

December 28, 2014  
Christmas According to Dickens  
*The Ghost of Christmas Future*  
Luke 2:21-40

**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 five 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 Future*. Our Gospel reading for today is Luke 2:21-40

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**Luke 2:21-40** <sup>21</sup> On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.  
<sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"<sup>1</sup>), <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:  
<sup>29</sup> "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss<sup>[d]</sup> your servant in peace.  
<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel."  
<sup>33</sup> The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. <sup>39</sup> When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

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You know the story, everyone knows the story. Scrooge was leaving the Ghost of Christmas Present. His transformation was beginning. He is beginning to enjoy Christmas. He enjoys the love in the Cratchitt home. He enjoys the fun at his family dinner. He even enjoys the sacredness of Christmas worship. He enjoys it all and he didn't want to leave. The problem is, he has to leave and face the last of his three ghosts, the ghost of Christmases yet to come, or the Ghost of Christmas Future.

Our scene for this morning features that voiceless, faceless phantom. The only thing Scrooge sees is a large black robe with extruding bony fingers. Those lifeless fingers show Scrooge where he must look. He must look at the stock exchange where he labored daily. He must look at the grieving Cratchitt home where Tiny Tim has passed. He must look at his own grave with his name edged in stone. He looked at it all and he didn't like what he saw. He had changed! What he saw as so valuable in this world means nothing. What he saw as pointless, suddenly has meaning. With this new insight, he promises to live the rest of his life differently. How would you live your life differently, if you knew your future? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Luke. We heard about two different events. The first event came when Jesus was eight days old. For it was on that day that Jesus was formally named and circumcised (v.21). Never forget, he was Jewish. The second came when he was forty days old. For it was on that day that the Old Testament law, Leviticus 12:2-8, demanded that Mary go to the temple. All women who had given birth to a boy had to go to the temple to offer a sacrifice of purification. It could have been something as small as two doves (vvs. 22-24). The sacrifice was made as scripted. The only thing that makes this story unique are the characters they meet at the temple. I have said it a million times. The best things that happen in church aren't found in the bulletin.

This morning, I want to be brief, but I want to be clear. The two people mentioned in this story play the part of the Ghost of Christmas Future. They were not preoccupied with the baby Jesus. They were more interested in the things that Jesus would do with his life. They knew that Jesus would play a vital role in God's plan of salvation for the world. They praised God on that day for two different reasons. It is those reasons I want to look at this morning. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

## Simeon

The name Alan Gross has dominated the news recently. He went to Cuba in 2009 to help set up internet access from the small Jewish community on that island nation. The Cuban government saw him as a threat and arrested him. After five years in a Cuban prison, he was released and returned home recently. I cannot imagine what life is like in a Cuban prison. He lost 100 pounds during his years of incarceration. The only thing that kept him going was his weekly phone calls home. They reminded him he wasn't forgotten.

The first person Mary and Joseph encountered was Simeon. He is described as righteous and devout. He had been waiting for years for the consolation of Israel. What does that mean? It means that he had been waiting for years for comfort. Annually, he sat at the Seder and remembered the great things that God had done for them. It was God who sent the plagues. It was God who parted the sea. It was God who provided for his people in the wilderness. God did some mighty things for them, but that seemed like ancient history. God hadn't done anything for them in quite a while. Those great days with God had been replaced by foreign domination. There must have been days when they felt like they were forgotten. Have you ever felt forgotten by God? When Simeon looked into the face of Jesus he was comforted, because he knew God was still with them. When we look into the face of Jesus, we are comforted too. Jesus reminds us that God is still with us! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

## Anna

On October 2, 2006, Charles C. Roberts walked into an Amish school with three guns. At first, there were 26 students. He permitted some to leave, leaving behind their classmates. It was at that moment that he began to fire. When silence returned, six people lay dead, including Roberts. Notes left behind revealed he was dealing with the loss of his infant daughter years earlier. The grieving Amish community did something completely unnatural. They forgave Roberts and began supporting his widow. They even offered her some financial help. Their ability to love did not come from this world, it came from God. Their ability to forgive changed the lives of countless people.

The second person Mary and Joseph encountered was Anna. She is described as an old prophetess. No, she wasn't 57. She was 84! It was never difficult to find her because she was always in the temple. She had been there since the death of her husband. She knew there was something special about Jesus, and spoke about the redemption of Israel. What does that mean? A large part of redemption is forgiveness. When Anna looked into the face of the infant Jesus, she knew that forgiveness was possible. After all, thirty-three years later, Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for the sins of our world so we can experience forgiveness. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Let me end with this old preaching story.

Many years ago, there was a very wealthy man who shared a passion for art collecting with his son. They had priceless works by Picasso and Van Gogh adorning the walls of

their family estate. As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His son had died. Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season had vanished with the death of his son. On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces of art on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hands who said, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you." The soldier mentioned that he was an artist and then gave the old man the package. The paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man hung the portrait over the fireplace, pushing aside millions of dollars worth of art. His task completed, the old man sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given. The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, far eclipsing any interest in the pieces of art for which museums around the world clamored.

The following spring, the old man died. The art world waited with anticipation for the upcoming auction. According to the will of the old man, all the art works would be auctioned on Christmas Day, the day he had received the greatest gift. The day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled that day. The auction began with a painting that was not on anyone's museum wish list. It was the painting of the man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid, but the room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" No one spoke. Finally someone said, "Who cares about that painting. It's just a picture of his son. Let's move on to the good stuff." The auctioneer responded, "No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?" Finally, a neighbor of the old man offered \$10 dollars. "That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it." The auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice...gone." The gavel fell. Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, "Now we can bid on the real treasures!" The auctioneer looked at the room filled with people and announced that the auction was over. Everyone was stunned. Someone spoke up and said, "What do you mean, it's over? We didn't come here for a painting of someone's son. There are millions of dollars worth of art here! What's going on?" The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the Father, whoever takes the son...gets it all."

It is the story of Christmas. Whoever gets the son, gets it all. You know it is true. If you have Jesus, then you have a constant friend in this world. There has never been a moment in your life when you are alone. Like Simeon, you have companionship. If you have Jesus, then you have forgiveness. Like Anna, you have salvation. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" May God bless each one of you!

**For your reflection:**

**The Ghost of Christmas Future**

1. When did you first experience romantic love?
2. Has your view of love changed throughout the years?
3. Have you ever had to practice tough love?
4. What do you want for Christmas?
5. What is your greatest need?
6. Do you have a loved one who feels unforgiven?
7. Is there someone who has never forgiven you?
8. Do you know of someone who struggles with a poor self-image?
9. How did you come to accept Jesus?
10. Do you question any loved ones salvation?
11. Have you discovered God's purpose for your life?
12. What is your greatest passion?
13. What are you looking forward to in the future?
14. What is your greatest fear in the future?
15. What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus?