

December 7, 2014
Christmas According to Dickens
Mankind is Our Business!
Luke 1:1-4

Opening words: In 1843, the world was introduced to a new Christmas classic, *A Christmas Carol*. The timing of the book was perfect. England was nostalgic for old Christmas traditions and longed for the introduction of new ones. Charles Dickens's short story was an instant hit. Everyone knows the story. The bitter old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed by the visits of four ghosts. The first is his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. The last three are the ghosts of Christmases Past, Present and Future.

From the very beginning, the critics viewed *A Christmas Carol* as an indictment on 19th century capitalism. Dickens had a heart for the poor. It brings to the reader images of light, joy, warmth and life, yet it also brings images of darkness, despair, coldness, sadness and death. Scrooge, himself, is the embodiment of winter, who is transformed into spring. Maybe that is why this book has spoken to the generations? We all long for transformation and hope for a better world.

This year I want to take this season of Advent and look at the Biblical themes found in *A Christmas Carol*. Recently, I read the classic and have to admit the name Jesus is not found in the book one time. However, that does not mean that Christ's fingerprints are not found everywhere. Like Dickens, Jesus had a heart for the poor. This morning, we begin our study by looking at the beginning of the story. It is Christmas Eve, and the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is visited by his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. Let me call this message *Mankind is Our Business!* Our Gospel reading for this morning is Luke 1:1-4.

Luke 1:1-4 ¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

You know the story. Everybody knows the story. Ebenezer Scrooge lived for one thing, money! Nothing else really mattered to him. Day in and day out, he sat at his place of business making more money. The problem was, his money wasn't making him happier, it was making him miserable. If you don't believe me then ask the people in his life. You could ask his clerk, Bob Cratchit. Working in the cold, he barely made enough for his family. He not only feared Scrooge but he pitied him. He knew Scrooge was miserable. You could ask his nephew, Fred. He was Scrooge's sister's only child. Annually, he went to his Uncle Ebenezer's office to invite him for Christmas dinner.

Every year he was turned down. He knew his uncle was miserable. You could ask those two nameless chaps who came to his office to collect for the poor. They were shocked by his treatment, but knew the truth. Scrooge was miserable. Without the miraculous, Scrooge would have died miserable, but the miraculous came in the form of his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley.

You know the story. Everybody knows the story. Scrooge is locked safely in the security of his own home when the most unusual things begin to happen. It begins innocently enough. The doorknocker is transformed. The lion's face turns in to Jacob's face. The wind blows without warning. The clocks strike out of time. Scrooge locks his bedroom doors for extra security, but it doesn't matter. Without an invitation, Marley enters the room. He is visiting Scrooge for one reason, transformation. He must change his ways or face a horrible fate. Scrooge is like many in our time; he doesn't like change. He appeals to Marley's practical side and reminds him of their days in business. He was a good businessman. They made a great deal of money together. There is only one problem. Money-making was not their business. Scrooge was blind to what Marley knows. Marley says it clearly: MANKIND IS OUR BUSINESS! It is at this point that the old Christmas classic begins to intersect the Gospel lesson.

If you were with us two weeks ago, you will remember Luke's background. Luke was born into a Gentile family, educated in the Greek classics. When his formal education ended, he was a doctor. However, the church will always remember him as a companion of Paul during his second missionary journey. That is the reason many consider Luke to be Paul's Gospel.

We are in the opening four verses of the book. These verses are vital because they set the stage of the entire book. In these opening verses, Luke admits his work is not original. There have been other books that have tried to summarize the life of Jesus Christ. His book is different for one reason. Luke, himself, can be trusted. His accounts have come from eyewitnesses and fellow believers. Luke has investigated those stories. The false ones have been eliminated. The true ones have been included. He does all this work for one reason. He wants this body of believers, personified in this person, Theophilus, to know the truth. This is the truth. Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the only son of God and our holy hope of salvation. Jesus came for one reason, to be the bridge between mankind and God. Marley may have said it after his death, but Jesus demonstrated it in his life; MANKIND WAS HIS BUSINESS! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Today, I want to give you an overview of the next three weeks. They will comprise my three points for today. They are good to remember as we prepare to go to the Communion table. That first ghost that came to Scrooge was **the Ghost of Christmas Past**. The past is complex. Each one of us holds the memories of joyous Christmases. For many, the past holds disappointments. For many, Christmas isn't merry. Do you know of anyone who struggles during the Christmas season?

