

Copyright Geist Christian Church, December 10, 2023

Title: The Ghost of Christmas Present

Series: A Christmas Carol

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During the season of Advent, our sermon series is based on *A Christmas Carol*, written by Charles Dickens in 1843. He wrote it during a period when the British were re-evaluating Christmas traditions, and it inspired the early Victorian revival of the Christmas holiday and greatly influenced how we celebrate the holiday. *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.

We're spending time in this season looking at Scrooge's encounter with each ghost and what it tells us about the birth of a savior and our own redemption. Last week, it was the Ghost of Christmas Past, and we discovered that the past doesn't have to define our future and that our windshield is bigger than our rear-view mirror. Today, it's the Ghost of Christmas Present.

After being visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past wrapped in chains and money boxes, Ebenezer Scrooge this time is visited by a jolly giant with dark brown curls. He is wearing a green fur-lined robe and has a holly wreath on his head. The Ghost of Christmas Present is surrounded by piles of food and signs of abundance. Even the ghost's lamp is in the shape of a cornucopia—but kids, don't hold an open flame close to the dried-out pine needles on your ceiling like this guy!

The ghost shows Scrooge how Christmas will unfold that year. First, they stop by the house of Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's long-suffering employee. Scrooge sees their small home and their meager feast, and they witness the innocence and joy of Tiny Tim, Cratchit's son, despite his challenges. Their next stop is at the home of Fred, Scrooge's nephew. Remember, Scrooge turned down an invitation to dinner at Fred's house, so Scrooge now sees the party he didn't want to go to. He enjoys it so much, he asks the

ghost to stay until the end of the festivities. Scrooge realizes all the things he will miss because his focus was on himself and his money. You can feel his heart starting to soften.

One of the most telling lines about Scrooge is in the 1984 movie adaptation when the Ghost of Christmas Present says to Scrooge, “You’ve gone through life not noticing a lot.” Ouch. Anyone else guilty of that? I think one of the biggest challenges to being faithful today is not the persistence of evil or the challenge of secularism. It’s the constant presence of distraction. We are a distracted culture; our attention is dissected 100 different ways, and we are unable to prioritize what’s important because we’re told everything is important, which means nothing is important.

The coming of the Christ child is just one event in a holiday buffet of events, and we’ll do our best to give it our full attention, but we’re just so busy, and there’s just so much to do, and I just got a text message and—just a minute—oh there’s a “buy 4, get 2 free” sale at Crew Car Wash. Wait, did I remember to order Ruth’s Christmas present? Hold on. I just got a notification about an injury report for the Colts/Bengals game. Stand by.... We are distracted.

When I participated in the Fishers Citizen’s Police Academy, one of the things we got to do was a four-hour ride along with a Fishers police officer. It was an eye-opening experience in many ways. When I asked my officer about accident investigations, he said that it was his guess that at least 90% of car accidents can in some way be defined as being caused by distracted driving. The officer said that we usually think of someone on their cell phone, and that’s certainly part of it, but there’s also eating, putting on mascara, adjusting a mirror, or even being too engaged in talking to someone.

Scrooge was distracted by the past and the future. Being present in the moment for him was a waste of time. His focus was either on the past and what didn’t get done or on the future and what needed to be done. His head was always in his ledger, his eyes on the bottom line, and his employee was simply a cog in the gear of Scrooge’s money-making machine. And, as the ghost showed him, Scrooge missed the overflow of life around him, the whispers of angels that got drowned out by his own greed.

What gets drowned out for us? What do we miss in this season because of distraction? The easy answer is we miss the meaning of Christmas. It seems that what we are most seeking in this world—peace—is the thing we are least likely to find if we keep doing things the same way. When we are distracted, we are not peaceful. God’s peace means we possess a calm, an assurance, a focus that only comes from meeting Christ where he is and knowing that he is here, in the midst of all that is going on in the world. He is here. Present. With us now.

You might think it a little odd that, here we are, getting pretty deep into December, and now halfway through Advent, and we’re yet to hear a traditional scripture for this time of year. We’ll get there, I promise, but John’s Gospel begins, not at Jesus’ conception or cradle, but at the conception of the cosmos. No angels, swaddling clothes, or shepherds enter the scene to deflect attention from the essential point—God, through whom the world was created, the one who gives light to all people,

became a human being. God lived among us and died among us. In this one human being, out of all the billions who have lived, God's own glory shone with life-giving light.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John's careful statement, "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" simultaneously identifies the Word both as being God and being "with" God. It's the paradox of explaining two of the three expressions of the trinity—Creator and Christ. Marianne Meye Thompson says that calling Jesus God's word means "Jesus is God's self-expression, God's thought or mind, God's interior word spoken aloud. John portrays Jesus not only as the representative of God, but also as the representation of God: the one whose origins lie uniquely in the very being of God."

