

December 14, 2014
Christmas According to Dickens
The Ghost of Christmas Past
Luke 1:26-43

Opening words: It was Christmas Eve 1969. I was twelve years old and I can remember returning home from the midnight candlelight service at my home church. The family car was filled with my loved ones. Everyone was excited about the next day. On that evening, we took the same route home from church that we had taken every Sunday morning. We were a block from our home when we noticed something unusual. The air was thick with smoke and the sky was filled with color. There was a yellow haze around the area, only interrupted by the red lights of emergency vehicles. The police routed us around the block as we tried to see what was happening. It wasn't until the next morning that we got the news. A house on the parallel street had caught on fire and had burned to the ground. The loss of property is hard; the loss of lives is unbearable.

The family that died on that Christmas Eve was the Campbell family. The only one who survived was their daughter, Maggie. The investigation revealed she was the cause of the fire. She was the one who lit the candle and left it unguarded. On that Christmas Eve, she lost her parents and her brother. At first he had escaped the flames, but returned to the house to save his parents. He didn't return. Memories are such a powerful thing. It has been over forty years since that tragic night, but every Christmas Eve I think about Maggie Campbell. Every year on Christmas Eve I pray for Maggie Campbell. How do you live the rest of your life knowing you caused your family's death? Maggie Campbell's story reminds us that Christmas isn't always merry.

This is sermon number two of my six-part sermon series, *Christmas According to Dickens*. We are looking at various scenes from the classic short story, *A Christmas Carol*. The name of Jesus is never mentioned in the book, but his fingerprints are found everywhere. Today's scene is no exception. This morning's message is called *The Ghost of Christmas Past*. Our primary scripture lesson is Luke 1:26-43.

Luke 1:26-43 26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." 34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High

will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

You know the story. Everybody knows the story. Miserly old businessman Ebenezer Scrooge lived for nothing but money. The problem was, his money wasn't making him happier, it was making him miserable. Everyone in his life knew it. His deceased business partner Jacob Marley knew it. Marley knew change was still possible, so he came to visit Scrooge and told him that three more ghosts would come to visit him. The first would be the Ghost of Christmas Past. The second would be the Ghost of Christmas Present. The third would be the ghost of Christmases yet to come, or the Ghost of Christmas Future. They were coming for one reason, transformation!

When we last left Scrooge, he was waiting. When the clock struck one, the waiting ended. The Ghost of Christmas Past comes in the form of a young woman. Her presence is so bright that he can hardly see her. In accordance with her name, she shows him his past Christmases. Some were wonderful memories, some weren't so great. There was the Christmas he spent in school alone. There was the Christmas his sister escorted him home. There was the Christmas that he partied with old Fezziwig. How many Christmas memories do you share annually? How many wonderful Christmas memories do you have? How many Christmases do you wish you could forget? In many ways, we are no different than Scrooge.

The one thing we are expected to be at Christmas is merry. Does anyone here have a problem with that last statement? For many, Christmas isn't merry. For some, Christmas isn't merry because of the death of a loved one. It may be a spouse. It may be a parent. It may be the death of a good friend or the death of a child. For some, Christmas isn't merry because there is a lack of money. They are unemployed or underemployed. They have mismanaged their money in the past, and that has tainted their present. For some, Christmas isn't merry because of reality. In their youth they had such dreams. They were going to see the world and make a million along the way. They have seen nothing but their leaky wet basement in their rented home. For others, Christmas isn't merry because of failing health. Does anyone here feel like they have let the youngest generation down? Or am I the only one? Do I have to go on, or do you get the picture? Christmas isn't always merry. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Our scripture lesson for today comes from the first chapter of Luke. You know the scripture. Perhaps, we have grown too comfortable with it. It is not really our fault. It was been told and retold over the past 2,000 years. It has been promoted by both the secular and the sacred worlds. Countless sermons have been written about it. Some of the greatest pieces of music have been inspired by it, and the masters of the art world have tried to capture it. In every home a Nativity set sits proudly on display to remind us of the story of the birth of Jesus. Do you know of anyone who doesn't know the story of the birth of Jesus? This morning I challenge you to look at this story from a different perspective. In your mind's eye, strip away the traditions. I just want you to listen to the words. What does the Bible say? The Bible says it all began with an unwanted pregnancy. That unwanted pregnancy placed a young woman in a difficult situation. Once you walk in Mary's shoes, the scripture suddenly comes to life.

Mary models for us how to survive in our world. She illustrates three things about life. They are the outline for my message today. First, she illustrates for us that life is hard. There is nothing easy about life. Second, she illustrates for us that sometimes we need others. She went to her cousin, Elizabeth. Third and finally, she illustrates for us that we always need God. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"** I promise I will be brief.

