

“The Life of Christmas Present: Look Upon Me”

Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Romans 8:18-25

12/11/2016

We continue our Advent sermon series based on Charles Dicken’s classic story, “*A Christmas Carol*” using resources from Matt Rawles book, [The Redemption of Scrooge](#).

Maybe you’ve heard the phrase, “There’s no time like the present.” I find thinking about time is fascinating because “the present” – this moment, right now – is so fleeting. There is, in fact, no time in the present because the moment I start think about the present, it’s already in the past. Indeed, “there is no time like the present,” because it can’t be measured or quantified. It’s over before it’s begun. I’ve also heard the present is called *the present* because it is a gift. This is true in the sense that present is where all of the action is!

Another popular phrase is to say that someone “tells it like it is.” When people say this what they usually mean is they agree with what has been said. At least, I’ve rarely hear someone say, “He tells it like it is , and he is totally wrong.” The interesting thing about telling it like it is, so to speak, is that we can never be completely objective when observing it whatever it happens to be. We will always, however small, only be able to tell it like we see it.

The Ghost of Christmas Present is about to take Scrooge on a journey, offering Scrooge a window into the way things are, that he could not experience by himself. If anyone can tell it like it is, the Ghost of Christmas Present certainly can.

As Scrooge awakens from sleep and realizes it’s time for the next spirit to appear he is drawn to another room by light shining under the door. Holly and berries adorn the walls, the fireplace roars with heat, and a bounty of food covers every surface. **The Ghost of Christmas present towers above him with a booming and joyful voice.**

The Ghost of Christmas Past had felt intimate yet distant and the visions shown to Scrooge were fleeting and separated from him. He tried to interact with the people from his memory, but he could not, leaving him with a

detached experience (not unlike spending time with a friend who will never put down their phone). But now, with the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge can feel the warmth of the fire and smell the turkey on the table. While Scrooge may have questioned whether his experience with the first spirit was real, now there is little question.

The laughter, warmth, food, and decorations of Christmas remind us of God's ever-present abundance. God is always present and always offers what we need. Scrooge's senses come alive in the "realness" of this vision. Why? Because the present is the only part of time that feels real. The past is a memory, and the future is a dream, but the present is now, and now is when everything happens. Every word of love we share, every meal we enjoy, every song we've heard were all experienced in the now. The past and future are simply nows that you have either experienced or will experience. That's why I like to say that God lives in an eternal now. It's all now to God because God is independent of time as we know it. God is eternal and all powerful, which is a concept that is hard for us to understand. But think about it like taking a long road trip – you travel from one point to the next, from mountains to valleys, but the earth is always under your feet.

Not only is God always with us, but God always offers us what we need. **Unfortunately we confuse our needs with wants.** Sin causes us to be afraid we won't have enough, so we buy more food than we can eat, more clothing than we can wear, and more shelter than we can keep clean. A fourth century monk, Basil of Caesarea, once said, "This bread which you have set aside is the bread of the hungry; this garment you have locked away is the clothing of the naked; those shoes which you let rot are the shoes of one who is barefoot, those riches you have hoarded are the riches of the poor." **God always provides enough.** It just might look different than what we had in mind. But I think the real problem is that we are afraid it isn't enough. This story is as old as the birth of humanity. God offered the man and the woman every tree in the garden except one, but their fear of not having enough transformed desire for the Creator of the fruit to desire for the fruit itself, and Jesus came to unwind that misguided desire that we still struggle with today.

Scrooge is traveling with the Ghost of Christmas Present when the church bells ring out. As the people leave their homes to gather in the church, the spirit begins to sprinkle incense upon the families meals as a

means of blessing their food. As Scrooge is perplexed why the spirit is offering more incense to some and less to others, the spirit replies without reservation that the poor need it the most. The spirit's simple gesture offers us a moment to pause and consider how God works within the world.

Sometimes we think justice means that everyone should receive the same, but this doesn't seem to be the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. **Here's an illustration that explains it well.** There is a 6 foot tall fence and three people of varying heights trying to see what is on the other side. One person is 6 foot 3 inches tall, the other 5 foot 7, and the other 4 foot 7. Let's say each person receives a one-foot crate to use in order to see over the fence. The tallest person is well over the fence, but almost can't hold on to the fence to keep his balance. The shortest person still cannot see over the fence. The person in the middle is holding steady, enjoying the view. This may represent equality in the sense that they all received the same crate, but this is hardly justice. Justice is making sure everyone has access to the same opportunities. Throughout scripture, God's justice involves lifting up the lowly, not a divine mandate that all receive the same. That is why we are collecting change in our change for change bottles and why we are collecting food for the Christmas food boxes, both needed by the Milaca Food Pantry. This is why we participate in Holiday Helping Hands. A rejoicing justice is at the heart of God's kingdom.

