

## **December 17 – Third Sunday in Advent**

Scripture: John 3:16-17; Luke 2:10-14

Sermon: The Life of Christmas Present

What does it mean to live fully in the present? The past is memory, and the future is a dream, but the present is now, and now is when everything happens. God lives in the eternal now. When Jesus came to live among us he challenged us to live fully now for God. What does that mean? For me, part of living in the eternal now is to see all others as beloved children in need of love. Too much of the faith of the people of Jesus' time was focused either on the past, remembering what God had once done, or longing for a future when God would send a Messiah. As important as memories and hopes are, Jesus realized that these were distorting the present. Too much emphasis was on following rules handed down from the past, which tended to make the faith of the now dry and sterile. Too much emphasis on what God might do someday kept many from asking, "How can God be at work today?"

They were living under an oppressive Roman occupation where following the rules and hoping for something better someday created stability but no life or joy. Jesus came to share a message of God's love. His birth, as we will see, was God's statement that now is the time. God is present. We still need to be reminded to live fully in the present and not be dragged down by our past, or only wish tomorrow was better. We, too, need to be reminded to see, really see what today has to offer.

In our journey with Scrooge he has experienced a difficult set of encounters with the spirit world. His deceased partner, Jacob Marley, had informed him that all that he values was ultimately and eternally unimportant. The Ghost of Christmas Past had shown him many memories, some joyous and others quite painful. They reminded him of a time when money was not the only focus of his life. He viewed, with pain, how seeking only for wealth had cost him the one woman he loved. Though he angrily snuffed out the Spirit's presence, those memories were at work in him.

Today we look at his time with the Ghost of Christmas Present. This is the one truly alive ghost for, of course, we are in the present. The past was a flickering set of memories and we will find the future a silent scary specter. But this ghost, he is big, he

laughs, he challenges and takes Scrooge on a journey, offering him a window into the way things are that he could not experience by himself.

For those of you who are not as familiar with the tale as I am, let me briefly share where Scrooge journeys with this Ghost. They first go out into the city and Scrooge sees people getting ready to celebrate Christmas. While his focus is on the buying and selling, he can't help but experience some of the joy of this day. They travel many places seeing people experience Christmas, from lighthouse keepers, to people on sailing ships. They see the pain of families who are so poor they are scrounging for food, trying to stay together. There is an extended visit to his clerk, Bob Cratchit's home, to which I will return in a moment. Also, there is a joyous time at Nephew Fred's where Scrooge sees what his rejection has been costing him. He has so much fun at Fred's he doesn't want to leave. Finally, there is a challenge to beware of ignorance and want with Scrooges' words flung back in his face as the Spirit departs.

Let's return to the Cratchits. We learn that they are a family of faith. Bob and Tim are not present as the family gathers because the two are at church. This is not a, "It is Christmas so I should go to church" type event. Bob relates a conversation he had with Tim on the way home where Tim says, "He hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant for them to remember, upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see." This reflection would only come from active faith.

Their dinner is an exercise in noticing blessings. They celebrate the size of the goose, that all have enough to eat, that all are present, and that they have a pudding for dessert. The narrator lets it be known that it was a small pudding for such a large family but no Cratchit would have mentioned it. "It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing." Bob even has the family share a toast to Mister Scrooge, the founder of the feast. Although Mrs. Cratchit wants to focus on how "odious" a person he is, Bob reminds her of the day. Celebrating blessings, giving thanks, offering well wishes to one who does not return it, seeing the cup half-full are all marks of faith, of ones who are trying to live in the present.

The scene affects Scrooge mightily. When Tiny Tim sings a song and wishes all a "God Bless us Everyone!" Scrooge asks the Spirit if Tiny Tim will live. His words,

about the poor dying and decreasing the surplus population, are thrown back at Scrooge. He sees now what that surplus population looks like. The Spirit says that in the grand scope of things, a poor man's child is worth as much, no maybe even more, to God than a miserly rich old man.

We sometimes forget, when we hear the Nativity Story, that it is a story born out of poverty and oppression. In Luke, the family travels to Bethlehem because of a decree of Caesar Augustus. This is a reminder that they are a conquered people. There is some debate about where Joseph and Mary were on the economic scale of that time. What we do know is that when they presented Jesus at the temple and offered two doves as their offering, this is what those with few resources would have given. The baby was born in a stable because there was no room for them in an inn. If Joseph had the means, a room or at least a space, would have been found for Mary. The shepherds are, as a class, poor. They grazed their sheep on land they did not own. Often they were hired to take care of the sheep, not owning them either. The Nativity in Luke is about hard working people, like Bob Cratchit, who are barely making ends meet. People Scrooge would not have cared about because they would not benefit him.

On their journeys, Scrooge notices that the poor get an extra blessing from the Ghost. When he asks why, he is told, "because they need it most." This is an example of God's justice and grace. Justice means not that people all get the same but they get what they need. The parable of the workers of the vineyard that we looked at two weeks ago lifts up this idea. All received what they needed not what they earned. It is a different world view.

Ebenezer Scrooge, before he encountered the spirits, has a prescription for humanity—the poor have only themselves to blame and would be better off dead. Now he is rethinking all of this, especially as the poor have a face and a voice in Tiny Tim.

The Nativity story is also about God being present now. Here again the message of the angels, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah." These were not about promises someday. God is on the move. The God who lives in the present announces what is happening right now!

What does it mean to live in the now? We hear the blessing of Tiny Tim, "God Bless us Every One." What if we actually believe that God is already blessing everyone

and we are called to make visible and tangible those blessings? This is not something we should do some day but today. How can we not just ask God to bless everyone, but to become a blessing to everyone? Scrooge is beginning to figure out that this is his task. It is ours as well.

The encounter with this Spirit ends on a jarring note. Scrooge notices something beneath his robes. When he asks about it two children, “wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable” are presented to Scrooge. Scrooge is appalled. “Spirit! Are they yours?” “They are Man’s. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of them both but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom.” When Scrooge asks if they have no refuge or resources, his words are flung back at him, “Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?” Scrooge is left alone with those words ringing in his ears.

Ignorance and want are our issue as well and most of all ignorance. We too want to ignore issues that make us uncomfortable. We want to present easy solutions that require little energy or effort. To live in the present is to confront life as it is, not as we might wish it to be. Living in the now reminds us of a God who came to turn the world upside down and proclaim a message of love and dignity and care for all.

This week my prayer for you is that you may be visited by surprising love that calls you to actions of love. And when you feel it, even for just a fleeting moment, know the miracle has just begun in you, for the sake of the whole world. As we move through the season of transformation and redemption of Scrooge, may we too be redeemed, for there is a little bit of Scrooge in each of us.

*“The miracle has just begun in YOU for the sake of the world... God Bless us Every One!”*