Life is hard

First, Mary illustrates for us: life is hard. Life has always been hard. If you don't believe me, then look at the Nativity itself. Don't glamorize the story. Don't get sucked into the tradition; just read the words. Every person in the story was in a difficult situation. Mary was in a difficult situation. In a time that valued morals, Mary was an unwed pregnant woman. Joseph was in a difficult situation. There was really no right answer. On the one hand, he has every right to divorce Mary and walk away. The problem is, Mary would have been found guilty of adultery. That means she would be stoned to death. How could he live with her death on his hands? On the other hand, if he takes Mary as his own, then he brings shame on himself. He is saying he has broken the abstinence law during the engagement. Zachariah and Elizabeth are in a difficult situation. They have no children and their society demanded children. If you turn to the second chapter of Matthew, then you find the story of the Magi. All they wanted to do was worship the new born king. Do you remember what happened? Their sincere actions led to the death of two-year-old baby boys and younger. Do I have to go on? Each one of the characters reminds us that life is hard. Do you know of anyone who has a hard life? Could it be that you have a hard life? Do you know of anyone who has ever said, "Life is much easier than I ever expected!" No! Life is hard! If you agree that life is hard, say, **"Amen!"** Scrooge was rich, but he had a hard life!

Sometimes we need others

Second, Mary illustrates for us: sometimes we need others. Look at the story one more time with me. Mary was from the town of Nazareth. In her time, Nazareth had a population of between 100 and 400 people. Have you ever lived in a small town?

Have you ever worshipped in a small membership church? Everyone knows everyone else. Everyone knows everyone's business. Mary is single and pregnant in a small town. Everyone in her life is talking about her pregnancy. She is the hot topic at the well. The story says she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Biblical scholars believe she went for two reasons. First, she goes to Elizabeth to escape the people in her life. Second, she goes to Elizabeth to receive some unconditional love. Has there ever been a time in your life when you needed the counsel of someone else? Have you ever been the counsel for someone else?

Sometimes we need people. Mary went to Elizabeth. Where do you go? Have you ever gone to visit a relative? Have you ever gone to visit a friend? Have you ever traveled to a counselor or a support group? Don't feel guilty! Sometimes we need people. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Scrooge was rich, but he had no unconditional love.

We always need God

Third and finally, Mary illustrates for us: we always need God. Beyond our reading for today comes one of the great pieces of scripture in the Bible. It is called the *Magnificat*; it means "glorifies". In that song, Mary completely surrenders to God's will. Just think about that for a moment. She sacrificed her dreams and desires for her life for God's will. Generations later, she reminds us that we always need God. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

One of the things that makes Christmas so difficult is all the images of the season. Christmas is the most visual holiday of the year. The season is filled with Christmas trees and Christmas lights. It is filled with Christmas cards and Christmas gifts. It is filled with Santa Claus and the Nativity. There are Christmas movies and Christmas cookies. There is both sacred and secular Christmas music. No matter where you turn, you are reminded of Christmas. You are expected to be merry. What happens when Christmas isn't merry? To many, those images are painful. Do you know anyone who can't wait to get Christmas over? Maybe we need a new image?

Ann Lamott is an American novelist and non-fiction writer. She is a little earthy for my taste, but she has something to offer. Perhaps, you have heard this story? She tells the story of being a child. One evening she was playing with some other children. She was running around the house and stepped inside the hall closet. She shut the door behind her and stood in the dark. She was excited because the other children couldn't find her. She was having a wonderful time until she tried to open the door. It was jammed, and she began to panic. She began to cry and called for her mother. Her mother ran to the closet door, but she couldn't open it! Her mother called the local fire department. The minutes waiting for the fire department dragged like hours. The little girl grew more and more upset. The mother did the only thing she could do. She sat on the floor on the other side of the door. Then she slid her fingers under the door and told her daughter to touch them. At the moment the little girl touched her mother's finger tips she began to calm down. This is the story of Christmas!

God is on the outside of the door, and the best we can do is touch God's finger tips. Yet, the touch of the finger tips makes us feel better. Would anyone here feel better just touching God's finger tips? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

You know it is true. There is nothing easy about life. It is so hard that sometimes we reach out to others. It may be in the form of a support group or a professional counselor. That supporting person may be a relative or a friend. Sometimes we need others. However, we always need God. David Jeremiah once said, "*All the Christmas presents in the world are worth nothing without the presence of Christ.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

For Your Reflection

The Ghost of Christmas Past

1. What is your first Christmas memory?
2. Does your family have any unique Christmas traditions?
3. What is your happiest Christmas memory?
4. What is your saddest Christmas memory?
5. Why does only Luke tell us about the birth of Christ?
6. What is the greatest challenge in your life?
7. Where do you go for unconditional love?
8. Does anyone look to you for unconditional love?
9. Have you ever experienced God?
10. Where do you go to experience God?
11. When was the last time you experienced God?
12. What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus?