

**Bah Humbug! Making Change**  
**Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 1:46-47, 52-55**  
**11/27/2016**

A *Christmas Carol* is not your traditional feel good Christmas story. The story begins with “Marley was dead”, a rather unconventional way to welcome the holiday season, don't you think? I mean what goes better with Christmas than creepy ghosts, right? But by the end of Ebenezer Scrooge's journey we find that Scrooge has found new life, it is an unconventional hero's tale. And so, as odd as it may seem to start a Christmas story with death, by the end, it all makes perfect sense. At the beginning of the story, on Christmas Eve, Scrooge is just as good as dead – his soul is as frigid as the bleak midwinter air. He goes on a difficult and frightening journey, and eventually wakes up Christmas morning a changed man.

A *Christmas Carol* is a timeless story, not only because we hear about Scrooge's past, present, and future, but because generations have told and retold this story in their own way. For over a hundred years now A Christmas Carol has been a part of our culture. It is a tale of redemption that will be with us for a long time to come! It is a story that has embedded itself into our culture and, for many of us, has become a routine fixture in our holiday traditions. Everyone knows what it means to be called a Scrooge, and poor little Tiny Time still has the ability to pull on our heartstrings.

**The dismissive response**, “Bah! Humbug!” perfectly expresses the worldview of Ebenezer Scrooge, the tragic main character of our story. Scrooge is a sad man, and Christmas is not a happy time for him; but to be fair, no time during the year seems to bring Scrooge much joy.

Scrooge is an iconic figure who represents stinginess, greed, and generally being in a terrible mood. Testament to the negative image his name implies there were only 12 children in England named Ebenezer in 2013. Interestingly enough, “Ebenezer” is a Hebrew word meaning, “stone of help” in 1 Samuel 7:12. Maybe you remember singing about it in the second stanza of “Come , Thou Fount of Every Blessing”: “Here I raise my Ebenezer ; hither by the help I'm come.” Even though by the end of the story Ebenezer Scrooge is a changed person, the character remains a strong caricature of

everything our Christmas celebrations shouldn't be. It seems that we can't accept that he has been redeemed. But maybe there's still hope. Maybe over the course of this worship series, even Ebenezer Scrooge's name might come to mean something different to you. After all, if Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we.

The word **Advent comes from the Latin word *ad venire*, meaning "to come."** The four Sundays before Christmas Day, the church gathers to wait for the birth of the Christ Child. During this time we read stories from the Old Testament, in which God laid out the plan to send a Messiah to save God's people. Let's hear again the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.*

*He will be named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal One, Prince of Peace.*

*There will be vast authority and endless peace  
for David's throne and for his kingdom,  
establishing and sustaining it  
with justice and righteousness  
now and forever.*

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

Waiting for something that has already happened is a curious practice. The Advent season plays with our notion of time. **The church gathers in the present, to ponder the past, for a future hope.** A *Christmas Carol* is a beautiful story for Advent because it is a tale in which the past, present, and future all come together on one transformative night. Certainly it is a story about Scrooge's love for money and his altruistic failures, but it is also a story about how Scrooge cannot let go of his past.

Jesus came to save us from counting our past as our only reality. It's like when Moses led God's people out of Egyptian slavery into the wilderness. Because living in the wilderness was difficult and they were caught wandering between where they were and where they were heading, the people complained and wished they had died as slaves. The people became stubborn and bitter, almost "Scroogelike" in their relationship with God and one another. Instead of moving forward in faith, trusting that God was with them, the people kept looking over their shoulder, hopelessly lamenting over the way things were.

Advent is like living in the wilderness between what was and what will be. Living into this tension, remembering God's promises, and depending on faith become spiritual disciplines that keep us from becoming Scrooges ourselves. Even though the Promised Land may seem far off, we hold tightly to the promises of our God, for **"the One who promised is faithful" Hebrews 10:23.**

So in Advent we spend four weeks "waiting" for Christ's coming into the world. It's a strange thing to wait for something to happen that we know has already occurred. Some things you can only do once. For example, watching a football game doesn't have the same energy or tension when you know who will win. A good mystery novel isn't nearly as good if you know the butler did it, in the ballroom, with the candlestick.

Advent is different. Christians profess that Christ was born, died, and rose again. The big reveal has been made. The church doesn't wait in expectation of what God is going to do; rather we live into the tension of where the divine meets the world, knowing that God has reconciled all things through Christ, but the story isn't finished yet.

