

“Ghosts of Christmas Past” Phil. 3:12-14; Ps. 32:1-6 12/2/18

Charles Dickens wrote “A Christmas Carol” in 1843 as a novella. It was very popular in Victorian England, and printing after printing sold out. The story centers on a miserly man named Ebenezer Scrooge, who treated his employees horribly and without compassion even with the approach of Christmas. One night he is visited by three ghosts: the spirit of committee meetings past, committee meetings present, and committee meetings still to come. No wait, that’s my nightmare! I think you know the Dickens version. In the end, Scrooge is transformed by his ghostly encounters.

We’re going to look at our own ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future over the next few weeks. Now there are scores of productions of “A Christmas Carol,” ranging from operas & full-length films, to “A Muppet Christmas Carol” and even “Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol.” I found a very simple presentation on YouTube, read by James Eckhouse. Let’s watch the section dealing with Christmas past. (SHOW VIDEO)

The spirit asks a poignant question followed by a powerful statement. She asks, “Whatever happened to that little boy?” Scrooge seemed so innocent and trusting and sensitive back then. What happened? And then the spirit says, “You’ve fallen a long way.” Ebenezer is clearly moved by seeing his past, but becomes defensive and tries to forget about it.

As we think about our own ghosts of Christmas past, we may also remember regrets, lost dreams, and guilt or shame over things that have

happened to us or poor choices we have made. The problem with these ghosts from the past is that they can still affect our attitude toward life and the decisions we make today.

The Apostle Paul understood this. In a letter to the Philippians, he writes about it. After talking about his desire to know Jesus and experience his resurrection, he writes this: *“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 3:12-14)

When Paul talks about “forgetting what lies behind,” what could he have had in mind? After all he was the Apostle Paul, the guy who wrote much of our New Testament- St. Paul! But earlier in his life, as a powerful Jewish leader in Jerusalem, he oversaw the persecution of innocent men and women just because they were Christians, which he regarded as a threat to Judaism. He caused untold suffering to those poor Christians, even holding the coats of those who threw the stones that killed the first Christian martyr, Stephen. I’m sure he felt guilty and deeply ashamed of these acts, but Jesus addressed that sense of guilt by appearing to Paul and giving him a mission. Earlier in this chapter Paul makes it clear that he

knows the forgiveness of his sins and his reconciliation with God is wholly dependent, not on any good things he has done, but on the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

So, let's talk a little bit about guilt. Many psychologists and psychiatrists regard all guilt as irrational and neurotic. In doing so they are assuming that there are no universal standards of morality, and that there is no higher being who holds us accountable for our actions. Christians, of course, assume that there are universal standards for human beings to follow, and that guilt is often a sign that we have violated them. Harvard psychiatrist, Robert Coles, says that the reason we feel like slime balls sometimes, is because we've acted like slime balls! Guilt feelings often reflect the reality of our actions.

If your ghosts of Christmas past have to do with things you've done that you know are wrong- theft from an employer, spreading dirt about someone who trusted you, some kind of sexual sin, betraying the trust of a spouse, abusing alcohol or other drugs- if you are haunted by the past because of things you've done that are wrong, I've got really good news for you! It's possible to let go of those past wrongs and experience God's forgiveness. Listen to these words from the Psalmist in Ps. 32.

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps. 32:1-6)*

To escape the haunting of ghosts of the past that are rooted in guilt over something you did, confess your sin to the Lord like the Psalmist did. God promises to forgive you. He promises to forget about your sin and never bring it up again! God promises that as far as the East is from the West, that's how far he has removed our sins from us! This is the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven. You can be ride of your guilt!

But there is another kind of ghost of Christmas past that we need to talk about in addition to guilt. It's called shame. Shame can also be based on something wrong we have done about which we're deeply ashamed, but shame moves from thinking "I've done a terrible thing," to thinking "I'm a

terrible person.” And shame may also be rooted in things that have nothing to do with sin. We may be ashamed of our poor education, of living in poverty, of having been sexually abused, or of the way we look. I’m sure we’ve all got things about which we are ashamed. I know I do.

Where simple guilt can drive us back to God to seek his mercy and forgiveness, shame tends to drive us away from God, like it drove Adam and Eve to hide from God in the Garden of Eden. In the novel, The Kite Runner, we meet Amir, the protagonist of the book. Amir’s life took a dramatic turn when as a boy he failed to come to the aid of his servant & friend, Hassan, when he was raped by a bully in an alley. Instead, Amir hid in fear as he watched the event unfold. The trauma of seeing this abuse and the knowledge of his own cowardice hung over Amir for the rest of his life. He says, “I became what I am today at the age of twelve... I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall.” You can bury the past, he says, “but it claws its way out. I’ve been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.”

Some of you know the pain of shame that Amir is talking about. Shame can deeply warp and weaken us and it can suck all the joy out of our lives. There is no easy answer for dealing with shame, because there are so many causes of it. Christian community can help- friends, small groups or pastors. Regular worship is important because it is here we

regularly encounter a loving God. A good Christian counselor can be of enormous help. Ultimately, we need God to heal us from our shame, and God wants that healing for us!

A number of years ago, when I was serving as pastor of another church, a high school senior we'll call Jack gave a riveting sermon on youth Sunday. He told the story of something that had happened to him when he was about ten. He and his best friend, Sam, were playing together in the park late one afternoon, when Jack suddenly realized he was late getting home. He knew he would get in trouble, so he began running toward his house. Sam, who Jack knew had a heart condition, couldn't keep up. He yelled for Jack to slow down, but Jack, afraid of getting in trouble, kept running. Sam collapsed. An ambulance was called, but Sam later died in the hospital.

You could have heard a pin drop in that sanctuary as Jack paused. He said that he had carried the weight of that decision around for the last eight years, but recently he had found a verse of scripture that began to change him. It's found in Romans 8: "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom. 8:1) No condemnation! Jack had been condemning himself for all those years. And this poor kid was carrying that backbreaking load around by himself. Then he realized that the One who made him and who made Sam, too,

was not holding what he did that afternoon against him. There was no condemnation, only forgiveness. And that promise was absolutely liberating to Jack.

I hope it will be liberating to some of you! Perhaps you are haunted by ghosts of the past. You carry an enormous load of guilt or shame or regret. The good news of the gospel is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ. None! And if you can accept that fact, it may be the best Christmas gift you've ever received. Lou or I would be happy to talk further with any of you about this wonderful news! Let's see if together we can banish the ghosts of the past this Christmas.