

# Overcoming the Past

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

## ***“The Redemption of Scrooge”***

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- Isaiah 9:2-4a <sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining on them. <sup>3</sup>You have given them great joy, Lord; you have made them happy. They rejoice in what you have done, as people rejoice when they harvest grain or when they divide captured wealth. <sup>4</sup>For you have broken the yoke that burdened them and the rod that beat their shoulders.
- Luke 5:27-32 <sup>27</sup> After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting in his office. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>28</sup> Levi got up, left everything, and followed him. <sup>29</sup> Then Levi had a big feast in his house for Jesus, and among the guests was a large number of tax collectors and other people. <sup>30</sup> Some Pharisees and some teachers of the Law who belonged to their group complained to Jesus' disciples. “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and other outcasts?” they asked. <sup>31</sup> Jesus answered them, “People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but outcasts.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus promises that our past faults do not condemn our future.

This morning I continue a series looking at the lessons we learn from the classic Charles Dickens story, the holiday favorite called *A Christmas Carol*. Written in 1840s Victorian England as one of five Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol* tells the story of the miserly, avaricious, cold-hearted Ebenezer Scrooge who, on a certain Christmas Eve, was visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley. Marley's Ghost had crossed the ethereal boundary to urge his former colleague to change his self-centered, uncompassionate ways – to change before death prohibited any possibility of reform. *A Christmas Carol* is most famous for the series of spectral visitations which descended upon Scrooge: the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come.

There are literally dozens of versions of *A Christmas Carol* that have been made for television or theatrical release featuring everyone from Basil Rathbone, Fredric March, Albert Finney and George C. Scott to Bill Murray, The Muppets, Mr. Magoo (the version that introduced me to the story), and *Mickey Mouse's A Christmas Carol*. Nowadays it's easy read the actual Dickens text because since it's in the public domain you can download it for free on the internet.

When Marley's Ghost departed Scrooge's dark, cold and drafty bedchamber on that Christmas Eve long ago, the first of the three promised visitations commenced. Dickens described the Ghost of Christmas Past as being at the same time young and old, with youth's vigor and age's frailty, with long white hair of an octogenarian but the fresh unwrinkled skin of a child. The Ghost of Christmas Past reached for Scrooge's hand and took him on a flight through space and time. The Ghost explained that they would not visit all Christmases throughout history, but only Christmases of *Scrooge's* past.

As he saw the hills and fields and lanes where he walked and played as a boy Scrooge could also hear the bleating of sheep and smell the aromas of chimney smoke and fields freshly sprinkled with rain. He saw the stark boarding school classroom where he saw himself as the

child Ebenezer sitting alone, reading... abandoned.... You see, the youthful Ebenezer and his father had had a very difficult relationship. Apparently his father had shipped Ebenezer off to boarding school so as not to be bothered by his presence. While his classmates had been collected by their families to spend the Christmas holiday back at home, his father had chosen to keep Ebenezer away. But this moment the Ghost was allowing Scrooge to revisit was that point when his father had come to his senses, had a change of heart, and had resolved to restore his relationship with his son. From his vantage point with the Ghost of Christmas Past Scrooge saw as if it were happening then and there when his father had sent a carriage bearing Ebenezer's beloved sister to gather him up and bring him home for the holiday.

The Ghost of Christmas Past also showed Scrooge himself as a young man apprenticed to the businessman Mr. Fezziwig, eagerly learning from his encouraging employer and mentor the value of diligence and industry. Scrooge also detected in his younger self the first hints of avarice, an unhealthy fascination with money and the power that one can derive from amassing it.

Finally, through the agency of the ghost Scrooge saw his first love, a young woman named Belle. He saw the affection they had for each other... but in that same moment Scrooge also beheld how over the years young Ebenezer's preoccupation with attaining success and wealth lured him away from Belle's sincere affection. From this perspective of hindsight, Scrooge began to shed a tear for one of the true treasures he had chosen to turn his back on all those years ago: his willful abandonment of his sweetheart Belle in favor of his business aspirations. It was that choice that had resulted in Scrooge's solitary existence without the companionship of the dear one who loved and wanted to be loved.

