

The Main Thing

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

Nov 27, 2022

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Isaiah 2:2-5 (NRSV)

² In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob,

come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

What is the main thing?

How do we keep our eye and our heart and on the main thing?

Our Advent sermon series this year is based on four fictional movies: *Charlie Brown's Christmas*, any(!) Hallmark movie, *Elf*, and the *Grinch*. So, I thought that in these studies, we'd walk through Advent incorporating another work of fiction, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, while following a traditional set of scripture passages. (Christmas hint – if you haven't seen the 2017 movie, *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, you should add it to your list. It is an every-year viewing for Patti and me.)

Ok . . . what is the main thing?

Each year it seems that the "commercialized Christmas season" begins earlier and earlier. I was surfing across the radio dial a few weeks ago and discovered that a local station had already moved to an all-Christmas-all-the-time playlist. By October, stores were decorating for the holidays. Little wonder we have trouble keeping the main thing the main thing – the main thing being Jesus Christ and the world-shattering proclamation that the infant Jesus, God incarnate, is Lord of creation and Messiah. Clichés are clichés for a reason, they often convey a lot of truth. As is true every year, many of us will find it mighty hard to keep Christ in Christmas. But not the Cratchit family.

In Dickens's story, the spirits of Christmas whisk Ebenezer Scrooge from place to place as they confront him with the consequences to himself and others of the choices he has made. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see the Christmas Day celebration at the Cratchit home. Bob Cratchit, of course, is Scrooge's clerk and ekes out a subsistence living on the meager sum he is paid. He and his wife have five children, including Tiny Tim who is sickly and crippled. Their Christmas "feast" will

consist only of a scrawny goose, not a Butterball turkey. Mrs. Cratchit's Christmas finery is no more than a few ribbons adorning her thread-bare dress. There is no tree and certainly no endless pile of presents. But none of that matters to the Cratchits; they have each other. Their home overflows with kindness, love, peace, and joy. The basket of fruit they enjoy is not from Harry and David's -- it is the fruit of the Spirit. To illustrate, Martha, the oldest daughter, hides before her father's arrival so that he will think that she has chosen to miss the family feast. But she can't do it. She can't bear for her father to be disappointed, even if only for a joke. The Cratchits are even able, with admitted difficulty, to toast old Scrooge. Dickens never uses the name of Jesus in his story, but just in case we don't really understand what is going on, Bob Cratchit tells us that on their way home, Tiny Tim had remarked that "he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who had made lame beggars walk, and blind men see." Who! Even little Tiny Tim understands that the main thing at Christmas is the "who."

Paraments and the Christian Year

The set of decorative cloths on our altar are ecclesiastical ornaments called "paraments." We have four sets: green, purple, red, and white.

The color of the paraments will be changed as we move through the Christian year, which begins today. The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar.

The Christian year is organized around two cycles. The first is the Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The second cycle is the Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Within each cycle, there is a season of preparation (Advent & Lent) that is symbolized by the color purple, hence our paraments have been changed from green to purple.

Purple is the color of both penitence and royalty. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of repentance and preparation, but I don't know that "repent" and "Advent" usually go together in our minds. Yet, the traditional Advent scriptures always include the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Some of our most enduring Christmas stories, such as Scrooge and the Grinch, are stories of repentance and transformed lives. Advent is explicitly a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, our Master and Savior. Advent is a time to shed ourselves of all that would divert us from the love of God and neighbor.

Why do we traditionally begin Advent with a passage from Isaiah?

Today's passage from Isaiah is one of several lectionary readings for the 1st Sunday of Advent. The passage from Isaiah is forward-looking, anticipating the day when the Lord's house would be established on the highest mountain and all the nations would stream to it. This is an image of the arrival of God's kingdom, an arrival that would be ushered in by God's anointed one, God's Messiah. Similarly, the NT lectionary passages for today are forward-looking. In a passage from Romans, Paul reminds the Christians that it is time to wake up, "salvation is nearer to us than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Paul anticipates Jesus' return and urges the Christians to behave as if it is imminent. In a passage from Matthew, Jesus warns his disciples that the "Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

All these passages aim to heighten our awareness that we live in the interval between the dawning of God's new age and its full consummation. Advent is a time of preparation and self-examination. We are preparing ourselves for the unbridled joy of Christmas day, but we are also preparing ourselves for the kingdom of God. Look back at the passage from Isaiah. What are we doing to learn God's ways, to

walk in his path (v. 3)? What are we doing to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (v. 4)? Each day and in every way are we seeking to walk in the light of the Lord (v. 5)?