Do you struggle during the Christmas season? Jesus can help them and you. There has never been a moment in your life when Jesus wasn't with you! The second ghost that came to Scrooge was **the Ghost of Christmas Present**. Both Dickens and Jesus had a heart for the poor. They should never be forgotten. When you help the least, you are helping Jesus. How much are you willing to sacrifice for the poor this year? The third and final Christmas ghost that came to Scrooge was the ghost of Christmases yet to come, or **the Ghost of Christmas Future**. Somewhere down the road, a Christmas is coming where you will not be present. Your chair around the table will be empty or filled by someone else because you will have joined that great cloud of witnesses. No one gets out of this world alive! We are all terminal from birth. Someday, each one of us is going to die. That is my sermon outline for today, and my topics for the rest of Advent. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

The Ghost of Christmas Past

The first ghost that came to Scrooge was the Ghost of Christmas Past. You remember the story. His past is filled with some wonderful experiences and some not so great experiences. There was the Christmas that he spent working for Fezziwig, and the Christmas he spent at the school alone. Scrooge's past was filled with both the good and bad. Can anyone relate to that statement? Aren't your Christmases the same? How many wonderful Christmas memories do you hold near your heart? How many Christmas memories do you have that will make you cry? For many, Christmas isn't merry.

In the past few years the church has begun to recognize those who struggle during Christmas. We call it a Blue Christmas service. It is for those people who struggle with the blues during the month of December. They struggle with broken dreams or disappointments. The passing of a loved one. The one true love who never came. The adult child who never achieved independence. They job that was lost. The money that was wasted. The health that failed. I have preached at those services, and I remind people of three things:

- 1. Life is hard!**
- 2. Sometimes we need others!**
- 3. We always need God!**

That is why we come to church. It is nice to see our friends, but what we really want is God. Do you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 28? The Master said, "*I am with you always until the very end of time.*" If you are thankful that God has always been with you, say, "**Amen!**" The first Ghost was the ghost of Christmas Past.

The Ghost of Christmas Present

The second ghost that came to Scrooge was the Ghost of Christmas Present. You remember the story. Scrooge's world was filled with poverty. The embodiment of that poverty was his clerk, Bob Cratchit. He slaved in Scrooge's lifeless office for slave wages. Out of that small income, he was to provide for his family. Scrooge is so consumed with himself that he doesn't know a single thing about Cratchit's family.

It is the Ghost of Christmas Present who introduces him. The saddest member in the family is Bob's crippled son, Tiny Tim. Once Scrooge meets him, everything begins to change. Charity is when you collect for strangers. Missions is when you get personally involved with human need. How would your perspective change about the poor if you knew one?

Matthew 25 is one of the great chapters in the Bible. You know it because we have visited it so many times. In that chapter we hear the parable of the sheep and the goats. The sheep and the goats are separated. The sheep go to heaven, but the goats go to hell. The distinction is simple. The sheep responded to human need, but the goats failed. Jesus said it clearly. When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me. That verse always troubles me. There is no shortage of human need in our world this Christmas. Jesus expects us to help them. What are you doing to help the needy this year? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The first ghost was the Ghost of Christmas Past. The second ghost was the Ghost of Christmas Present.

The Ghost of Christmas Future

The third and final ghost that came to Scrooge was the ghost of Christmases yet to come, or the Ghost of Christmas Future. You remember the story. Wearing that long black robe, the face of the ghost is never seen. The gender is never disclosed. The only thing that appears are those long boney fingers. They point to the home of the Cratchit family. In the future, Tiny Tim will pass. They point to a grave and Scrooge is faced with his own fate, his own death. As the ghost leaves, Scrooge is begging for one more chance. He will keep the spirit of Christmas in his heart 365 a year! Scrooge doesn't want to die. I have never met a person who wanted to die. We all want to live for eternity.

The Gospel of Like was written for one reason. He wanted you to know the truth. He wanted you to know about the greatest life that ever lived. He wanted you to know that Jesus was the only son of God. He wanted you to know that Jesus was your only hope of salvation. It does not come out of the Gospel of Luke, it comes out of the Gospel of John. However, Luke would agree. John 3:16 says, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That whoever believes in him my not perish, but have eternal life."* If you would like to live for eternity and never die, say, **"Amen!"** If you believe in Jesus, say, **"Amen!"**

Jacob Marley changed Scrooge. He wasn't the same man. He was transformed. He kept Christmas the rest of his life. However, Marley's ghosts were unnecessary. He could have saved the trip. All Scrooge ever needed was Jesus. If Scrooge would have known Jesus from the very beginning, then he would have known the truth. Mankind was his business. He would have known Jesus had always been with him. After all, life is hard and we need help. He would have known to care for the poor. He would have known eternal life was an option. What he needed more than Jacob Marley was Jesus! And so do you! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

For your reflection:

Mankind is Our Business!

- 1. Have you ever read *A Christmas Carol*?**
- 2. What is your favorite movie version of *A Christmas Carol*?**
- 3. Have you ever felt like Scrooge?**
- 4. Have you ever felt like Bob Cratchit?**
- 5. What are the greatest priorities in your life?**
- 6. Do you consider yourself a lonely person?**
- 7. What is your happiest Christmas memory?**
- 8. What is your saddest Christmas memory?**
- 9. What would you like to change about yourself?**
- 10. How open are you to change?**
- 11. What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus?**