The term "Word" (*logos* in Greek) connects the Genesis 1 creation story to Jesus. According to Genesis 1, God creates through the Word; God speaks, and God's Word brings each created thing into being. In Greek thought, the Word is the logic that permeates and structures the universe, the divine reason that orders and gives meaning to all that is. Jews and Greeks can agree that the very existence of the created order depends on the *Logos*, without whom not even one thing has come into being. So, while we wait for Christ, Christ is here because Christ has been here since the beginning.¹

How is it, then, that we can be Christ in the world now? The rest of the lesson of the Ghost of Christmas Present for Scrooge happens when he is reminded of the cruel words he once uttered about the poor and suddenly realizes how heartless and hurtful his comments were. The ghost shows Scrooge two more children that had been hiding under his robe. The boy is named "Ignorance" and the girl is named "Want." Scrooge then asks if these children have no refuge or any place to go for help, to which the spirit reminds Scrooge once again of something he said: "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?"

The Ghost then gives a piece of advice about these two: "Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." Ignorance is what is most troubling in the present, for it spells doom for the future of us all. Through a new perspective granted to him by the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge becomes aware of both the good and bad that surrounds him in the present. Ignorance and Want both plague Scrooge—and, if we're honest, they can get ahold of us too.

It's what makes the Ghost of Christmas Present so relevant for us today. Christmas Present is today, this season in which we're engaged. There's no bringing back Christmas Past. The past has been relegated to memory; the future is yet to be. We only have today, this moment. I think Scrooge's Ghost of Christmas Present tried to impress upon Scrooge the importance of making each moment count, and this ghost "lived" the perfect example. The once-vibrant spirit ages so quickly in the tale, Scrooge questions the sudden change. The Ghost tells Scrooge his life is "very brief"—in fact, the length of Christmas Day only.

¹ Commentary on John 1:1-14 by Judith Jones, December 25, 2019 found at www.workingpreacher.org.

If we look at our lives this way—making today count and living each day with the same gusto and vigor—the briefness of life becomes irrelevant. I recently read of someone whose life epitomizes this truth. The man’s name was William Borden, heir of the family fortune made in silver mining. He was born in 1887 and enjoyed all the advantages of wealth and privilege. While still a teenager, he made a momentous decision to become a missionary, and he focused his life with this goal in mind. Of course, this wasn’t his family’s goal for him; they wanted him to take over the family business.

Borden entered college at Yale University, spent four years there, and went on to Princeton Theological Seminary for three additional years. Friends were dismayed at Borden’s single-minded devotion to serve as a missionary; they considered he was “throwing his life away.” In contrast to this thinking, Borden continued to move forward. In his journal, he wrote, “Say ‘no’ to self, say ‘yes’ to Jesus every time.”

While he was still attending seminary, he gave away his personal fortune. Inside the flyleaf of his Bible, Borden wrote the words “No Reserve.” After completing his education, job offers followed. He turned them down. Writing once more in his Bible, he added two new words: “No Retreat.” Having chosen to serve as a missionary to China, Borden embarked on his voyage. Beforehand, though, he received word his father was seriously ill. Instead of returning immediately to his father’s side, he continued on his journey. Another statement was added in his Bible: “No Regrets.”²

But Borden never arrived in China to begin his ministry. He was in Cairo when he contracted meningitis, and within a month, the 25-year-old had died. Did he (as some classmates suggested) throw his life away? It’s true he never achieved his goal of being a missionary to China. Nevertheless, the accounts of the years before he set sail indicate he was already living a life in service to God. He was living in the present, doing what he believed God wanted him to do now, at each moment. Each activity into which he poured himself became an example to those who worked alongside. Borden’s short life conveys the urgency that the Ghost of Christmas Present taught to Ebenezer Scrooge. In thinking of gifts for loved ones, our presence is often our best present.

The Gospel writer assures us, the Word that spoke the world into being continues to speak. In Jesus, God says to the world, “I have so loved you that I am sending my unique child to live among you so that all of you may become my children.” Those who listen, who recognize and welcome God in Christ, become God’s children not by any ordinary biological process, but solely by God’s gift of rebirth.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing for God to transform the world through Jesus Christ, but it is also a time in which we recognize that God has already transformed the world through the birth of Christ. It is a time of already and not quite yet, a time of celebration and a time of preparation. Christmas is not about whether we say “Merry Christmas” but instead about choosing to live like Christ and proclaiming Christ to the world.

² Story originally found at <https://wiseblooding.com/tag/ghost-of-christmas-past/> but fact checking on Wikipedia found it to be somewhat flawed. The part about what was written in his Bible was antidotal but his Bible was never found.

As we prepare to look to the Ghost of Christmas Future, let us make the Christmas present what we need it to be for us. Instead of being simply one more Christmas, just like last year or all the years before, let us make this Christmas a time in which we see God's incarnation as transformative and life-changing, not just for us but for the world, for what came into being at Christmas was life, and that life was the light of all people. The promise of Christmas present is that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not and will not overtake it.