Hymns and other religious songs are meant to communicate theology, tradition, and an experience of God. And, in large part, music is the vehicle through which theology and tradition and story is learned. Even if one is relatively unfamiliar with the Christian tradition, he or she can probably still finish the lyric: **"Hark the herald angels sing, glory to \_\_\_\_\_"** or Silent night, \_\_\_\_\_ night." This is one of the reasons why Jesus spent so much time teaching through stories called parables. The "Prodigal Son" reminds us of God's love and forgiveness, the "Good Samaritan" urges us to offer compassion, and "The Sheep and the Goats" cautions us against forgetting

the sick, the hungry and imprisoned. And though Dicken's "carol" is longer than a parable and isn't set to music, he uses the power of story to remind us that there is no soul too gruff, too cold, or too cantankerous for God's redeeming power.

As Scrooge is sleeping, the servant's bells over the door chaotically chime, waking Scrooge up from his meditative slumber, and his dead partner Jacob Marley's ghost appears through the door, weighed down by heavy chains that have been forged with his miserly wealth. Marley says, that he is restless, always traveling with an "incessant torture of remorse." Part of Marley's punishment is the inability to find peace, and his restlessness is one we know too well during the holidays. There are seemingly countless parties, decorations, concerts, gifts to wrap, stockings to hang (or threaten to take down depending on one's behavior), and meals to prepare. On the other hand there is loneliness as well – memories of loved ones no longer with us, the numbing silence of an empty house, the sadness of seeing giggling children you could never have yourself. Advent is to be a time of waiting, not only to live into the tension of when the divine and creation collide, but it is the spiritual discipline of slowing down to notice God's presence in the still small voice within a violent and hurried world. **"Be still, and know that I am God!"** the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 46:10, but Jacob Marley is doomed to wander in constant aimless motion, like a shopper on Christmas Eve trying to find a last-minute gift.

Marley offers Scrooge a warning echoing the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" in which the rich man ignores Lazarus the poor dying man who is at the rich man's gate and would welcome any scraps, but is offered nothing. Both die. Lazarus is in heaven and the rich man in hell. There is a great void or chasm that separates them that neither can cross. The rich man wants Lazarus to bring water to him because he is in agony. And he insists that Lazarus should go to his brothers and warn them to change their ways so they don't end up in the same place of eternal torment. The Rich man still sees Lazarus as a servant to do his bidding, he doesn't see Lazarus' value as a child of God. This parable offers a conviction to open our eyes to the value of each and every life. The Rich man's torment is his own stubbornness in holding on to the misplaced assumption that his life is more valuable than Lazarus's. The great void between Lazarus and the rich man was not wealth

or status; rather the great chasm across which the rich man cannot travel is ignorance. When we fail to see that class is a human construct built around the false belief that some souls are worth more than others, that chasm is indeed impossible to cross.

In a way, **Marley weighed down by the chains he forged in life**, represents the rich man in Jesus' parable, affirming you reap what you sow, but warning Scrooge that he has been sowing the wrong kind of seed. Scrooge responds, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," to which Marley answers, "Business!...Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business." Marley can now see the plight of the poor, but can do nothing about it other than to reveal it to Scrooge.

**If Marley's ghost were to visit you, what do you think he might say to you?**

But there is hope. Because God's kingdom doesn't look like our kingdom. When Mary was pregnant with Jesus, she traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When they met, Mary offered a great vision of what God's kingdom looks like in the world:

*"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!*

*In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.*

*...God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.*

*God has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty-handed.*

*God has come to the aid of the servant Israel,  
remembering God's mercy,*

*just as promised to our ancestors,*

*to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."*

During Advent, we remember Mary's vision of God's new creation coming into the world through Christ. It is a graceful world in which the proud are scattered, the hungry are filled, the lowly are lifted, and the hopeless are offered a new life.

**The miracle has just begun in YOU for the sake of the world...God bless us every one!**

From the prophet come these words about the future Messiah.

**Isaiah 9:6-7**  
**Common English Bible**

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.  
He will be named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal One, Prince of Peace.  
There will be vast authority and endless peace  
for David's throne and for his kingdom,  
establishing and sustaining it  
with justice and righteousness  
now and forever.

And in our second scripture Mary praises God in a reading known as the Magnificat.

**Luke 1:46-47, 52-55**  
**Common English Bible**

Mary said,  
"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!  
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

...God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.  
God has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty-handed.  
God has come to the aid of the servant Israel,  
remembering God's mercy,  
just as promised to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of these  
holy words.