

January 4, 2015
Christmas According to Dickens
God Bless Us! Every One!
Matthew 2:1-12

Opening words: We have come to the end. This is my final message in my Advent/Christmas sermon series, *Christmas According to Dickens*. We have been looking at scenes from Charles Dickens's classic short story, *A Christmas Carol*. By now you should know 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 *God Bless Us! Every One!* Our reading for this morning is Matthew 2:1-12.

Matthew 2:1-12 ¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

You know the story. Everybody knows the story. When we last left Scrooge, the transformation was complete. Scrooge had endured the three phantom visitors that Marley had promised, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the ghost of Christmases yet to come, or the Ghost of Christmas Future. Scrooge was a new man and embraced the spirit of Christmas. He began by remembering the poor. He continued by celebrating the day in the home of his nephew, Fred. Then he went to the home of his office clerk, Bob Cratchit. Presents are given to everyone and he provides a big bird for the feast. Bob is even promised a well overdue raise. When the punch is passed out, Scrooge offers to make a toast. It was his first.

It is filled with both love and regret. It is Tiny Tim, Bob's crippled son, who closes the book. Tiny Tim says, "*God bless us. Every one!*" That line has been woven through the fabric of our society. I have never met a person who didn't want to be blessed. If you would like God to bless you, then say, "**God bless us, every one!**" That takes us to this morning's Gospel lesson.

We find ourselves this morning in the second chapter of Matthew. The story is unique to this Gospel; none of the others have it. However, that does not mean that the story is not known. We know more about the story than we do most stories. It is not because we are Biblical experts, it is because of the tradition. It is because of the song. Just think about it for a moment. Everyone thinks there were three kings. The problem is, the Bible doesn't call them kings. The Bible calls them Magi, who brought three gifts. (There is an old Orthodox tradition that says there were twelve of them.) Tradition doesn't stop there. Tradition tells us their names, descriptions and gifts. The Bible doesn't say a word. Melchior was an old grayed headed man with a long white beard. He brought the gold, the gift for a king. Caspar was young and beardless. He brought the frankincense, the gift for a priest. The myrrh, the gift for one who was going to die, was brought by Balthasar, who was swarthy. Yet, all of this non-Biblical tradition doesn't nullify the divine truth.

What does the Bible say? The Bible says (two years) after the birth of Jesus, Magi came from the east because they had seen a star. It all makes sense. Magi were astrologers who came from the Middle East. The stars had told them a king had been born. They assumed the king would be born in the palace. The problem is they assumed wrong. The king had been born among the common people in a blue collar place. Yet, in spite of their error, we still value the magi because they stand as a symbol that Jesus came to save all people, not just the Jews. Epiphany is a liturgical season when we celebrate the fact that God loves all people, even unlovable people like us. And all of God's people said, "**God bless us, every one!**" That is one of those things that sounds good but is hard to live out.

One of the great saints in the history of this church is Jean Macaulay. She moved out of the area several years ago. Recently, I have been communicating with her son, Harry, because the family is preparing to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. You may remember her and her husband Mac. For decades they sat in the back of the sanctuary. She once said to me, "Russ, I have been part of this church from the very beginning. There was a time when I knew everyone, their parents and their most recent illness or surgery. There is something wrong with that. Our church was stagnant, our church was dying." She ended by saying, "I know fewer people all the time. I think that is wonderful." She wasn't wrong. Healthy churches grow. She would have been thrilled with 2014.

Before we go to the communion table and get too far into 2015, I want to look at what Epiphany means to Western Reserve this year. (Epiphany means "manifestation.") This year is special because last year was so unique.

I never had a year in the ministry quite like last year. We made progress in nearly every corner of the church. It was fueled by a large group of new members who came from a wide variety of places. You would be hard pressed to find any mainline church in this part of the state that progressed as much as we did. Churches with proud histories are closing all around us, but we are growing. That is a good thing, but that is a hard thing from a group dynamics standpoint. Listen to what I am about to say. Epiphany reminds us that God loves all people, even people like us, even people we don't know.

