

December 24 – Evening Service

The Hope of Christmas Future (Part II)

Luke 2:1-20

With the pealing of bells Scrooge awakes from the strangest dream he has ever had to discover it is Christmas. Scrooge awakes to a new day and life. He left the Ghost of Christmas Future with a question hanging in the air. Can the shadows he saw be dispelled? The bells of Christmas affirm new possibilities. We need to remember that Scrooge has done nothing to receive this chance at new life. It is a gift.

Scrooge has been given a new day not to make amends, though he will do much to heal past hurts. If this was the sole reason for the Spirits coming, their energy should have been directed towards another, younger person, who would have many years to make up for their past. Scrooge is old and has done so much harm that he could never right the balance sheet. No, he is given this new day in order to experience an unbound joy. He has been given it so that he will know the freedom of stepping out of the chains that have bound him for so many years. His first words celebrate this joy. He feels as light as a feather, as giddy as a school boy.

Scrooge understands that this joy will only continue if he shares it. His first act is to send the prized turkey to Bob Cratchit. Just thinking about the looks on the Cratchit faces when the turkey arrives causes Scrooge to laugh for the first time in many a year. When he had been with the Ghost of Christmas present, he had heard the family praise the little goose they had, its size and cheapness. The turkey represents unimagined blessings. Buying the turkey is one way for Scrooge to share his joy with others.

Soon Scrooge goes out into the city to experience firsthand what he had seen with the Ghost of Christmas Present. In that first walk with the spirit, Dickens mentioned how dreary it was yet there was joy present. Now everything is bright and glorious and gives Scrooge great joy.

While on this walk he sees the two gentlemen who had approached him a day earlier asking for help with providing a little something for the poor. Though it pains

Scrooge to think about what these men's opinion of him was, after having been so rudely rebuffed, he approaches them and makes an amazing gift. We are not told the sum but it surprises them and he assures them that it includes a great many back payments.

Offering donations and gifts to the community was the fruit of Scrooge's redemption, revealing that he was a new and joyful person. He no longer looks at the poor as lazy, deserving prison time or the workhouse. Instead, they are people just like him and if he can be a blessing he should do it. Looking differently at life and people is part of the message of this night.

We read how the angels came to the shepherds to share the joy-filled news that a savior had been born. But first, there was the word of "Do not be afraid." When life is changing, there can be some fear. God comforts us and at the same time celebrates with us. The shepherds were the first to hear that the long-awaited messiah is born. Surprisingly, to be found in a manger of hay. It says they went with haste. They couldn't wait. After seeing the babe they return praising God. Scrooge is like those shepherds. He had heard great news that brought him joy and now he couldn't wait to share it, to experience it and to pass it on to others. Scrooge was redeemed not to make amends but to live joyously.

This makes me ask the question, "How do we share the joy this night represents?" Are there people like the Cratchits that need a little happiness sprinkled into their life? Are their opportunities to share, either our resources or our time, to make the world better? Are there ways we need to express our gratitude for how we have been blessed? Tonight is about God's joy entering the world and we are to pass it on.

At the end it says that if ever there was a man who knew how to keep Christmas well it was this redeemed Ebenezer Scrooge. The ghosts certainly aided Scrooge in discovering how to keep Christmas well. Remembering past loves lost awakened in him the nobler person he once was. The compassion he found for Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchit stirred Scrooge's soul. Reliving the joy of seeing Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig twirl about brought a smile to his rigid and timeworn face. Seeing Fred's party helped him to

appreciate family. All of this blended together to help him going forward. There is one last task for Scrooge.

We see Scrooge on this joyous day nervously pacing up and down in front of his nephew's house. He wants more than anything to enter into the joy of that family. After all he has said and done, he is fearful. Will Fred want him? Scrooge is redeemed when he risks rejection and asks to be welcomed by Fred.

Christmas is an invitation into relationship with God, through Christ. When Christ's invitation is accepted, we discover that we have been redeemed. One of the ways we accept that invitation is entering joyfully into relationship with others. Scrooge will not know how to keep Christmas well until he allows his nephew Fred to welcome and receive him. Earlier in the story, Fred offers Scrooge a Christmas dinner invitation but Scrooge wants to be left alone. "Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine." At the end of the story Scrooge knows what he must do. His journey will not be complete until he humbly and selflessly reconciles with his family, asking, "Will you let me in?" That welcome by Fred is like God's welcome to us.

It is a story of God's action and our acceptance. It is our accepting the gift of God's love and passing that gift to others. Christmas is about God's invitation to community. God is waiting at the door, waiting to welcome us if we will just find the courage to open our lives.

Redemption means exchange, like you redeem a coupon for 20% off. Scrooge wants to exchange past for future, from greed to compassion, from loneliness to community. Where do you need to be redeemed? What do you need to turn in for something better? Where do you need courage to try? God is encouraging you to risk and be open to change.

I recently read a story from this season. It is the story of a young man who had left his small hometown for college in the city and then stayed there when a job was offered to him. For some time he had enjoyed the city life, making fun of his parent's quaint values. He no longer went to church and partied more than he should and drank more than was wise. Then one year he met a young woman from a small town and after

a whirlwind romance they were married. They ran off to Las Vegas because neither of them wanted to be married in their hometowns. Soon a child was born and as the enormity of fatherhood began to weigh down upon him, he started thinking about his father. He realized that a lot of what his dad did, all the sacrifices, was to provide him with a stable life. That small town began to feel safe instead of quaint. He was in banking and, just before Christmas, saw a job opening at the local hometown bank. Talking with his wife, he found out that she too was wanting to unhook from the city. Without saying a word to his family he took the job and rented a house. That year they were at his parents for Christmas so they could enjoy their grandchild's first. When it came time to open presents, his parents saw an envelope in the tree. In it was a copy of a post office change of address form with their new address. He turned in one life for a better one for his family. He would no longer be climbing the financial ladder the big city offered but he knew that ultimately his life was now headed in the right direction. The power to change is the story of a Christmas Carol.

This tale ends with Tiny Tim saying, "God Bless us Everyone!" Tim's blessing becomes our challenge and our gift. God does bless everyone and wants us to be a blessing as well. May the hope and joy of this night fill us.

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