

December 24 – The Hope of Christmas Future (Part I)

Matthew 2:1-12

We don't always think about it but the story of Jesus' birth is, in part, a journey into darkness. Jesus was born during the night. The shepherds were guarding their sheep at night. The wise men would have had to travel at night to follow a star. Joseph was told in a dream at night to take the child and his mother to Egypt. This theme of darkness continues throughout Jesus' life. We don't always think about how December is, for some, a journey into darkness. Because this is the first time without a loved one, every "Merry Christmas" pierces their heart with a reminder of lost. For others, moments of great loss or tragedy happened during this season of the year. This has forever cast a cloak of darkness over all future celebrations. They might have been able to move past the searing pain of that initial loss or hurt but still there are reminders, each December, that cause momentary stabbing pain.

Scrooge must journey into the darkness to find light. This journey begins with his last moments with the Ghost of Christmas Present. As he is confronted with the glib words he had spoken concerning prisons and workhouses as a way of dealing with the poor, he is plunged into abject grief. He then is confronted by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. A specter whom Scrooge fears most of all. A silent foreboding presence that shows him at least one possible future. We realize that the images Scrooge sees with this Spirit are not meant to scare him into changing his life. A man like Scrooge would not scare easily and things done out of fear rarely last. No, they are shown so that he can see the emptiness of where his love of money will lead.

His encounter with this Spirit is first and foremost a journey of understanding. He sees the people who trade in the pilfered belongings of those who have died with no family who care. The maid, laundress and undertaker all come to the shop with their pilfered goods. They laugh how this wicked stingy old man had kept everyone away so that they would be the ones to profit at his dying. He sees a body lying on a bed in that pillaged room. When asked to

remove the sheet he says he has not the power. It is as if Scrooge cannot confront that destiny. We are always left with the question whether, at this moment, Scrooge knows that he is the one lying on the bed or still questions it. When he asks to see some tenderness associated with a death they are taken to the home of his clerk Bob Cratchit. It is immediately apparent that Tiny Tim has died. The family is solemn. Bob, upon entering totally breaks down in grief. After hearing Bob Cratchit's pain and sadness, Scrooge asks the spirit about the man who lay hidden under a shroud on that bed. He compares the love and grief here for Tiny Tim with the uncared for body he had just left. The poor child was loved, and Scrooge is beginning to understand that this is the most important possession of all.

In seeing the grief, Scrooge is beginning to understand that he is not his own man, that his decisions do affect the people around him. Whether he helps Bob or others or refuses to help, he now realizes his life altering consequences. He is beginning to ask himself, we think, "Do I really want to die alone and unloved? Is money really worth that?"

The story we read about the wise men in Matthew is also a journey of understanding. They see a sign in the heavens telling them about a king. They journey, following a star to Judea. Because they are searching for a king, they go to Jerusalem and the palace of King Herod. Here is where you would expect to find a crown prince recently born. When their search there is futile, they journey on until they find Mary, Joseph and the babe.

None of what they expected was realized in finding a child born to humble parents. They did not doubt but trusted in God that this is the one they had sought. When we are open to God's direction, the future we encounter might be very different from what we expect, but in faith we are to be open to the possibilities of what is presented to us.

Finally, Scrooge asks the question that confronts all of us. Is change possible? Is redemption really an option? He wants to know if these images are

what will be or just may be? Scrooge isn't so sure that he wants to see the rest of his story as it is being laid out. Scrooge's past made him who he was. Scrooge asks whether, after seeing his future demise, he is beyond all hope.

That is ultimately the question that is presented to all of us. As we have journeyed through this season of Advent, we have examined our past and seen how events and decisions we have made have formed us into the people we are. We have been challenged to really look at how we live life, the choices we make, the opinions that we have, and asked ourselves is that who we want to be? How have they affected others? My guess is that we, sometime in this journey through Advent, perhaps today, have come to that point where we want to embrace change. We no longer want to continue on this particular life path. Maybe we have felt that we are too old to change. Maybe we have only thought about change because we are a bit afraid. Now we want to change because we, like Scrooge, like the wise men, have taken a journey of understanding.

In Matthew it says that when they see the child, with great joy they open their gifts and give to him presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The wise men did not doubt. They believed that this two-year long journey had been for this moment in time. They embraced the new understanding with joy.

Scrooge is willing to embrace something new. He wonders if he is beyond hope or if redemption is possible. We light the candle of joy today because we know the shadows will be dispelled. Tonight, we will talk about how he and we can live into a new reality.

But for today, we need to hear the good news. Christ came to free us from our past. Yes, the journey we are on is because of our decisions. As Scrooge said to the spirit. "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But, if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

Each and every day is a day of choices. We can continue making the same ones, using the same reasoning we have always used and, as Scrooge has learned, might end up headed in directions that we do not want.

The good news of Emmanuel, God with us, is that if we depart from that path the end will change. Scrooge has to confront his death before he finds new life. Our faith challenges us to face our death to find life. The good news is that new life is possible.

What is God challenging you to do differently today? Do you need to have a different attitude about those in need? Do you need to be reminded that all are children of God? Is your life one that lives out the possibility that God can bless everyone? Today is a day of hope, of possibility, of joy.

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