

December 16, 2018
Matthew 1: 18-25 & Matthew 25: 31-40
Ghosts of Christmas Present
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Outside of the Bible, Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is probably the most famous Christmas Story – *that timeless tale about the passing of time.*

In one fateful night, Scrooge confronts his past, his present and his future – all for the purpose of helping him change his greedy ways and discover Christmas' spirit. His Sherpas on this journey – three ghosts each with their own unique personality and purpose.

How's our spirit doing with nine (9) days on the calendar until Christmas?
Have world events, personal situations or the oncoming holiday rush got us feeling a bit more like Ebenezer Scrooge?
Perhaps we, too, like **dear old** Scrooge, need some assistance to open our hearts to what is coming this Christmas?

For in one night, the ghosts were able to pull Scrooge away from materialism and greed toward the true spirit of Christmas – perhaps they can help us this Advent as well.
So, this Advent, we're spending time with Scrooge that we might peer into the past, ponder the present and yearn for what is yet to come.

Quick story recap:

Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly old man whose love of money left him leading a lonely life. Dickens described him this way, "He was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!" (*sounds like the makings of a good confession of sin* 😊)

On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley who informs Scrooge that he has been condemned to walk the earth carrying heavy chains because of the greedy life he led.
Marley warns Scrooge to avoid the same fate and foretells of the three ghost gatherings that will follow that evening.

The first ghost is the Ghost of Christmas Past, who escorts Scrooge to view previous Christmases from the curmudgeon's earlier years. That journey helped Scrooge to see that he was never able to move past who he **was** to become who he **could be**. Scrooge was stuck looking in the past instead of looking forward with hope.

After the ghost of Christmas Past leaves, the next spectral visitor is the Ghost of Christmas Present.

While ghost 1 had an air of mystery, ghost 2 can't be missed. Dickens describes him as a majestic giant in a green fur robe (*could this be the first ugly Christmas sweater* 😊).

Before we get to this visit, let's revisit an encounter Scrooge had earlier in the day, before his 3 ghostly encounters. A Mr. Granger stops by Scrooge's place of business...

[8:15 and 11:00 am – Lou and Shane Miller will read the scripted dialogue]

[9:30 am – show video clip]

[8:15 and 11:00 am pick up here...] And with that, Mr. Granger is shown the door...

Later that night, the ghost of Christmas Present will show Scrooge how Christmas will unfold that year.

First stop, the house of Bob Cratchit, Scrooges long-suffering employee. Peering into their tiny home and meager feast, Scrooge witnesses the innocence and joy of Tiny Tim, Cratchit's son who walks with a crutch and is unable to get the treatment he needs because of the poor wage Scrooge pays his father.

Next stop is Scrooge's nephew, Fred, and the dinner he turned down an invitation to attend. Seeing the party he is going to miss, Scrooge asks the ghost to stay until the end.

This prompts Scrooge to realize all he will miss because his focus was on himself and his money.

The 1984 movie adaptation puts it this way when the Ghost of Christmas Present says to Scrooge, "You've gone through life not noticing a lot."

I'm just going to raise my hand in the vein of *guilty as charged*.

Now, my quick defense is, perhaps one of the biggest challenges to faithfully following the Christ isn't persistent evil or secularism – perhaps it's the constancy of distraction.

Smartphones, on-demand movies, x-box, email/texts/social media posts – we live in the brave new world of multi-tasking on steroids.

Our attention is dissected 100 different ways to the point we become frozen with an inability to prioritize what's important because **everything** is important.

The coming Christ-child is yet another event in our holiday buffet of important events – we try our best to give it the full attention it deserves – however there's just so much to do – did I order the roast; how about the holiday photo cards? Distracted.

Amid the distractions we often miss what's in front of us.

"The Christ child will be here, when? Well...you know, that's really not good for me. Let me check, though...I have coffee at 9am; then Christmas shopping; I need to pick the kid up at school and run by the grocery store...Wednesday is open, how about Wednesday at 3? Can Jesus wait until then to be born?"

Perhaps, the old saying is true, "*Christmas can be difficult when we think we're God's gift to the world.*"

(OPTIONAL: The distractions of the season keep us from being present to the needs all around us every day.

How about it? Do we go through Advent not noticing a lot? Do we go through life not noticing a lot?)

For Scrooge, being present was a complete waste of time. His focus was either on the past – **what didn't get done** – or the future – **what needed to be done**. Focused on his ledger, eyeing the bottom line, most everything was merely a gear in his monetary generator. As the ghost revealed, he often missed life's overflow around him – greed drowned out the need.

The **simple** response for us is to agree – that we too, like Scrooge, can miss the true meaning of Christmas and family joy if we get so caught up in tinsel & to-dos.

Yet, I wonder, if the **better** answer goes deeper?

Before the ghost of Christmas present departs, he shows Scrooge two starved children living in his coat – their names are: *Ignorance and Want*.

In the clip I watched this week starring Patrick Stewart as Scrooge, he asks the green clad specter “...are [the children] yours?”

“No, they are mand(kinds),” the spirit replies. “Beware the both of them **but beware most** [of ignorance]. For on his forehead I see that written which is **doom**. Unless the writing's erased, if you deny him, slander those who tell others about him, admit he exists but do nothing about it, then doom will engulf you all...”

Scrooge asks, “Are there no shelters? No charities to help them?”

“Are there no prisons? Are there no work houses?” the Spirit quickly retorts using Scrooge's very words against him.

The bell chimes – the Spirit is gone – Scrooge is alone on the street.

(OPTIONAL: Earlier in the movie, when Scrooge is viewing the Cratchit family dinner he sees Tiny Tim's crutch by the fire and inquires what will become of the boy – the Spirit implies there will be an empty seat at next year's feast for the crutch's owner will not make it one more year – Scrooge responds “that surely the story can be re-written. It doesn't have to be that way.” The Spirit says, “...would it not decrease the surplus population.” Scrooge declares, “you mock me, Spirit, by using my words against me.”)

As faithful people we are called to more than words alone – we are called to not ignore ignorance.

Advent reminds us that the places to which we are called are not always glamorous.

Where do we find the Christ?

If we recall the story, it's not in a palace or a castle or the halls of power.

It's in a stable – a feeding trough for animals – dirty, dingy, smelly, unsanitary conditions.

It is into the most unlikely of places we find the Christ child.

I read recently, “What if Christ this year is born this year in a homeless shelter? Or a halfway house? Or under a bridge? Will we have the courage to go there, to witness the gift of Christ in the faces of those who are completely unlike us in every way?”

Theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way, “God comes to us in the hungry people we do not **have to** feed, comes to us in the lonely people we do not **have to** comfort, comes to us in all the desperate human need of people everywhere that **we are always free to turn our backs upon.**”

They say Christmas is for children, well, here are some statistics about children According to the national center for poverty:

- 44% of children under 18 live in low-income families in the United States (approx. 31.4 million children);
- 1 in 30 children are homeless (this means 2.5 million children have no room, no bed, no place to call home);
- 1 in 10 children in America lives below the federal poverty line for at least half of their childhood (it is referred to as “persistent childhood poverty”);
- 13% of “persistently poor children” are less likely to graduate high school (a significant reason for this statistic is the need to work full-time to provide a living for their family);
- 3 out of 4 public school teachers say they have students who come to school hungry on a regular basis.

As faithful people we are called to more than words alone – we are called to not ignore ignorance – we are called to notice.

Now, lest I end in a Scrooge-like, bah-humbug fashion – **which doesn't mean I want us to forget about our call to social justice (we cannot ignore ignorance...we must take notice)** – I want us to remember that the way we live today – the way we interact with the people around us today – forms them (& us)...

the ghost of Christmas Present calls us to live day-in and day-out in such a way that we can't help but impart joy – so, I share with you now the following video that strikes a chord of joy in my heart **and which also** has a tendency to choke me up 3 out of every 5 times I see it – so I may or may not have something to say after we watch it...

[play clip]

Advent – life for that matter – is about a long obedience in the same direction – and while it may seem that the dance loses its allure at times – eventually it breaks through calling us to follow.

Emmanuel – God with us – calls us to keep doing what we're doing – to build a foundation of loving, caring, compassionate kindnesses along the way.

To not ignore ignorance – to step up and fill the void – to boldly go – knowing that God not only goes with us...God is already there...we are called to notice...

Amen & Amen.