

Lives Redeemed... for Good... for God

A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series

“The Redemption of Scrooge”

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December 18, 2016—Advent 4

- Isaiah 61:1-3a The Sovereign LORD has filled me with his Spirit. He has chosen me and sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to announce release to captives and freedom to those in prison. ²He has sent me to proclaim that the time has come when the LORD will save his people and defeat their enemies. He has sent me to comfort all who mourn, ³To give to those who mourn in Zion joy and gladness instead of grief, a song of praise instead of sorrow.
- Luke 2:8-15 ⁸There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, ¹⁰but the angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. ¹¹This very day in David's town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord! ¹²And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In sending the son Jesus as our savior to bring us into an intimate relationship, God our Heavenly Parent redeems our lives, offering each of us a “second chance” as well.

Thanks to the Charles Dickens story *A Christmas Carol*, this year we've made our way through Advent in the company of Ebenezer Scrooge. With Scrooge we encountered the Ghost of Jacob Marley his former business partner who warned him to change his self-centered ways before it was too late. Then came the series of spectral visitors Marley's Ghost had predicted. Through those encounters we've seen Scrooge's cold, cruel heart begin to thaw. Thanks to the Ghost of Christmas Past Scrooge discovered that past faults do not condemn our future. Then the Ghost of Christmas Present prodded Scrooge to look upon the world around him – to notice the joy and the sorrow, the abundance and the need. Scrooge discovered that people in every walk of life *learn* to be grateful and compassionate and generous, *and* that generosity is appropriate not just at Christmastime but all the time.

As quickly as the encouraging Ghost of Christmas Present departed him, Ebenezer found himself dwarfed by the third spirit predicted by Marley's Ghost. Dickens wrote that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come “...was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand.”¹

To be honest, after his encounters with the ghosts of Jacob Marley, Christmas Past, and Christmas Present, Ebenezer Scrooge seemed to be growing at least a little bit accustomed to these ghostly apparitions. He said to this towering shroud, “Ghost of the Future!... I fear you more than

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave 4

any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart.”²

The spirit showed Scrooge other London businessmen known to him. The men were discussing the passing of an unspecified acquaintance. They showed no sorrow for the deceased; indeed, they were almost amused by the idea that his frame had “given up the ghost” while his wealth lived on.

The ominous phantom then showed Scrooge a young couple, barely scraping by. At this particular moment they were relieved and elated by an unexpected blessing. They had just learned that the sudden death of their creditor had granted them the temporary reprieve they needed to restore their meager finances to a manageable condition.

Scrooge noticed that he himself did not seem to appear anywhere in this future Christmas shown to him by the ghost... and soon he discovered why. The spirit conveyed Scrooge to a cemetery. In that churchyard Ebenezer received his answer – his answer for whose demise the businessmen had been discussing, what creditor’s death the young couple was celebrating. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come pointed his bony finger, and the trembling miser turned in that direction until his eyes took in the name carved into handsome but neglected tombstone: “Ebenezer Scrooge!”

Listen to how Scrooge reacted to his startling and sobering discovery.

“Spirit! ...hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this [experience]. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? ...Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life! ...I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.”³

Throughout Advent the artwork on our bulletin cover has stated that this story is about “the redemption of Scrooge.” Scrooge was blessed with the opportunity of a “second chance.” Through the agency of some guiding spirits Ebenezer had been gifted with perspective to see the trajectory of his life: he saw how he started nurturing seeds of self-absorption in his youth and early adulthood; he saw how he had hardened his heart, clenched his fist and closed his mind throughout his long, miserly and miserable life. At one point Scrooge asked the future-seeing ghost a question which gets to the heart of all our wondering: “Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?”⁴

Are we condemned to an unchangeable future because of the sins and shortcomings of our past? No. The gift of Christmas is redemption, exchanging the bad for the good, leaving behind the old and embracing the new. For that reason God came among us in the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born into our world and into our lives to save us from our destructive ways. By inviting us into an intimate relationship with God, Jesus redeems us from the allures of our self-centered human nature and shows us a hopeful future.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah foresaw how God would redeem humankind from our struggles and self-inflicted hardships by sending a savior to us. In Chapter 61 we heard,

¹ The Sovereign Lord has filled me with his Spirit.

He has chosen me and sent me
To bring good news to the poor,
To heal the broken-hearted,
To announce release to captives
And freedom to those in prison.

² He has sent me to proclaim
That the time has come

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

When the Lord will save his people
 And defeat their enemies.
 He has sent me to comfort all who mourn,
³To give to those who mourn in Zion
 Joy and gladness instead of grief,
 A song of praise instead of sorrow.⁵

That may sound like fancy Bible talk, but it captures the reality of daily life:

- we can feel captive to people's expectations, or to the relentless demands of our schedules or that of our boss or our kids;
- at times we feel poor, sometimes in terms of lacking money, or lacking time to breathe and rest and enjoy life;
- certainly there are times our hearts are broken—broken by dreams and hopes that don't materialize, broken by people who hurt us or disappoint us or are taken from us.

Our outlook may feel hopeless, buried by so much baggage, bound up by chains that hold us captive. And we may despair that there's little likelihood of things being any different tomorrow or next month or next year.

But the gospel—the good news—is about our redemption: we have been given a “second chance” in Jesus.

One of the most familiar stories in the whole world is that of the shepherds “abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”⁶ We may have an image of peaceful, innocent men minding their own business, bothering no one, not likely to harm a fly. We may think that because of idyllic manger scenes we've looked at all our lives. But there's a reason shepherds were scorned by society and not welcomed in towns and villages. Not only did their personal hygiene mimic that of the sheep and goats, but shepherds were a rough-and-tumble bunch. They lived in the wild for months at a time. They had neither the time nor need for the usual social graces. They were not above helping themselves to crops or a water source without permission. We can only imagine their topics of conversation, their jokes. If they were to step back and take a look at themselves, we can be pretty sure they wouldn't be proud of all they had said and done.

And yet God chose them as the target audience for the first public announcement the birth of the world's savior. God knew them. God knew their lives. And in giving them “good news of a great joy,” God gave them a second chance. God gave them a chance to redeem their unsavory behavior by seeing and sharing the news of the holy birth.

When God was born into our world we received grace. God's grace enables us to leave behind what is in the past, to face the challenges and blessings of the present, and to forge a future that seeks God's will for our *lives* and our *world*. God is Lord of all that—past, present, and future. An opening verse in the last book of the Bible affirms that in offering the greeting “Grace and peace be yours from God, who is, who was, and who is to come...”⁷ The God “who was” offers us forgiveness; the God “who is” is present with us; the God “who is to come” assures us that our trust is in the right place.

Through Christ's birth into our world, God offers to ease the load of our baggage and clip those chains that confine us, redeeming them—exchanging them—for another chance, an opportunity to start over, a chance to make amends and make ourselves a new future.

God's love, God's forgiveness was born into our lives in Bethlehem to rescue and restore our lives. This incomparable gift is offered to us not on a silver platter but in a straw-filled manger. When we embrace God's gifts of love and forgiveness, like Scrooge “we will not be the men or women we were.” Giving our lives to Jesus we are redeemed for good... for God.

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⁵ Isaiah 61:1-3a Good News translation

⁶ Luke 2:8 King James translation

⁷ Revelation to John 1:4a Good News translation