

Bringing Our Sins to the Stable

Second Sunday of Advent – Purple – December 5, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Today, we continue our Advent series:

“What Will You Bring to the Stable?”

Ebenezer Scrooge brings a life devoid of Christ and Christmas, a life given over to nearly complete separation from God and others. In other words, Scrooge brings to the stable a life given over to sin.

A life given over to sin

Our idea of sin is often too small. We tend to see sin only as various transgressions which displease God. But so long as we restrict ourselves to lists of what is naughty and nice, we fail to see the true nature of sin. Simply put, sin is what separates us from God. Sin is the gulf that sits between the relationship we have with God and the relationship God desires for us. Acts of sin are all those words, actions, thoughts, and feelings that do not stem from love of God and neighbor. Ebenezer Scrooge lived a life cut off from God and others. He wasn’t a thief, nor an adulterer, nor even a gossip. Yet, his utter abandonment of all relationships had rendered him a monster in whom the image of God barely flickered. Of course, Scrooge didn’t realize this. He could see the chains hanging on Marley’s ghost, but he could not see his own bondage. And it is impossible to break the bonds of sin if we don’t even know they exist. But Scrooge will be blessed by visits from the Ghosts of Christmas who will show him, with devastating power and effect, the chains that bind.

Repentance

Just as John the Baptist came to Israel bearing the message that the day of reckoning had come, so the Ghosts bear the message that Scrooge’s life is at a crossroads. It is as if they have come to lift the

John the Baptist

Last week, we learned that Advent is to be a time of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Christ, God’s Messiah. And the second Sunday of Advent is always focused upon John the Baptist, God’s messenger of preparation and repentance.

John the Baptist was a cousin of Jesus, born to an old couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah (see Luke 1:5-24). The angel Gabriel brought the news of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy, telling Zechariah that his son would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Mary, Jesus’ mother, was related to Elizabeth.

John was about six months older than his cousin and began his public ministry at the age of thirty or so. He preached a message of renewal enacted by a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). John washed people in the Jordan river, a powerful symbol of Israel’s salvation. Huge crowds came to the river to be cleansed by John the baptizer. Even Jesus came to be baptized. Not long after, John was imprisoned by Herod and executed.

blindness from Scrooge's eyes so he can see the darkness. Has Scrooge done anything to deserve these eye-opening visits? No. It is grace at work. He was blind, but now he will see. With sarcastic meanness he turned away businessmen who had come collecting money for the poor. But now his own words will come back to haunt him as he is confronted with the world's Ignorance and Want.¹ He sees that the vast fortune he has accumulated accounts for nothing at his death. He has no friends, no mourners. The emptiness of Scrooge's soul has led him to an empty death. Out of his despair, Scrooge pleads for a chance to change, "Why show me this, if I am past all hope?" But of course, no one, not even Scrooge, is truly past all hope. No act of sin we might ever commit can place us outside the power of God's forgiveness. The gulf between us and God can never be so wide that God cannot bridge it. But we are to see our sins for what they are and bring them to the stable.

Rebirth

As the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come departs, Scrooge realizes that he lies not in a grave, but in his own bed and the transformation of his heart is overwhelming. "I am as light as a feather, I am happy as an angel . . ." He laughs with abandon; this from a man who had not laughed in decades. In short, Scrooge has been reborn, born from above, born of the Spirit. He knows this, as he says giddily, "I'm quite a baby. Never mind, I don't care. I'd rather be a baby." Indeed, Ebenezer Scrooge is the very picture of new creation, "If anyone is in Christ - new creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It may be the spirits of Christmas who confronted Scrooge, but it is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) who has transformed him.²

New Creation

Scrooge has repented of his past, promising that he will honor Christmas in his heart and keep it all year. Scrooge has awakened to his new life - but what will come of it? Here, Dickens drives home to us the biblical perspective on repentance. We tend to think of repentance as being sorry for something we did and Scrooge is surely that. But repentance is much larger. To repent is to turn around, to turn 180° from the direction we were heading and, instead, head toward God and God's way of love. In his repentance, Scrooge must not only regret his past choices and their consequences, he must begin building a life of mercy and kindness. And this he does.

