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**Title:** The Ghost of Christmas Past

**Series:** A Christmas Carol

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Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year in the church calendar. The word "Advent," from the Latin *adventus*, means "arrival."<sup>1</sup> I spoke to our school's kindergarten class last week, and we talked about a lot of things. They had a lot of questions, not the least of which was their interest in what's behind that door (it's a storage room by the way), but one of the things we talked about was the meaning of the colors on the table and pulpit. There are two times in the church year that you will see purple, and they are both times that we are WAITING. In Advent, we wait for the birth. In Lent, we wait for resurrection. Even when TCU played in the national championship game, I resisted the urge to change the church color to purple—although it certainly wouldn't have hurt.

During the season of Advent, our sermon series is based on *A Christmas Carol*, written by Charles Dickens in 1843. It is likely that you have either read it, seen a live production, or seen one of the many screen adaptations. The Muppets even did one. It's where we get the phrase "Bah Humbug!"—used by those of us who think others are being overly festive. Then we get called a "Scrooge," also from Dickens's main character, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* during a period when the British were re-evaluating Christmas traditions, including carols and newer customs such as cards and Christmas trees. The book, *A Christmas Carol*, which by the way was originally called, *A Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, inspired the early Victorian revival of the Christmas holiday and greatly influenced several aspects of Christmas that we enjoy to this day—family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, and a festive generosity of spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Dickens wanted to do something about how the society in which he lived treated those less fortunate. The key themes of his writing would come to be the treatment of the poor and the ability of a selfish man to redeem himself by transforming into a more sympathetic character. There is discussion among

<sup>1</sup> <https://aleteia.org/2017/12/01/what-does-the-word-advent-mean/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Christmas\\_Carol](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Christmas_Carol)

academics as to whether this is a fully secular story, or if it has Christian theme. Either way, we're going to see what we can learn from it.

As a reminder, or if you have no idea what I'm talking about, *A Christmas Carol* recounts the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, an elderly miser who is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come. Spoiler alert—after their visits, Scrooge is transformed into a kinder, gentler man. We will spend time looking at Scrooge's encounter with each ghost and what it tells us about the birth of a savior and our own redemption.

*A Christmas Carol* opens on a bleak, cold Christmas Eve in London, seven years after the death of Marley. Scrooge dislikes Christmas and refuses a dinner invitation from his nephew, Fred. He turns away two men seeking a donation to provide food and heating for the poor and only grudgingly allows his overworked, underpaid clerk, Bob Cratchit, to have Christmas Day off with pay to spend with his family.

That night Scrooge is visited at home by Marley's ghost, who wanders the Earth entwined by heavy chains and money boxes forged during a lifetime of greed and selfishness. Marley tells Scrooge that he has a single chance to avoid the same fate. He will be visited by three spirits and must listen or be cursed to carry much heavier chains of his own.

This first spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to Christmas scenes of Scrooge's boyhood. The scenes reveal Scrooge's lonely childhood at boarding school, his relationship with his beloved sister Fan, who died young while giving birth to Fred, and a Christmas party hosted by his first employer, Mr. Fezziwig, who treated him like a son. Scrooge's neglected fiancée Belle is shown ending their relationship, as she realizes that he will never love her as much as he loves his money.

Finally, they visit a now-married Belle with her large, happy family on the Christmas Eve that Marley died. Scrooge, upset by hearing Belle's description of the man that he has become, demands that the ghost remove him from the house. Dun, dun, dun, dun. Come back next week to Geist Christian Church to hear more. Seriously, that's where we'll stop in the story for now.

I invite you to consider with me how we, in this season of Advent, just like in Dickens's story, can operate in three tenses, all at once: past, present and future. In Advent, we recall a past event, a birth that happened over 2,000 years ago. This birth has great significance to our present. We wouldn't be here if that birth hadn't happened. In just 21 days, bathed in candlelight, we will sing: "Jesus, Lord at thy birth" and rejoice in his presence now. And, in Advent, we await the future—the unveiling of the reign of God, something continually being revealed, and yet to be fully realized.

Marley had many of the same traits as Ebenezer Scrooge. Marley appears, wrapped in the chains of his past. In his life, every time he failed to help someone, every time he took advantage of someone, he added chains, now wrapped around him for eternity. He's the only one who can get Scrooge's attention. Dickens seems to want us to see this so that we can choose a life that matters. He wants to get our attention like Jacob Marley is getting Ebenezer Scrooge's attention.

