

“Ghosts of Christmas to Come” II Cor. 5:17 12/24/18

During December, Lou and I have been preaching a series of sermons based on Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol. We’ve looked at “Ghosts of Christmases Past”- those wrongs and regrets and lost dreams from our past that continue to haunt us. And last week Lou talked about “Ghosts of Christmas Present”- things in our lives today that deeply trouble us. Tonight we move on to “Ghosts of Christmases to Come.”

In the original story, Ebenezer Scrooge is given a sobering view of his own future- his funeral that no one attends, unless they are promised lunch will be served! Servants stealing his worldly goods. A neglected tombstone that no one visits. And the needless death of Tiny Tim, the son of his beleaguered employee, Bob Cratchit. These unsettling visions are enough to transform Scrooge’s heart!

When he awakens on Christmas morning, he arranges for gifts and the biggest turkey around to be sent to the Cratchit home. He gives a large pay increase to Bob, and becomes like a second father to Tiny Tim. In fact, he becomes everything he wasn’t before- cheerful, generous, compassionate, and kind. I believe it is this transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge that has given the story such lasting popularity even 175 years after it was published! We want to believe that no one is so far gone that

he or she can't turn their life around and become a better person. And, if Scrooge can change, then there's hope for us, too!

But, A Christmas Carol is very optimistic about personal transformation, isn't it? All it takes is one night of strange dreams and Scrooge is a new man! But is this realistic? Can people really change? And what does any of this have to do with Christmas? (All good questions!)

The story is told of a young boy who became embittered when another boy was given the part of Joseph in the annual Christmas program. Instead, the boy was given the part of the innkeeper. The boy brooded over what he regarded as gross unfairness, and decided to take his revenge.

During the performance, when Joseph and Mary came to the door of the inn and asked for a room, instead of turning them away, the innkeeper said, "We have plenty of room! Come on in!"

But the boy who had bested him for the part of Joseph was up to this unexpected challenge. He walked past the innkeeper, pretended to look inside the inn, and exclaimed, "This place is a mess! I can't let my wife stay in a dump like this. Let's go, Mary. I'd rather sleep in the barn than stay here!"

Humor aside, I wonder if this isn't a more realistic portrait of human nature! Like that young innkeeper, many of us learn unhealthy ways of dealing with rejection or disappointment at a young age. We learn to hold on to hurts done to us and seek revenge. We become sensitive to the tiniest slight- imagined or not- and lash out or withdraw from the offender, be they a close family member or the clerk at Kennies. Others learn greed, disloyalty when it suits our interest, gossiping to hurt others, a sense of entitlement, sexual exploitation of others, putting yourself first, or callousness toward those in need. These habits of the heart become deeply ingrained in us, as we mentally tread the same emotional paths day after day and year after year. These habits often cause us to hurt the people we care most about. These character weaknesses or sins become part of who we are, and that's why they are so resistant to change. Changing these inner habits can feel like cutting off your own arm!

The fact that our lives are littered with broken New Year's Resolutions also speaks to the difficulty of change. Entire industries have emerged to help people change their habits of overeating, smoking, and overspending because making changes is so difficult. Can people really change? At a minimum, we have to say that change is very hard. Almost impossible, according to the Bible.

Almost impossible, but not entirely. And this is where Christmas comes in. The Apostle Paul said *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”* (II Cor. 5:17) Throughout the New Testament, personal transformation is promised to those who follow Jesus Christ, and Christmas is where it all starts.

When the angel appeared to Joseph, he said that the child to be born to Mary would be called “Emmanuel,” which means *“God is with us.”* (Matt. 1:23) In spite of knowing our weaknesses and failures better than anyone else, God demonstrated the enormous value that he places on the human race when he took on human flesh. God’s coming to earth in the flesh shows that you are valued and loved by the greatest being in the universe, by your Creator himself! That is a solid foundation for your sense of worth. And a healthy self-esteem undercuts the insecurities that lie beneath some of our vices.

“God is with us.” God was with us literally in that helpless infant in the manger at the first Christmas as He became one of us. But God is also with us in the sense of being for us. God is not hanging around just waiting for us to mess up so he can pounce on us! No! God is for us! He wants the best for us. He wants to redeem us, to take us with all our flaws and

shortcomings and self-centeredness, and make us into the kind of beings we were intended to be. To change us. To transform us.

But that doesn't happen just because we get sentimental feelings on Christmas Eve when the candles are lit at the end of the service. Those feelings may be strong, but they aren't strong enough to change us. For that we need a Savior, and the good news of Christmas is that God has provided one for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Our part is to acknowledge and gratefully accept what God has done on our behalf, and to allow God to begin the changes within us that need to be made. It's that simple. And it's that hard.

A number of years ago I began leading trips to the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico each summer to help churches there with construction projects and Vacation Bible Schools for their children. I really enjoyed, and still enjoy, these adventures, but some of the villages were hard places to be. Many of the local men hung out at bars with their buddies all afternoon and evening, getting drunk and leaving their wives to do the back-breaking work required to live in the primitive conditions there. Sometimes fights broke out in the streets. Sometimes our women felt unsafe. Our hosts took measures to protect us and we were never in real danger, but it was an uncomfortable atmosphere, and unfair for the women and children of the villages.

The fifth village we went to was a place called Chuchub. It was very remote and even more primitive than the previous villages I had visited as it had no running water or electricity. It was beastly hot, with no fans or air conditioning to help. But something was different in this village. In Chuchub men strolled around the village in the evenings with their wives and children, who were very well-cared for. The homes were well-kept. Our women felt perfectly safe anywhere in Chuchub (except for the tarantulas and scorpions!). There were no fights or drunks wandering the streets. In fact, all the bars had closed, because no one was drinking enough to keep them open! Why was Chuchub so different? It hadn't always been that way. It turns out that every one of the 150 people living in Chuchub (except one) had committed themselves to follow Jesus Christ and become part of the Presbyterian Church there. And the difference in village life was stunning.

We were witnessing how real change is possible in the lives of ordinary people who have chosen to follow the Savior whose birth we celebrate tonight. And how whole societies can be transformed by his followers. That means real change and transformation in a person's life- in your life- is possible, though it usually takes time. None of us is perfect, and transformation is a lifetime task. As the old African-American proverb puts it.

“We ain’t what we oughta be;
we ain’t what we wanna be;
we ain’t what we gonna be;
but thank God, we ain’t what we was!”

Personal change must start at some point, and be empowered by something, or it will fail. Why not let it begin this Christmas, empowered by the One who came into the world that first Christmas to change us? Then in Christmases to come, with God’s help, you’ll be able to say, “Thank God, I ain’t what I was!”