Bruce Birch writes:

The temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was far more than a matter of local geography. It was the locus of God's presence in the midst of God's people. To envision Zion as elevated above all other mountains and the focus of pilgrimage by all peoples (vv. 2b–3a) is not so much a political claim by Jerusalem as a spiritual claim of God's presence as the true center to which all nations will eventually flow. Nations will always be in conflict unless God's reign is recognized beyond that of kings and God sits on Mount Zion enthroned above the ark of the covenant, reigning over all other claims to power. Already the prophet Isaiah understands God's ultimate purpose to bring salvation to all the nations and not simply to Israel. This universal quality is appropriate to Advent, where Christians celebrate the birth of the child proclaimed with the words "Peace on earth; goodwill to all people."

A part of that hoped-for future day is that all humanity will also recognize the need for God's direction in their lives. Verse 3 actually contains four synonyms that stress the ways in which the direction that comes from God will finally prevail: "he [will] teach us his ways," "we [will] walk in his paths," "out of Zion shall go forth the law," "the word of the Lord [will come] from Jerusalem." Ways, paths, law, word—all express the direction that comes from God and counters the alternatives that tempt our allegiance in the world. The ways of this world are self-centered and idolatrous. This verse reorients the faithful to the alternative world created by covenant partnership with God. God is the true source of guidance in human life and community. In Advent, God's word incarnate is about to become flesh in our midst, countering the wisdom of this world. The Gospel of John expresses this hope in its profound claim that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14).¹

In Advent, we are preparing ourselves for Christ's *coming*. Perhaps it is a little like seeing something in the distance that is *coming* closer and closer and closer. And it is our heart's desire that is *coming* closer and closer, for, truly, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.² The Christmas proclamation is that God has *come to us*, is *coming to us*, and will forever *come to us*. And this is by the grace of God, for we could never find God on our own.

A few questions to reflect upon this week, as we prepare ourselves for Christmas.

You might begin this week by sharing memories and reflections on Dickens' story. Have you read it or only seen a film adaptation? What might be some of the differences in the two? Which film versions have you enjoyed the most and why? Why do you think this is such an enduring story? Every year it seems that new adaptations appear on our television screens. Could it be that it is a suitably secular treatment of Christ in Christmas? Or is it merely that people like ghost stories!?

Dickens' story is particularly suited for Advent. What themes in the story help to prepare us for the coming of the Christ child? Other than buying gifts and erecting trees, what do any of us do to prepare for Christmas, in the sense that we might use Lent to prepare for Easter? Would it be easier for us to see Advent as a time of preparation if we understand that every Christmas is a time to celebrate our expectation of Jesus' return as well as Jesus' birth, if we are forward-looking as well as backward-looking? What are two or three things that we, our friends, and our families could do this year to make Advent the time of preparation that it ought to be?

¹ Bruce C. Birch, "Exegetical Perspective on Isaiah 2:1–5," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 5.

² This famous phrase is from Augustine: "yet man, this part of your creation, desires to praise you; for you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

A Christmas Carol

Over the past couple of decades, the publishing world has exploded with the category “Christian fiction.” Go to any bookstore or prowl around on on-line and you’ll find shelves filled with novels of one sort or another that are pitched as having been written by Christians for Christians. It is almost as if any novel not on those shelves must be non-Christian!

What then do we do with Dickens, O’Connor, Dostoevsky and countless other great writers whose works never show up on shelves of “Christian fiction,” but who have much to say about God, humankind, sin, redemption, and the Good News? They wrote *from inside the Christian worldview* and for audiences who largely professed to be Christians.

In the case of Dickens, though he never had much interest in theology per se, he used his vast literary skills to craft stark indictments of Victorian England’s neglect of the poor. He reminded his readers that Christian love is not mere sentiment, but consists of what we actually do. Dickens had no patience for those who would speak kindly of the poor, wish them well, and then send them away hungry (see James 2:15).

I hope that you will make the time to read Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* in the coming weeks. Though the novella isn’t very long (only about eighty pages), the many film adaptations still must leave out much. Read it slowly and with an eye to the Christian themes that Dickens has woven together. For example, what does Jacob Marley see as having been his great failing? Is the story really about Scrooge’s greed or is it about his utter rejection of all relationships, close and distant? Is Scrooge’s repentance really genuine? How would we know? Enjoy!

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *1 Thessalonians*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”. [Note – I’m having a lot of problems with “junk content blocking” of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at scottengle.podbean.com.)]

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class. [Note – I’m having a lot of problems with “junk content blocking” of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at scottengle.podbean.com.)]