This morning's scripture is designed to get our attention, too. It comes as Jesus knows that his time on earth is short, and just before we learn of the plot to kill Jesus. Jesus is telling people that something is about to change, and they need to be ready. It's a necessary word to hear early in this season of waiting so Jesus can have our attention.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

Jesus wants them to know that the coming reign of God is near and that their past doesn't have to define their future. There's good news for us, just as it was for Scrooge and for those who first heard those words of Jesus. The God we worship is not only the God of the future and the God of the present. God is the God of the past, which means God's forgiveness stretches backward, covering our past actions and altering the shape of our lives.

We are not who we were. We can choose to act like we are, to act as if the mistakes we have made still plague us, still define us. Or we can have hope. Hope that God can work through our past to redefine our present and open our future. Hope that we are not limited to either staying the same or running from the past. Hope that God presents another option, to help us claim that who we were was a part of becoming who God wants us to be.

I've made mistakes, and I've done good things, likely just like you. So, which defines me? The mistakes or the good things? I guess that depends on where I choose to put my focus. Yes, we have made mistakes, and those mistakes are a part of our story. But they don't have to be the whole story. Scrooge let himself be defined by his past, but that's only one part of his story. We can reframe our past regrets as a small part of a larger story of forgiveness and growth. God has something greater planned for us.

I liken our situation to driving a car. If you want to know what's behind you, you have a couple of small mirrors you can use. The sideview and rearview mirrors give you a small glimpse of where you've been. But if we spend too much time looking in our rear-view mirror, we miss what's coming ahead. I think there's a reason that the rear-view mirror is so tiny and the windshield is so spacious. It's important to glimpse at the past every once in a while, to know where we've been, but it's much more important to stay focused on what's in front of us. We were meant to spend most of our time looking ahead of us, not behind.<sup>3</sup>

For Scrooge, the Ghost of Christmas Past reminded him of the pain his actions caused as a way of setting the stage for him to look forward. For us, the birth of the Christ child brings with it the hope that our past doesn't have to be our present and that our future is pregnant with the possibilities God has for us.

For many of us, Christmas is a mixed bag of emotions. While the season is meant to be joyous and delightful, we are weighed down by grief or guilt. We don't know how we can move forward because of what we have done or what others have done to us. What will Christmas bring us this year? More painful memories, more staring at the rear-view mirror? Or will we look ahead through the windshield at the hope the Christ child brings this year? Scrooge still has two more ghosts to go before his transformation is complete. But ours can start now. You are not who you used to be. You don't have to be a prisoner to the past. With God's help, you can start writing your new story.

Let me finish with a story about a wealthy man and his son who loved to collect rare works of art. They had everything in their collection from Picassos to Raphaels. The father and son would often sit together

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<sup>3</sup> Illustration found in sermon by Kory Wilcoxson titled Ghosts of Christmas Sermon Series – #1, November 27, 2016. [www.revkory.wordpress.com](http://www.revkory.wordpress.com).

and admire the great works of art. However, when a war broke out, the son was drafted and died in battle rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and he grieved deeply for his son. About a month later, there was a knock at the door, and a young man stood at the door with a package in his hands. He said, "Sir, you don't know me, but I'm the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He often talked about you and about your love for art."

The young man held out his package, and said, "I know this isn't very much. I'm not really that good of an artist. But I think your son would have wanted you to have this." The father opened the package, and it was a portrait of his son painted by the young man. The father stared at the portrait in awe. About a year later, the man died. There was a huge auction of all his paintings. Many influential people gathered wanting to bid on one of the masterpieces. On the platform also sat the painting of the son.

The auctioneer pounded his gavel, "We will now start the bidding for the picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?" And there was silence. Finally, a voice in the back of the room shouted, "We came to see Picasso and Raphael. Skip this one." Finally, a voice came from the very back of the room. It was the long-time gardener of the man and his son, and he said, "I don't even know if I should be here given my past because I'm not one of you but, if allowed, I will give \$10 for the painting."

The auctioneer hit his gavel again and said, "\$10. Who will give me 20?" And the room went silent. "Sold to this man in the back for \$10." And then he hit his gavel again, "The auction has ended." People looked around and said, "What about the other paintings?" The auctioneer said, "I was given the Last Will and Testament of this man with the stipulation that I would not reveal his request until this moment. The father's will said this, "Auction the picture of my son, and whoever gets the son gets everything." <sup>4</sup> I was thinking about the gift of Christmas. It's not about the presents; it's about God's son. And this Christmas can be wonderful if you'll say, "My past is checkered." The Lord would say to you, "Then give your life to him because he who gets the Son, gets it all!" You are not who you used to be thanks to the one on whom we wait to be born this day.

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<sup>4</sup> Illustration found at Christmas Past, Present, Future The Reason by Wayne Cordeiro, Jon Burgess, December 23, 2018. <https://www3.ewehope.org>.