This is what the Ghost of Christmas Past revealed to Scrooge.

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"The perfect Christmas...." We've all heard that expression. Maybe you're preparing to host family members for Christmas, and you want everything spotless, the decorations mounted with precision, the menu memorable. Maybe you're looking for the gift for that special someone that captures that person to a "T" and that no one but you could have selected. Maybe you're hoping for a light, fluffy snowfall on Christmas Eve that looks beautiful but doesn't cause any problems for travelers. What would make Christmas "perfect" for you?

There's one problem. Unless you're like Ebenezer Scrooge and plan to observe Christmas by sitting alone in your dark, cold, drafty bedchamber, you're probably going to be celebrating with... people. Relatives. Friends. Neighbors. People you love. People you probably like to be with. And here's the newsflash: people are imperfect.

Almost by definition, that's what we are: each of us is an imperfect person trying to be in relationship with other imperfect persons. We're not proud of every single thing we've said or done. Like Ebenezer Scrooge re-visiting the strained relationship with his father and the failed relationship with his Belle, it's not hard for us to bring to mind ways we've hurt others emotionally or even physically. It's not hard to recall ways we've disappointed people who matter to us.

Now, what does our imperfection have to do with the birth of Jesus? Simply this: Jesus brings into our lives—into our past—the power of God's forgiveness which overlooks our imperfections, our failings, our sins. God's forgiveness, brought home to us, made real for us, through Jesus the Son, enables us to overcome the sins of the past that, like the chains enveloping Marley's Ghost, hold us back and pull us down, prisoners to our past. Asking the spirit of Jesus to live in our hearts and minds, God's forgiveness enables us to forge a new future that's not shackled by mistakes or insults or failings in our past. Joined to Christ we become new

beings. Hear what St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians (this coming from a fresh translation called The Message),

Because of this decision [to put our trust in God's Son Jesus] we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with [Christ] gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier you heard one of the stories about Jesus calling individuals to become his closest colleagues and friends... inviting them to become disciples. The story we heard was about Jesus calling the tax collector named Levi (that was his Jewish name; we know him better by his Greek name Matthew). You probably know that in ancient Palestine, people who worked as tax collectors were held in low regard by their Jewish kindred. People who engaged in tax collecting were viewed as "sell-outs," in cahoots with the enemy, which is how the Jewish people viewed the Roman forces occupying Palestine.

But Jesus saw Matthew sitting at his collection office and Jesus asked him to join this group he was putting together. Matthew accepted and then threw a big party for his new friend Jesus that night. Among the guests were religious professionals employed at the Jewish Temple. They wondered what sort of rabbi (teacher) Jesus was; they couldn't imagine how Jesus could take into his inner circle a fellow with a history of being (of all things!) a tax collector. And yet Jesus didn't hold it against Matthew — Jesus was able to look past Matthew's past, imperfect as it had been, and offer him the embrace of welcome through the gift of forgiveness.

Jesus offers the same to you and me. Maybe we cower because of the pain caused by something someone said or did to us in the past. Maybe we cringe because of some physical or emotional injury we innocently or purposefully inflicted on someone. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are not prisoners to our past. The hurt that others have caused, the hurt we've caused others all can be overcome, forgotten, forgiven when we allow the grace of Jesus to enter our minds and hearts, to guide our actions and our words.

The Ghost of Christmas Past allowed Scrooge to see the origins of the emptiness and isolation and bitterness that characterized his life. Yet by recalling those memories, Scrooge found the first glimmer of hope for personal redemption; he discovered that regret was a baby-step toward repenting for his self-absorbed past; he discovered that compassion was a baby-step toward asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness. We, too, can overcome our past. Our personal pasts are ready to be washed in forgiveness. Because of God's unconditional love which we discover in the birth of Jesus we are forgiven... and we, in turn, can find the courage and strength to offer forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16-20 The Message [modified and abbreviated]