Scrooge questions the spirit's motives, almost blaming the spirit for the cultural command to rest on the Sabbath (by closing the shops). The spirit points out if Scrooge is looking to blame someone, he should blame humanity. When the poor are vilified or assumed to be lazy, and when the only solution to systemic poverty is working harder in a system that favors the prosperous, it's time to work to change the system.

Is Tiny Tim's prayer, "God bless us, every one," meant simply to pull at our heartstrings, or can it be a lived reality in our churches and the world? Are we, perhaps, still living in anticipation of "God bless us, every one" becoming a reality? Anticipation and expectation are fundamental to the Christmas experience – it's why we wrap presents and put them under the tree for all to see. There's the anticipation of resolved mystery. *What could be hidden under the brightly colored wrapping?* There's also the expectation of fulfilled desire. *I hope it's what I want.*

During the Babylonian exile, around six hundred years before Jesus was born, Israel began to anticipate a Messiah. The people held the expectation of an earthly king who would restore the old kingdom of righteousness and truth. The book of Isaiah records the hope: *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.***

They anticipated that God would eventually bring God's people out of exile and send them a king. Writing hundreds of years later, even with the knowledge that Christ had died, Paul echoed this hope in his letter to the Romans: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

The anticipation is palpable. It's as though Israel is a small child sitting at the foot of a Christmas tree just begging to open their presents. The problem is their anticipation came with a misplaced expectation. In other words, they were sitting at the foot of the tree looking at all the wrapped boxes, all the while missing the tree in front of them. Simon Tugwell, in his book Prayer, says it well: "If we keep clamoring for things we want from God, we may often find ourselves disappointed, because we have forgotten the weakness of God and what we may call the poverty of God. We had thought of God as the dispenser of all the good things we could possibly desire; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except himself."

Our Christmas expectations can miss the mark, too. At times our meditations are focused on boxes rather than on the tree. The Christmas

story is the story about a miracle – the infinite and almighty God entered into the world as a helpless baby, born into poverty in an occupied land. God decided to put on human flesh so that we could inherit the eternal, a kingdom full of life, built by grace on a foundation of love and justice.

What are you expecting this Advent and Christmas season? Are you expecting a miracle? The good news is that God has already done the great miracle by sending Jesus to break the bonds of sin and death – that first Christmas was a miracle! And, amazingly, he continues to do miracles by using us - the church, the body of Christ – to make them happen. But too often we get in our own way. Seeing the Cratchits' poverty, Scrooge is moved to pity. He asks the Ghost of Christmas Present if crippled **Tiny Tim will be spared**, and the spirit answers, "I see a vacant seat...in the poor chimney corner and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die." Scrooge trembles at the thought, pausing only to hear his own earlier words spoken back to him, "If he be like to dies, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." Our own misplaced desires and foolishness are a great enemy to our communion with God than any perceived or real spiritual force of wickedness.

If only we could have been there for the first Nativity. Maybe if we had seen the Christ Child with our own eyes, our Christmas celebrations would be more like what God intends them to be. But the beautiful thing is that we are in the story, in a way. When the shepherds arrived to tell the Holy Family what they had seen and heard from the angels, Luke tells us, "Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully" Luke 2:18-19. The funny thing is the only people present that night were Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the shepherds, so who is the "everyone" who heard the shepherd's story? We are the "everyone". We should be filled with amazement at their news. We, along with Mary, should treasure and ponder the mystery of God being with us in the flesh.

Tiny Tim's "**God bless Us, Every One**" is one of the most iconic phrases in popular literature. What if we modeled our Advent and Christmas comings and goings as if we actually believe that God has already blessed everyone?

Maybe then Tiny Tim's precious and prophetic prayer will ring true – God has blessed us all, with the gift of himself.

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Our first scripture details how we will be blessed when we care for the needy in our neighborhood.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11
New Revised Standard Version

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

In our second scripture Paul reassures us whatever challenges we are facing right now, God will reveal to us glories that are more than we can imagine.

Romans 8:18-25
New Revised Standard Version

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

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