exact. But other than that, Scrooge shared his life with nobody – not a wife, not his servants, not his friends since they didn't exist. Despite the persistent invitations of nieces and nephews to join their holiday dinners, Scrooge refused the sincere invitations, preferring scowling solitude to festive merriment.

On Christmas Eve he left work after his customary full day, went to his large, lonely, drafty house to eat his stew alone by the fire, and went to bed... only to be jarred awake by the appearance of the ghost of his late business partner. In his afterlife Marley's Ghost had learned how misguided his earthly life was in focusing solely on accumulation of wealth while ignoring the people all around him – ignoring their good natures, their gifts, their needs, their plight.

Marley's Ghost then tells Ebenezer that he has come back because Scrooge yet has a chance to amend his ways. A series of spirits will visit Scrooge over the next three nights: the Spirits of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and of Christmas Yet to Come.

Marley's Ghost has appeared in the hope of righting Ebenezer Scrooge's upside-down view of the world. Scrooge had chosen a very stern outlook on life: *You get what you deserve. You reap what you sow. Every man for himself.* Compassion did not exist in Scrooge's world. He believed debtor's prisons were the proper place for people who haven't been able to succeed financially. He believed that people struggling to cope with the pressures of life should be removed from general society and simply confined at London's "lunatic asylum." If you weren't able to manage, Ebenezer was convinced it was your own fault and solely your problem, no one else's.

How does that view of the world compare to what the Bible urges? It's upside down. God's heart has a special affection for those who find themselves struggling, who are on the margins of society, rejected, discriminated against, ignored, taken advantage of. God's compassion and generosity are not reserved only for those who can prove their worthiness; God's grace encompasses all. According to the prophet Isaiah, in God's worldview, "blessed are the poor." In God's worldview, "a little child shall lead them"³ who "will be called, 'Wonderful Counselor,' 'Mighty God,' 'Eternal Father,' 'Prince of Peace.'⁴

We find another description of God's revolutionary compassion in a gospel passage often called "The Magnificat" from the Latin translation of the passage's opening words, "My soul magnifies the Lord." When God's messenger revealed to Mary that she would be the mother of the incarnated Son of God – when Mary wrapped her mind around that stunning news – she sang a song praising God's greatness. The song's words captured by Luke's gospel include her vision of what God's new world order was accomplishing. She sang, "[God] has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.⁵ He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands."⁵

² <http://literature.org/authors/dickens-charles/christmas-carol/chapter-01.html>, accessed 11/23/2016

³ Isaiah 11:6 Good News translation

⁴ Isaiah 9:6 Good News translation

⁵ Luke 1:52-53 Good News translation

In *A Christmas Carol* the tortured soul of Marley's Ghost realized that all his life he had lived contrary to God's will; now his specter wants to warn his former business partner to change his ways. What might have inspired Charles Dickens to write this tale? In Luke Chapter 16 Jesus tells a parable of a certain Rich Man, and a pauper who had survived day by day by eating scraps out of the Rich Man's garbage. The pauper was named Lazarus (the name's familiar because it's the same name as another fellow who Jesus raised to life after Lazarus had been in the tomb four days). Let me summarize the parable.

The pauper Lazarus died, and so did the Rich Man. The Rich Man received an unpleasant afterlife in the flames of Hades, but he could see that the pauper Lazarus was feasting in eternal heavenly comfort at the side of the great patriarch Abraham. The Rich Man begged Abraham to send Lazarus down to him to relieve his torture, but Abraham pointed out that the Rich Man had enjoyed his comfort on earth while people had caused Lazarus to suffer throughout his life. Then the Rich Man begged Abraham to send someone from the heavenly world to warn the Rich Man's family to start showing compassion and generosity. Abraham responded, "What do you think Moses and the prophets were doing – your family should have listened to them." In desperation the Rich Man begs, "Well, if someone were to rise from death to warn them, surely they'd listen then."

That was sort of an "unfinished parable" that Jesus told... and then sometime later Jesus himself would be raised from death. By his resurrection Jesus announces hope for us all. In giving us the Risen Christ, God offers us hope that we can take those parts of our lives that are "dead" to the needs of others and give them new life of compassion, of servanthood. Despite our selfish, self-centered tendencies, the resurrection of Jesus provides us with hope that our values and lifestyles can be changed to more closely meet God's will for the world.

As *A Christmas Carol* opens, there seems no hope for Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge sees need to make amends or change his life – he views both as so much "humbug." Humbug referred to things that were a fraud, a sham, a deceit, delusional. To Ebenezer, hoping for anything more in life than what you can count and collect was just so much "humbug."⁶

What Ebenezer Scrooge sees as "humbug" Marley's Ghost sees as a window of hope. We, too, have a window of hope – a chance to redeem the embarrassing or unpleasant or selfish aspects of our lives which weigh us down with shame like the chains of eternal remorse which surrounded Marley's Ghost. Our hope comes from a baby who was a king at his birth. Our hope is built upon a savior whose power was shown by suffering and dying. Our hope is in a leader who preferred the role of a servant.

Our hope is no mere humbug. Hope is the picture of all that God can accomplish. In giving us Jesus, God offers hope that what we choose to value will more closely meet God's plan.

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⁶ "The Naming of Names in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*" by Philip V. Allingham, Contributing Editor, *Victorian Web* Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/xmas/names.html>, accessed 11/22/2016