

December 21, 2014
Christmas According to Dickens
The Ghost of Christmas Present
Luke 1:46-56

Opening words: 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 more 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. He 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!

This is sermon number three in 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 Present*. Our primary scripture is Luke 1:46-56.

Luke 1:46-56 ⁴⁶ And Mary said:
"My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."
⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

When we last left Scrooge, he was trying to recover from his time with the Ghost of Christmas Past. She reminded him of both the good and the bad. It was now time for his next visitor, the Ghost of Christmas Present. For the first time he saw the home of his office clerk, Bob Cratchitt. His home was simple at best, with a surplus of both love and hardship. Everyone is doing their best to survive and support one another. The apple of Bob's eye is his young crippled son, Tiny Tim. The boy has no future, but he is able to do one thing no one else can. He pierces Scrooge's heart. For the first time in a long time, Scrooge shows some compassion. The problem is, Scrooge is not quite ready to act on that compassion. In many ways we are like Scrooge. We have compassion on the less fortunate, but we do very little to relieve their suffering. I hope you don't resemble that remark. I am afraid, I do.

On Tuesdays evenings I have been meeting with a small group. I do them occasionally. I enjoy them for a variety of reasons. First, I do them for me. I get to be with people. I spend more time alone than you would think. Second, I do them for you. With three services and new members, we don't know one another anymore. It is important that you know one another. You may get to know someone new in one of these studies. Third, I do them for the material itself. I will be the first to admit that I am not a great chapter and verse minister. However, I will also admit that most of the time we know what God wants us to do, but we just refuse to do it. Just think about it for a moment. Everyone here knows they are to love unconditionally, but we love conditionally. Everyone here knows we are supposed to tithe, but we give our spare change. Everyone here knows our only hope of salvation is Jesus, but we still believe we can earn our salvation by our good works. In my opinion, knowing chapter and verse is important, but it is not as important as living out God's will. In many ways, we play the part of Scrooge. We know what we should do but we just don't do it. That is what makes this morning's Gospel lesson so incredible. Let us look at it together.

Once again, we are in the first chapter of Luke. We have to go back before we go forward. Mary has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she has been selected by God for a special job. She is going to be the mother of the Messiah. There is only one problem. She is unmarried, so pregnancy seems impossible. You have to admit, God is always thinking outside of the box. This child will not be conceived in the old-fashioned way. This child will be conceived in a miraculous way. The Holy Spirit himself will come upon her, and she will be with child. She will name that child Jesus. That is a good church story, but in the real world it is hard to believe. All you have to do is walk in Mary's shoes and the story gets very complex. We talked about this last week.

The scriptures tell us Mary lived in a town called Nazareth. It was a small town. In Mary's day, it had a population of between one hundred and four hundred people. Have you ever lived in a small town? Have you ever worshipped in a small membership church? You don't just know everyone, everyone knows everyone else's business. Unlike our world, Mary's world had high moral standards. She was a single pregnant woman. In our low morals time, we are supposed to be open minded about such

matters. In Mary's time, she was shunned. That means all of her personal dreams and desires were gone. Her pregnancy didn't just bring shame to her, it brought shame to her entire family. On the one hand, God's selection of Mary was a wonderful thing. She will always be remembered as the mother of Jesus. On the other hand, this unwanted pregnancy meant the death of her personal dreams and desires. All she really wanted was to be respected by this world. That is what makes this morning's scripture lesson so incredible. Mary surrenders her personal dreams and desires to do God's will. Luke 1:38 is significant. Mary is addressing the angel Gabriel. She says, "*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*" That leads us to today's lesson.

We call it the *Magnificat*, which means "glorifies". It is one of four hymns found in the first two chapters of Luke. It is written like a psalm and is comparable to Hannah's song in I Samuel 2:1-10. The words are legendary. However, what makes it so amazing is the content. Mary is able to do as a young woman, what we have never been able to do, completely surrender to God's will. How open are you to God's will for your life? C. S. Lewis said it for us all. He said, "*We're not necessarily doubting that God's will is the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.*" If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" That leads us to three questions.

Today, I want to test your faith. How far are you willing to trust God? We are good at talking about the faith. We have limitations when it comes to living out the faith. The words are nice, but the authentic Christian life is even better. The Gospel is supposed to be affecting every dark corner of your life. The Gospel is supposed to be influencing your **worldview**. The Gospel is supposed to be influencing your **community spirit**. The Gospel is supposed to be influencing your **self-image**. We can't cry ignorance. We know the opinions we should hold. The problem is, we play the part of Scrooge. We just choose not to do it. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Does your worldview reflect God's will?

Many consider David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* the greatest movie ever made. It is based on Margaret Mitchell's book of the same name. It was the only book she ever wrote. You know the story because the movie is on television regularly. Earlier this week was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the movie's world premiere in Atlanta. One of the facts that has come to light revolves around the actress Hattie McDaniel, who played Mammy in the movie. She became the first black actor to receive an Academy Award for best supporting actor in 1940. However, she wasn't invited to the world premiere because of the segregation laws in the Jim Crow south. Racism has been a big part of our country for a long time. I am afraid we haven't made much progress.

