The Ghosts / Memories of Christmas Past

Today we celebrate the second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Hope.

The Second Sunday of Advent, you know what that means don’t you?

There are 16 full days of shopping before Christmas!

16 days! On this Sunday of Hope, are you feeling hopeful?

Or, maybe, are you feeling a bit more like Scrooge? Bah Humbug!

Maybe we should pray, please be with me in prayer.

This morning, we continue our series looking at the Advent messages found in the classic Dicken’s story A Christmas Carol. This story reminds us of Advent and the journey we all face in seeking hope. Hope for our families, for the world…

The season of Advent starts with remembering. Remembering, not to beat ourselves down with past hurts and sorrows, but remembering, so we can be transformed and renewed in our life, our love and our faith.

Here’s a trivia quiz for you. What do these actors have in common? James Earl Jones, Jim Carrey, Patrick Stewart, and Bill Murray? What if I add Michael Caine, George C. Scott, Cicely Tyson, and Tom Hanks? Got it yet? All of these outstanding thespians have had the honor of playing the role of Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.”

How’s your Christmas spirit doing so far this year? If you’re like me, all the change and turmoil of this past year along with the oncoming rush of the holidays has me feeling a lot more Scrooge-ish than usual.

I enjoy this version of the story with the Muppets and its well-known message of warning and redemption.

Good old Ebenezer Scrooge, his dead partner Jacob Marley, Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. All these characters blend together to weave this classic story by Charles Dickens.

As Ron reminded us last week, Dickens wrote this story in England in the midst of the industrial revolution. This was a time of widespread poverty and human suffering.

A time when the Scrooge character somewhat represented a common opinion of the foolishness of the Christmas holiday.

People had moved to London, desperate for jobs and Christmas was looked upon as an annoyance, a distraction by employers.

The meaning of Christmas had been lost among the rush of rapid industrial growth.

Some might say that the meaning of Christmas has been lost for us also.

This Advent season we can learn from the “Ghost (or spirit) of Christmas Past” as we prepare to take our personal journey through Advent to Christmas.

As we travel through this Advent season of love and hope,

it may seem strange to be talking about Scrooge

and the ghost of Christmas past. But, for many of us, Christmas and the holidays carry memories and experiences that can be difficult to bear.

While it seems like everyone else is happy, we can be burdened in the memories of times long ago, of love lost. Sometimes, we can feel kind of like Scrooge’s partner, Jacob Marley, and the chains he is dragging around as a result of his life on earth.

Marley gave Scrooge a warning that if he didn’t change his ways he would be destined to carry a burden even greater than Marley’s chains.

Scrooge is clearly not a happy person,

he sees no benefit in being generous with the poor,

or even providing a living wage to dedicated workers.

He clutches onto his money and despises the thought of parting with any of it.

But it is not only his money that Scrooge withholds from others, it is his entire being.

He withholds love and kindness, he withholds warmth and friendship.

His world was small and bound up with self-centered ambition

that kept him from relationships that could have made him whole.

He wanted nothing to do with Christmas almost as much as he wanted nothing to do with helping others. Scrooge lived for himself alone.

So, what happened to Scrooge, how did he wind up like this?

In our time, to be called Scrooge is an insult, especially this time of year.

The name Scrooge is synonymous with words like greedy, stingy, miserable, unhappy, etc. All of us know someone who fits the description,

but have we thought about why someone acts this way?

If you remember the story,

the visit of the ghost or spirit of Christmas past

is really where we first gain the insight into Scrooge’s personality.

It’s interesting to note that the ghost of Christmas Past always has a brilliant light coming from it. Dickens might have been thinking about the words from the Gospel of John. The light of God shines onto the darkness of Scrooge’s past, pushing out the darkness of his past.

The journey with the spirit of Christmas past is the place where Scrooge’s nasty attitude first cracks as he looks to the past - it’s when he remembers what Christmas was like as a boy.

It’s when he remembers being young, when he was still looking forward - when he still had dreams. He remembers being so alone.

Something the movies leave out from the original story, It’s when he grieved the death of his beloved sister and remembered being blamed for his mother’s death in giving him birth. Maybe too heavy for the theater, but so real in many of our lives.

The journey continues to cover Scrooge as he grows and next we see when he remembered what it was like to have fun and to laugh.

It’s when he remembered being in love

and how that love was lost when his priorities changed

and his obsession with money got in the way.

Scrooge looked back at those Christmases long ago,

and he measured his life against them,

and he began to realize how far off course he had wandered.

He begins to realize the chains that were weighing him down

(taking the joy out of life)

were the decisions that had enslaved him

and that separated him from those who loved him.

He begins to see himself through the eyes of others, of “Christmas Past.”

That’s the key, isn’t it?

To learn from the past, to see our past through the eyes of others.

The early 19th century theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, observed what most of us already really know:

"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

And, our attempting to understand our pasts can be difficult, but healing,

just as it was for Scrooge.

Scrooge was face to face with his history,

a history that up to this point

didn’t leave a lot of room for hope for the future.

The prophet Isaiah was face to face with a history every bit as dark as Scrooge’s.

Isaiah preached in the worst of hard times.

Israel was in exile, hundreds of miles from home, temple and heritage.

Her cities were in ruins, and it was as though she would fall off the map of history.

Just a little more and her name would be forgotten.

Speaking the Word of God,

Isaiah bent down upon the weary, defeated tribe and whispered into her ear,

"Good tidings." “Good News”

The world was hearing an early proclamation of good news from God.

The message from Isaiah was that they should know

that the Spirit of the Lord was upon them, a vision of delight.

A promise of hope, of salvation,

**even** in the face of all the things that had gone wrong, all the bad decisions,

all the times of turning their backs on God.

Isaiah gave them hope by speaking the words of God.

Words that called Israel to task for turning away from the hurting people.

Action words to learn from her past and move forward in faithful relationships.

Israel was to preach to the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to those in captivity,

release itself from a feeling of vengeance,

and she was to comfort those who mourned.

. . . . She was to be the hands and feet of God here on earth.

Hear again the words of Isaiah from the Message translation:

Isaiah 61:1-3 The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me because God anointed me. He sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken, Announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners.

God sent me to announce the year of his grace— a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies— and to comfort all who mourn, To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,  give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,  
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,  a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.

This Advent, let us prepare for the future by revisiting our past.

Like Scrooge, we may not be comfortable with what we see.

Along with seeing ways that God was trying to work in our lives,

we may see how we resisted these efforts.

Like Scrooge, we may have let disappointments in life

become prison walls that keep us from the joy of loving relationships.

Like Scrooge, we may have become prisoners of greed,

separated from generosity that would enrich our lives as well as those around us.

Like Scrooge, our ghosts, our memories of Christmas past may bring us down this time of year.

But the good news is that our past does not have to define our future.

The promise found in our reading from Isaiah

is that hope and healing is on the way.

So don’t forget about Scrooge.

Scrooge didn’t know that he would be visited

by the ghost of Christmas Past.

But he came and though he may have been frightening,

he brought hope and the possibility of new life.

In the moments of stillness, as you await sleep,

don’t be surprised if you receive a visit from the spirit of Christmas past.

Do not be afraid for it will be the spirit of God

offering us the precious gift of healing and new life,

of grace and redemption.

Do not be afraid:

Our broken hearts will be comforted.

Our tears of mourning will be kissed in love

Our hopelessness will receive hope.

Our potential will be fulfilled.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Let’s pray