

# From Selfishness to Blessing

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

## ***“The Redemption of Scrooge”***

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- Deuteronomy 15:7-11 <sup>7</sup>“If in any of the towns in the land that the LORD your God is giving you there are Israelites in need, then do not be selfish and refuse to help them. <sup>8</sup>Instead, be generous and lend them as much as they need. <sup>9</sup>Do not refuse to lend them something, just because the year when debts are canceled is near. Do not let such an evil thought enter your mind. If you refuse to make the loan, they will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be held guilty. <sup>10</sup>Give to them freely and unselfishly, and the LORD will bless you in everything you do. <sup>11</sup>There will always be some Israelites who are poor and in need, and so I command you to be generous to them.”
- Matthew 2:1-18 <sup>16</sup>When Herod realized that the visitors from the East had tricked him, he was furious. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighborhood who were two years old and younger — this was done in accordance with what he had learned from the visitors about the time when the star had appeared. <sup>17</sup>In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true: <sup>18</sup>“A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping. Rachel is crying for her children; she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus calls us to *see* the suffering in the world, *recognize* our hand in its cause, and *commit* our heart for its easing.

*A Christmas Carol*, the popular, masterful and moving Christmastime ghost story by Charles Dickens tells the tale of the solitary old miser Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge’s entire energy was devoted to one thing and one thing only: amassing money. He had no use for anything or anyone that did not contribute to advancing his solitary purpose in life.

By way of a summary of where we’ve been in this Advent sermons series, on a certain Christmas Eve Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley. The ghost pleaded with his former colleague to change his self-centered, uncompassionate ways while there was still time. The lesson we took from that is that there is always hope that we can turn our lives around.

Marley’s Ghost had predicted that Scrooge would be visited by a series of three spirits. The first of the three, the Ghost of Christmas Past, brought to life scenes from Scrooge’s earlier years. For the first time since childhood, Scrooge actually shed a tear for the relationships he had neglected in favor of his solitary desire to succeed as measured by the acquisition of wealth. The lesson we took from that was that God’s forgiving nature promises us that our past faults do not condemn our future.

That recap brings us to today where we meet the second of the three spirits predicted by Marley’s Ghost: the Ghost of Christmas Present. “A jolly giant” as Dickens described him, the ghost had “a genial face... sparkling eye... open hand... cheery voice... and... joyful air.” He was the embodiment of “merry Christmas” with the color and richness and abundance and hearty welcome of celebration. The ghost continually entreated Ebenezer, “Look upon me!” But Scrooge was reluctant to cast his eyes on this hale-and-hearty spirit. Scrooge thought that all Christmas observances — from gifts and decorations to feasts and revelry — were nothing more than “humbug” — foolishness. Scrooge couldn’t conceive of anyone in their right mind wasting hard-earned wages on lavish outlays of food and clothing and decoration and gifts and merry-making — especially for something as pointless as a holiday which comes around every year, lasts for a day, then disappears only to show its bothersome self again in a year’s time. To Scrooge, a holiday was nothing more than a waste of an otherwise productive day.

No, Scrooge, was reluctant, indeed, to heed the bidding of the Ghost of Christmas Present to “Look upon me.” Scrooge didn’t want to acknowledge the reality of the world around him. He had no stomach for those keeping Christmas merry. But Ebenezer also had no sympathy for those who faced difficult circumstances like sickness or poverty. Scrooge was convinced they brought it on themselves. What reason could they have to be merry, Scrooge wondered.

The spirit spanned space and time to show to Scrooge scenes of genuine joy and celebration:

- first in the comfortable home of his nephew;
- then scenes of sincere Christmas celebrations of impoverished, hard-working families living in the dingy shanties of the coal valleys;
- then a view of the gratitude and joy of the solitary man tending a lighthouse and the captain at a ship’s wheel on the vast sea.

“They all *know* me,” said the Ghost of Christmas Present to Scrooge. The spirit’s message was clear: people *know* to be grateful and generous and compassionate and responsive, regardless of their station or condition, when they allow God’s Spirit to live within them. “Look at me,” the ghost said again, urging old Scrooge to look and see and acknowledge and respond to the realities all around him.

We, too, can be reluctant to acknowledge the realities all around us. When our home is warm and our car is fueled and our bed is soft and our plate is full and our wallet is sufficient, we can become blind and deaf to the reality of need which is absolutely present in our world... even in our community... even in our church... perhaps even in our own home. How great the needs every single day... and how little we ever even think of them:

- In jails and prisons, some men and women wonder how they’ll be accepted by families and employers once they’ve served their time;
- In Thailand, boys and girls wonder what they did wrong that caused them to be swept into the sex-trafficking business, and what they can do to escape;
- In Syria, women and men and children struggle mightily to try to maintain daily routine while soldiers and mortar fire blast away any semblance of peace;
- In Cleveland, some children striving to gain an education are distracted by the growling of their tummies.