This season I want to be very practical. You can call this my "state of the church address." The theme of epiphany, God's love for all people, acts as the background. Our future success depends on us. God is not to be questioned; He has blessed us in a mighty way. Our future success demands on how we treat and accept one another. It is much easier to chase someone off than it is to recruit them. I bet I will step on everyone's toes at least once. I have wrapped my thoughts around two words. The first is *age*. The second is *ministry*. I will admit it to you up front, some of my comments may be upsetting to you, so please hear them in the spirit they are intended. After all, God loves all people, even me! So if you are ready to begin, say, **"God bless us, every one!"**

Age

The first word is age. The church was never meant to be dominated by one generation. The church was never meant to be a senior citizen's center or a day care center. The church is the last place where all generations mix. We need the spiritual maturity and the wisdom of the aged. We need the energy and the passion of the young. The problem is, in most mainline protestant churches there is only one generation represented. I am so thankful that is not our problem. I am thankful we have all generations represented here. I am really thankful we have a viable, growing youth group. They are just great! Do you know what I have learned from them? They are a lot like me when I was a teenager. They are full of energy, so they make noise and an occasional mess. The only thing they want from us is acceptance. They are proud of this church and have a passion for Jesus. How can that be a bad thing? Listen to what I am about to say. If a clean kitchen is more important to you than teenagers, then go to another church. If an orderly church building is more important to you, then go to another church. If quiet is more important to you than kids, then go to another church. There are many churches that have no youth at all. Their kitchens are spotless. Their churches are orderly. Their churches are quiet. My home is both quiet and orderly because my children have moved out. I miss them. Our church would miss our teenagers if they were gone. All teenagers want is acceptance. Remember, God loves all people. And all of God's people said, **God bless us, every one!"**

Ministry

The second word is the word ministry. Each one of us was created by God for a specific reason. I am convinced what we enjoy doing reveals our gift. Everyone enjoys something different, so everyone's gift is different. Some people teach.

Some people sing. Some people have a heart for the poor or the forgotten. Some people cook or pray. Whatever your gift is, use it! I spend more time than you think encouraging people to pursue their passion. We would really see this church blossom if everyone would simply pursue their passion or gift. The problem is, that while I am encouraging people, others are discouraging them. The reason is simple. We are more interested in controlling what is happening than we are serving God. We discourage people because we want to control them. I have a million examples and so do you. How many discouraging words have you heard lately? They discouraged others with their predictions of failure to their face. They discouraged by spreading negative false information behind their backs. They discouraged by not supporting someone else's cause. When I went into the ministry I thought everyone was passionate about Jesus. On negative days, I fear everyone is passionate about control. This is the truth. You don't have to like everything in the life of this church. That is fine, because we don't need your permission. However, God does expect you to pray for your fellow church members. When was the last time you prayed for someone else's ministry? Remember, God loves all people. And all of God's people said, **"God bless us, every one!"**

In October, Kathryn and I went to Germany. We took a self-guided Martin Luther Reformation tour. We saw some amazing things and every place was special. I hope to return some day. One of the highlights for me was Munich. One of the places on my bucket list was the Hofbrauhaus in Munich. It was one of those things I wanted to do before I die. I don't want to shock you, but it is famous for one kind of beverage, beer. However, they offered other kinds of beverages of choice. For example, you could order a Mountain Dew. It really is an amazing place. It can hold 3,000 customers at a single time. We went on a Saturday night, so it was almost filled. As we wandered through, everyone was in a good mood, expecting something special to happen. The German band was playing traditional music, which spoke to every generation. We found two seats on the main floor. We sat at a long table with 12 people sitting on a long wooden bench. That meant we had to sit with strangers. However, they weren't strangers for long. Everyone was welcoming. We ordered our beverage of choice and started talking to the man across the table. He was with his wife and his teenage daughter. They had driven to Munich from their home in Switzerland. He told us he had been in America years ago and stayed in California. Over the next hour, we drank our beverage of choice. We talked about our lives and gave our opinions on a variety of world topics. We were having such a good time we hardly noticed the man who was sitting at the table alone, drinking his beverage of choice. He didn't speak English. However, he did communicate by lifting his mug filled with his beverage of choice and gave us a big toothless smile. The whole time, the tables around us were celebrating the night. Your age or your income didn't matter. Your social standing or your nationality did not matter. Nothing really mattered and everyone felt like they belonged. It was a great evening. Everyone came expecting something good to happen. No one judged another. Everyone talked to strangers and left as friends. I know there are some limitations in this analogy, but I still have to say it:

Why can't the church be more like the Hofbrauhaus? Wouldn't it be great to go to a church where everyone was positive? Wouldn't it be great to go to a church where no one was critical or judgmental? Wouldn't it be great to go to a church where strangers became friends? Wouldn't it be great to go to a church where everyone was accepted? The people at the Hofbrauhaus understood what the Magi illustrated for us years ago. God loves everyone and so should His church! And all of God's people said, "**God bless us, every one!**"