

Sermon Advent Week 1: *God Bless Us Everyone!* November 27, 2016

A Child is born to us, a Son is given to us, and authority will be on His shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for His kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. Isaiah 9:6-7 CEB

Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior. The Lord has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. The Lord has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. The Lord has come to the aid of God's servant Israel, remembering God's mercy, just as God promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever." Luke 1:46-47, 52-55

Today is the first day of Advent, which is a word that means "coming" and during the four weeks of Advent... even before Christmas and decorations and presents... we celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world. We celebrate the arrival of God's Kingdom, and we wait - we yearn - for the second coming of Christ, and for the healing and redemption of the world. So in these next four weeks of Advent, Christians are mindful of our joy and the world's brokenness. Advent is a prayerful season, and every week, as a new Advent candle is lit, we are given a different word to pray. This week's prayer-word is "peace." In Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus' coming was foretold, and He would be called, among many things... the Prince of Peace.

The Thursday after the presidential election my clergy circuit met and it was my turn to give the devotion. I took a baby doll and wrapped it in a blanket and we read this scripture, "A Child is born to us, a Son is given to us, and authority will be on His shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace." I asked us all to remember how it feels to hold a baby, how precious and fragile they are, and I asked us to imagine that the baby-doll was peace, and to

hold her carefully and tenderly. We passed her around our circle, looking at her in our arms, touching her face, most of us in tears.

Peace is not just the absence of disagreements or war, or holding back bitter and angry words... it's also looking for common ground; it's standing together to combat prejudice and injustice; it's searching for ways to love others, especially others with whom,,, we don't have peace. Jesus brought peace to us, to the world. Angels appeared in the night sky when He was born and sang to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid... to glory to God... and peace on earth." Before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told His friends, "Don't be afraid... My peace I leave with you." And after His death, when He appeared to His friends, the Risen Christ said to them, "Peace be with you." Peace is not the absence of conflict... but it's the opposite of fear. Today we lit the Advent candle of peace to remember that when we walk with Jesus, we don't need to fear the past, the present, or the future.

At the beginning of Charles Dickens' famous book, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge had no peace. This story was published in 1863 and takes place on Christmas Eve, which was Scrooge's least favorite time of year. Scrooge's partner, Jacob Marley, was dead, and Scrooge's soul was almost dead. On this night, Christmas Eve, Scrooge goes on a terrifying and transforming journey, and wakes on Christmas morning, a new man. During these four weeks of Advent we'll journey with Scrooge as he meets the ghosts of the past, the present, and the future.

To be called a "Scrooge" is to be stingy with both money and human affection, and to be greedy, stockpiling wealth at the expense of, and indifference to, the needs of the poor. Charles Dickens described Scrooge as "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping,

scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue... He carried his own low temperature always about him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas... Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place of Scrooge. Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways." Scrooge seems irredeemable, and yet at the end of his story, he is redeemed.

*A Christmas Carol* is a story of redemption, just as Christmas is a story of redemption. To redeem something is to save or recover it, to buy it back. Money was the only thing Ebenezer Scrooge valued, but his visits with the ghosts of Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future, showed him that only love can redeem us. Love is why Jesus came into the world... as we sang earlier, to "save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray." *A Christmas Carol* reminds us that there's no soul too bitter, or cold, for God's redeeming love.

In contrast to this story about Scrooge's penny-pinching insecurity, today we've heard Jesus' mother's words about trusting God, and depending on God's mercy. "With all my heart," Mary sang, "I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior. The Lord has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the

lowly. The Lord has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.”

At the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge hears a caroler sing “*God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlefolk*” which we just sang. Scrooge has rejected, mocked, and insulted everyone who’s wished him a Merry Christmas, and he goes home to be alone and resentful. Dickens’ wrote, “No warmth could warm Scrooge... No wind that blew was bitterer than he.” At his front door, Scrooge’s doorknocker appears as the ghostly face of his old business partner, Jacob Marley, who is wrapped in chains. Marley warns Scrooge that if he doesn’t change, he too will drag similar chains of loneliness and regret throughout eternity.

Marley leaves Scrooge, rattling his chains until the sound disappears, and Scrooge is alone in his room. He notices, for the first time, that the tiles around his fireplace are pictures of bible stories. They’ve gone unseen, literally and figuratively, for they haven’t influenced his beliefs or his behavior. In response to his nephew Fred’s invitation for Scrooge to spend Christmas with him and his wife, Scrooge’s nasty reply was, “Bah! Humbug! Merry Christmas! What right do you have to be merry? What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer?” We, like Scrooge, have pictures around this room that tell us stories from the bible about the undeserved love, and the extravagant welcome of God, for all people.

Scrooge, noticing the bible story pictures surrounding his fireplace, takes the first step of the journey towards redemption. He notices the tiles, and in his encounter with the ghosts of the past, the present, and the future, Scrooge is forced to notice that how

he's lived, and what he's valued, have left him spiritually and morally bankrupt. The ghosts make Scrooge see... pay attention... and gradually he decides that instead of making the change of commerce, he wants to be a changed man.

Christmas can be a painful time... for people without change in their pockets who wish they could buy gifts for friends and family; who wish they could enter into that magical time advertisers and retailers smoothly promise is, if not the reason for the season, the true expression of the season. Christmas can be a painful time... for people without love, who wish that change in their pockets could buy friends and family; who wish they could buy people who care about them.

But Advent is a different season, and it embraces all of us, regardless of our circumstances. Advent is a time to see, to pay attention, to be mindful (the lessons the ghosts of Christmas past, and present, and future, offered to Scrooge) ... a time to see God, here, with us. Advent is a time to slow down, to notice God's presence, even in this fractured and warring world. Advent is a time to breathe in God's peace, and to be amazed, and grateful, and to find ways to share it.

You might know Scrooge's story well. *A Christmas Carol* has been made into many movies, first as a silent movie in 1910, and I think most recently in 2009, with Jim Carey. You might want to watch one of them this week, to refresh your memory of this story... or borrow the book from the library. Every week, for the next three weeks of Advent, we'll hear a dramatic reading from *A Christmas Carol*, and we'll look at how that story, and the bible's Christmas story, and maybe our own story... intersect, and as we recognize, maybe for the first time, the healing and redemptive power of God's love. Scrooge was, Dickens said, incorrigible, hopeless. And yet, by the end of that story, he

was redeemed. Dickens reminds us that there's hope... for you, and me, and all the world, to be redeemed.

Let us pray: Today, Lord God, we pray for peace. Today we pray that we would learn of peace from You, Jesus, because You weren't born into a world of peace, but still You held peace, and shared it with Your friends. We too are Your friends and followers, Lord, and we pray that You would teach us to hold peace in our hearts, and to offer it to others - as the first gift of Christmas. We pray this in Your name, Jesus, amen.

Now let's continue in a time of prayer, for a few moments of silence.