A world needing salvation is nothing new. This morning’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew began with the familiar story of kings following a star and ended with a tale that is probably less familiar and much more disturbing. It was the horrific story of paranoid King Herod attempting to protect his grasp of the throne by slaughtering all of Bethlehem’s infant and toddler boys. Matthew caps the story with words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah who had written,

*A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping.*

*Rachel is crying for her children; she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead.*<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was born into a world filled with brutality, greed, poverty, discrimination, injustice. Jesus ministered to people scarred by neglect, abuse, disrespect, violence. Not unlike the Ghost of Christmas Present, Jesus calls us to see the world and serve the world... to serve the world in his name.

We all know that Christmastime spawns greater generosity in the hearts of many. In this morning’s *Plain Dealer, Parade* magazine featured a cover article about “a world of need” and the many opportunities for Americans to give back from our abundance. The article noted that individual American’s charitable giving increased for the sixth consecutive year.<sup>2</sup> Acts of generosity increase at this time of year. For instance,

- It’s not unusual at this time of year for us to get calls here at the church from individuals, families, businesses looking for ways to bless a needy person or family with food or clothing.
- Many of you make special Christmas gifts to our church’s In His Name Fund.
- Following the phenomena of “Black Friday” and “On-Line Shopping Monday,” more Americans are beginning to embrace “Giving Tuesday” by making online gifts to charitable organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15 Good News translation

<sup>2</sup> “Give Back,” *Parade*, December 11, 2016, p. 8

- Our youth groups provide a mitten tree to welcome your donations of scarfs and hats and gloves and mittens.
- Our Semi-Circle invites your gifts to bless the young people receiving services through the Positive Education Program.
- Next week we'll join thousands of Presbyterian congregations in receiving the annual Christmas Joy Offering that benefits retired pastors or their widows.

There's something about Christmastime that inspires an increase in charitable attitudes and generous acts. As believers, we know the source of that increase in charity and generosity: the blessing of Christmas is God's generosity in coming to live among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What a world this would be if we were able to sustain that spirit of charity and compassion beyond December the Twenty-Fifth!

When stores swap out Christmas specials for Valentine's Day merchandise even before the calendar ushers us into a new year, when the *echoes* of carols dissipate within the walls of the church, how can the *spirit* of the carols resonate in our minds to shape our attitudes? How can the *spirit* of the carols continue to resonate in our hearts to encourage acceptance and compassion? How can the *spirit* of the carols inspire us to defend the helpless and demand justice for those who are oppressed, whether in a place far away or right here in the very society we are part of?

How can we sustain compassion and generosity? The Spirit of Christmas Present suggested a way. "Look upon me!" he urged Scrooge. "Look upon me." In other words, open your eyes to see the needs all around you.

Isn't that the reason God sent Jesus into this world: to encourage us to open our eyes to see the needs all around us? And seeing the need that exists in the world, Jesus would have us respond, perhaps on our own, or with others who share our concern. We might:

- Give the precious gift of time to roll up our sleeves and get involved;
- Phone or email or write to legislators to express our concerns and suggest a compassionate, reasonable plan of action;
- We can pray for those who are suffering: praying for their safety, peace of mind, provisions for daily life;
- We can share our money with responsible agencies that are directly addressing the needs.

These are things we can do in January and July as easily as in November and December.

Scrooge's infamous lack of compassion had resulted from his conscious choice to ignore the needs of anyone but himself. But the Ghost of Christmas Present opened his eyes to a reality: people in every walk of life *learn* to be grateful and generous and compassionate and responsive, regardless of their station or condition. They learn to be more giving when they allow God's Spirit to live within them. Yes, compassion and generosity is something that we have to learn. From Deuteronomy Chapter 15 we heard the Israelite people being taught – even amid their temporary hardship – not to "be selfish and refuse to help" when encountering people in need. "Instead, [they were encouraged to] be generous and lend them [whatever] they need."<sup>3</sup>

And so the lesson we can take from Scrooge's encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Present is expressed in the simple yet challenging question posed on the cover of this morning's bulletin: "In what ways do you continue the Christmas spirit all year long?"

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 15:7-8 (modified) Good News translation