Racism has dominated the news lately. Do these names sound familiar?

Travon Martin
Michael Brown
Eric Garner

You know those names. Martin was fatally shot in Sanford, Florida by George Zimmerman. Brown was fatally shot in Ferguson, Missouri by Darren Wilson. Garner was strangled to death in Staten Island, New York. They are just three names in a sea of names that revolve around racism. I hate to say it, but you know it is true. Racial tension in America is high. The views that white America holds about those men and the views black America hold about those men are extremely different. This is the question.

Does your worldview reflect God's will? 1 John 2:9 says, *"Whoever says he is living in the light but hates his brother is still living in darkness."* Mankind sees how people are different, God sees what we have in common. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ! What do you see when you look at a stranger? Do you see how they are different from you? Do you look for what you have in common? In other words, are you more like Scrooge, who saw the problem and did nothing? Are you more like Mary, who surrendered to God's will? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Does your community spirit reflect God's will?

One of the great things this church does annually is the "giving tree". You know the routine. You take a tag off the tree, which contains a gift suggestion. You are to return that gift with the tag and wrapping paper on a designated date, unwrapped! The tree stands empty today because those gifts were picked up last week. Can I be honest with you? I miss those gifts. It was fun to look at all the gifts. It was fun to see the generosity of this congregation. I am proud of your generosity! This is the question.

Does your community spirit reflect God's will? Galatians 2:10 says, *"They asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."* I am glad you are generous, because there is so much need. Did you know that 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day? (World Bank Development) Did you know 22,000 children a day die due to poverty? (UNICEF) God expects us to help them. Are you more like Scrooge, who saw the problem and did nothing? Are you more like Mary, who surrendered to God's will? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Does your self-image reflect God's will?

Psychologists tell us that by age five, children have developed a definite self-image. Economics and social standing influence that self-image very little. The greatest influence on a child are the child's parents. That makes parenting even more overwhelming. How good of a job did your parents do? Do they have a good self-image or a poor one? I am always amazed at how tough people are on themselves. This is the question.

Does your self-image reflect God's will? 1 John 3:1 says, *"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."* Every day get up and look in the mirror and remind yourself that you are a child of God!

Are you more like Scrooge, who saw the problem did nothing? Are you more like Mary, who surrendered to God's will? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"

A little over a month ago, Kathryn and I were in the state of Texas to visit relatives. One of the family members we visited lives in San Antonio. We took that opportunity to visit the Alamo. I came away with a new appreciation for the events of April 6, 1836. For it was on that day the thirteen-day siege ended. Approximately 200 Texans were confronted by approximately 6,000 Mexican soldiers led by Santa Anna during their war of independence. Some of the greatest names in American history were involved in the battle: Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett and William Travis. The final outcome at the Alamo was obvious, but they refused to surrender.

In one of the great scenes in North American history, William Travis lined up his soldiers and told them of their impending defeat. He drew a line in the sand and said any man wishing to leave the Alamo could do so without recourse. Only one man left. The others stepped over that line to stand with him, hence accepting their fate. History tells us each one died with honor and for a cause that was bigger than themselves. Santa Anna's cruel treatment of their corpses changed the future of Texas. He wanted to shock his world with his might. Instead, he inspired many Texans to defeat the Mexicans because of his cruelty. About six weeks later, on April 21, 1836, Sam Houston defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto and their independence was won. This is my question for you.

What in the world does the Virgin Mary have to do with the Alamo? The answer is everything. The Magificat isn't just a song, it is a line in the sand. She is challenging us to step over the line and stand with her. William Travis stood with 200, but Mary is standing alone. She is standing alone because we really don't want to surrender our **worldview** for God's worldview. She is standing alone because we don't want to surrender our **community spirit** for God's compassion for the poor. She is standing alone because we refuse to surrender our **self-image**. Saint Ignatius once said, *"It is not hard to obey when we love the one whom we obey."* And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

The Ghost of Christmas Present

- 1. What are you planning on celebrating Christmas?**
- 2. Who will you be unable to see on Christmas?**
- 3. Do you know of anyone who is estranged from a family member this Christmas?**
- 4. What is your biggest disappointment this Christmas?**
- 5. Is ignorance or war the biggest challenge facing our world?**
- 6. What is God's biggest disappointment Christmas?**
- 7. What will make Christmas special this year?**
- 8. Have you ever volunteered to help the needy on Christmas?**
- 9. What have you done to help the needy this year?**
- 10. Have you spent more money on your family pet or the poor this year?**
- 11. Will you be glad when Christmas is over?**
- 12. How would God like you to spend Christmas?**
- 13. What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus?**