The joy in Scrooge's heart translates into action - that day and for all the days to follow. In fact, Scrooge is thrilled that he has awakened on Christmas Day and, thus, can begin immediately to put things right. Scrooge sends a boy to buy the prize turkey and deliver it to the Cratchits. On his way to his nephew's home, Ebenezer runs into one of the gentlemen who came collecting for the poor. Scrooge pledges a sum so large that the man's breath is taken away. The next day, Scrooge gives Bob Cratchit a raise. And in the days to follow, Scrooge becomes a second father to Tiny Tim, seeing that the boy gets the medical care he needs to live. As Dickens puts it, Scrooge "became as a good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city ever knew."

The Kingdom of God is not just a promised future, it is also a present reality, though we can often have great trouble seeing it or living it. But in *A Christmas Carol*, the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge's heart, head, and hands lands him squarely within God's kingdom. He found that "everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk - that anything - could yield him so much happiness. . . . Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh . . . His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him." Scrooge's life had been given over to sin, but now it was given over to love. He had abhorred the company of others, but now he found only joy in them. Confronted with his own monstrosity, Scrooge had dumped his sin upon the stable and learned that even he was not beyond the power of Christ.

¹You may recall that two grotesquely wretched and miserable children hide under the gown of the Ghost of Christmas Present. Their names are Ignorance and Want. If we gulp a bit guiltily as we read this, then Dickens' has achieved his goal. We are to see something of Scrooge in ourselves.

²Just in case we might miss this, Dickens quotes Matthew 18:2 when speaking of Tiny Tim: "And he took a child and set him in the midst of them." Certainly, we are to see the transforming power of the Christ-child in Dickens' portrayal of Tiny Tim and his effect on Scrooge. But more about this next week!

Daily Bible Readings

(other readings from the lectionary for the 2nd Sunday of Advent)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 11:1-10 The peaceful kingdom, the Kingdom of God</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 40:1-11 The promise of God's comfort for the captives. The opening of Handel's <i>Messiah</i> is taken from these verses.</p>
<p>Day 3 Malachi 3:1-4 The coming messenger. This passage is also used in the Christmas section of Handel's <i>Messiah</i>.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 3:1-6 Luke's telling of John the Baptist's proclamation</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Peter 3:8-15a We are not to be impatient as we await Christ's second coming. Rather, as we wait, we are to lead lives of holiness and godliness.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

December Book Recommendation: Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Because we are incorporating *A Christmas Carol* into the Advent sermon series, this is a pretty obvious choice for December. The edition that I've asked our bookstore to stock also includes two other Dickens' Christmas novellas, *The Chimes* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*. This edition also contains a helpful and insightful introduction by Katherine Kroeber Wiley. Most of us have probably seen one of the many film adaptations, even if it was the Muppets. But I hope you'll find a quiet corner and read again the story of Scrooge – try to read it with the mind of Christ. You'll be surprised how much Christ there is in a story that never uses the name of Jesus.

CD recordings of the *Dismantling the DaVinci Code* series are ready!

On Nov 7th and Nov 14th, I took a look at many of the claims made in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. We were able to record both lectures! The recordings are now available in the bookstore.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Have you ever known someone you would call a Scrooge? What characteristics makes someone a Scrooge? Miserliness? A history of being a “downer” at the holidays? Perhaps just a general bah-humbug outlook on life? I suspect that most of us could come up with a name or two. I bet there has even been a time or two when many of us have played the Christmas Scrooge ourselves.

Isn't it interesting that two of the most enduring Christmas characters are Ebenezer³ Scrooge and the Grinch. What they share in common is their complete withdrawal from all relationships – it is this withdrawal that has made their hearts “two sizes too small.” And their stories are stories of repentance. They both not only come to regret the choices they have made, but they both set about a lifetime of putting things right. These stories remind us that truly biblical theology is a relational theology. How is the coming of the Christ-child relational? How is the incarnation of God (God made flesh) relational?

Many families end up being very stressed out at the holidays. I'm not speaking of shopping or cooking – but of the stresses over relationships in the family. What is it about Christmas that puts a lot of family relationships under stress? What does Advent have to say to us about our own relationships during the holidays? What can we do to set about repenting for our own contributions to these stresses?

³Dickens' choice of a first name for Scrooge is probably not an accident. “Ebenezer” was the name of the memorial stone set up by Samuel after the victory of Mizpeh (1 Sam 7:12). Christians use the phrase “raising our Ebenezer” to express gratitude for God's help in getting us to our present situation. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's transformation is a gift from God.