

# *The Call to Repent and Prepare*

## **WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> in a four-part series

December 4, 2022

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[The angel Gabriel comes to an old priest while performing his once-in-a-lifetime priestly duties in the temple. The priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, are childless and long past child-bearing years. Yet, Gabriel announces that they will have a child who will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” When Gabriel doubts such a thing possible, he is struck mute and will remain so until the child is born. As promised, Elizabeth becomes pregnant and is visited by her kin, a young woman, Mary of Nazareth, who is also pregnant.]

*Luke 1:57–66 (NRSV)*

<sup>57</sup> Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup> But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” <sup>61</sup> They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” <sup>62</sup> Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed.

<sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. <sup>66</sup> All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

*Matthew 3:1-12 (NRSV)*

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This 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.’”

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

<sup>7</sup>But 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? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do 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. <sup>10</sup>Even 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.

<sup>11</sup>“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. <sup>12</sup>His 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.”

*Ebenezer Scrooge brings to the manger 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 Christ’s Mass a life given over to sin.*

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 nearly 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.

Randle Nixon offers some reflections on the birth of John. These are written for preachers, but I think they are helpful to us all.

In preaching on this text, it may be useful to give Zechariah's hymn [Luke 1:67-79] some literary context. Like Mary later in this chapter, Zechariah is surprised by a visit from the angel Gabriel. Like Mary, he questions the announcement of a miraculous pregnancy, that he and his wife in their old age will have a child. As ancient Sarah laughed at such news, Zechariah challenges the angel's proclamation. Unlike Mary, he is punished for his incredulous response to the angel's announcement. Perhaps a man of his years and stature, a priest of the most high God, ought to be better prepared for such visitations than a peasant girl. Perhaps the elderly priest is, and ought to be, held to higher standards of accountability than a teenager still finding her way in the world. Perhaps there is a standard here by which the more seasoned and mature are expected to set examples, to lead the way for the young. Tom Wright says that "Often it's the old people, the ones who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumor of hope.... Zechariah comes across in this passage, especially in the prophetic poem, as someone who has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and who now finds the two bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son."

Because Zechariah is mute and deaf, a preacher might develop some sort of interior monologue in which Zechariah meditates on his fate and gathers the thoughts that culminate in this hymn of ecstasy and blessing. Surely Zechariah's season of being mute and deaf leaves him with time to wait, watch, and wonder. His physical state forces him in on himself to consider the entire course of his life—his faithful service as a priest, his faithful love for Elizabeth, his faithful belief that God would redeem God's people. He has time to consider the long arc of his life and how it has been disrupted by the sudden appearance of the holy at a time and in a manner he was not expecting.

Finally, Zechariah is faced with the hubbub surrounding the naming of the baby. The people of the village see that something out of the ordinary has happened to him, but they do not understand what he is going through. In the midst of the naming crisis he finds his voice. In response to people wondering, "What then will this child become?" the old priest breaks out in his ecstatic song of prophecy and blessing.

Who will this baby be? He will be called John, "God's gift" or "God is gracious." He will be integral to fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of how God will redeem God's people. He will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. In Luke's account of Zechariah's song, quotations from Israel's prophets are interwoven with Zechariah's own words of commissioning and blessing for his infant son. John will be the bridge between the law and its fulfillment, the prophet who will proclaim the Messiah's presence, the voice who will call the whole creation to repentance in response to the promise of salvation.<sup>1</sup>

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 plunged into the river by John.

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<sup>1</sup> Randle R. Nixon, "Homiletical Perspective on Luke 1:68-79," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 33-37.

Not long after, John was imprisoned by Herod and executed. But his call to repentance has rung loudly over the centuries and is meant for us still, perhaps especially now when too much of our world has lost any sense of genuine 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 blinders 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

### *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.<sup>3</sup>

### *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

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<sup>2</sup>You 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.

<sup>3</sup>Just 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!

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 manger and learned that even he was not beyond the power of Christ.

#### *Final thoughts and a few questions*

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 Ebenezer<sup>4</sup> 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?

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<sup>4</sup>Dickens' 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.

## **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*. *We begin 1 Samuel on January 3. Join us!*

#### **No class on December 6**

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](http://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](http://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](http://scottengle.podbean.com).)