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Title: The Ghost of Christmas Past

Series: A Christmas Carol

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Text: [Luke 21:25-36](#)

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“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.”

These words seem like an unlikely beginning to a favorite Christmas story.

But these are the words that begin *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens’s iconic story of the miser Ebenezer Scrooge. On a very cold Christmas Eve in England, Ebenezer Scrooge encounters the ghost of his deceased business partner Jacob Marley, who informs him that he will be visited by three ghosts: The Ghost of Christmas Past, The Ghost of Christmas Present, The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come

The aim of these three ghosts: Transformation of an old sinner’s heart and life. Unexpected and unlikely change. This beginning sets the stage and foreshadows what will happen and what to come.

During the season of Advent, our sermon series is based on *A Christmas Carol*. It is likely that you have either read the novella; seen a stage adaptation of the novella; seen a movie, such as *Marley’s Ghost*, Jim Carrey’s *A Christmas Carol*, or perhaps *A Muppets Christmas Carol*. At the very least, you have heard the phrase “Bah Humbug!” And you are familiar with the name Ebenezer Scrooge.

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. I believe this series is a great companion for the season of Advent because we spend the next four weeks preparing our hearts and minds, preparing our lives for what is to come. This is when the church focuses on what will happen at Christmas, a day that changes everything. The word Advent in Latin, *Adventus*, means coming. We are preparing for what is coming. In the midst of the brokenness of our lives and the brokenness of the world, something new is coming.

Charles Dickens was born into a middle class family who experienced financial peril with his father being thrown in debtors prison when Dickens was 12. He was forced to sell his collection of books, leave school, and work at a rat infested shoe factory.

By 1844, Dickens had written six books and released *A Christmas Carol* in December of that year. There was a renewed interest in celebrating Christmas in England at this time, and Dickens wanted to write a Christmas story that also raised awareness about poverty, especially child poverty. He wanted to challenge the spirit of greed that ran among English upper and middle classes. Dickens felt one of the best ways to raise up the injustice of poverty caused by greed was to write a moving Christmas story.

And thus *A Christmas Carol* was born. It's pretty remarkable that an English story written in the mid-19th century remains one of the most recognized Christmas stories.

Marley is wrapped in chains, in death. In life, every time he failed to help someone, every time he took advantage of someone, another chain is wrapped around him for eternity. He is in a hell of his own making. He's the only one who can get Scrooge's attention

Dickens wants us to see this so that in this life, we can choose a life that matters. He wants to get our attention.

There are particular texts in the Bible that are designed to get our attention. Near the conclusion of Luke's Gospel, and Jesus' earthly life, he is telling people that something is about to change. It's a curious text for the first Sunday in Advent, but it's a necessary word for us to hear:

“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves.²⁶ The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.²⁷ Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor.²⁸ Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near. (Luke 21:25-28 CEB)

Luke tells us that the signs of the coming reign of God are near if we are only willing to see that things are going to change and we need to be ready to change with them. That, in the meantime, while we wait, we prepare by

- Living with courage
- Living with compassion
- Living with hope

No matter your circumstances, your redemption is drawing near, and it's never too late to begin living in a new way. Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserable person. And he can't understand how anyone is not miserable. After all, he has everything materially he would ever need, and yet he is still known as a miser. He keeps putting more and more into his bank account, and it doesn't matter.

He lives a life that doesn't matter. But it's not too late...and it hasn't always been this way.

I love the way Dickens describes the Ghost of Christmas Past. The first ghost to appear to him following Marley's appearance: "The voice was soft and gentle. Singularly low, as if instead being so close beside him, it were at a distance."

This is Scrooge's moment of reckoning. It's not exactly how Jesus describes our moment of reckoning, but the ghost of Christmas past comes in a way that lets us know his journey of redemption is beginning.

The ghost takes Ebenezer back to his childhood. At first his spirit delights in seeing the town he grew up in, the kids playing. But as he goes along in the memory, it's clear that he has buried the past. He is the child sitting alone in the schoolhouse. We see the love of his life leave him because money is more important to him than their love.

Scrooge begins to see the pain he has experienced, the error of his ways, the pain he has not transformed but instead passed onto others. It's so painful that at the end of the chapter, Scrooge begs the ghost, "Take back. Haunt me no longer." Scrooge had buried his past. He had remembered it a certain way. That's the tricky thing about the past. We can look through old photos or social media memories and remember things a certain way

A week before Christmas in 2015, the New Orleans City Council approved the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee from a street called Lee Circle. As you can imagine, there were strong feelings on both sides about the removal of the Confederate landmark. The debate in many communities has been about how we are honest about the past, remember the past, and learn and move forward from the past. This debate has taken place in many communities, especially in the southern part of the United States. One of the issues raised in the debate in New Orleans was that Lee Circle *was always called Lee Circle*. People kept saying that it's always been Lee Circle. That is what they remembered. But it wasn't true. Until 1884, the road was known as Trivoli Circle. Of course, there was no one alive to remember that, but the road did have another name.

The past can be tricky. A journey through our memories for some is fleeting and for many is difficult. But we find this is where Scrooge begins his journey to redemption. This is where he begins to discover hope for the future. It's where, as Luke says, he stands up straight, raises his head, because his redemption is drawing near.



I think the 2009 version of *A Christmas Carol* captures the best image of The Ghost of Christmas Past—a candle, a light, a flickering candle here to shine a light for Ebenezer Scrooge what he should have seen all along, the pain he experienced.

And how that buried pain led him to “Bah Humbug.”

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2 CEB).

So often, that great light comes as a flickering candle. Today we lit the candle of hope, just one candle out of the five, but we can begin to see that no matter our station in life, no matter our circumstances, no matter what is going on in the world (and there is a lot going on), hope is here. Redemption draws near

Let Us Pray:

God, you have been at work in our lives and in the world since the beginning. Open our spirits to all of the ways that you are at work during this season of preparation. Give us the courage to examine our lives so that we continue to grow into the people you have created us to be. In Jesus name, Amen.