

Sermon Advent Week 3: *God Bless Us Everyone!* December 11, 2016

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 CEB

Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them.

Matthew 2:1-18 CEB

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We've seen His star in the east, and we've come to honor Him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *"You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the Child. When you've found Him, report to me so that I too may go and honor Him." When they heard the king, they went; and look! the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the Child was.

When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother. Falling to their knees, they honored Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the Child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the Child in order to kill Him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the Child and His mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called My Son out of Egypt.

When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: *"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving. Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more."*

This is the third week of Advent, the four weeks that lead up to Christmas and the coming of the Christ Child. In the midst of this season already called Christmas, Christians are observing a prayerful, reflective season called Advent. Even though our closets might be full of gifts to wrap, and our wallets stuffed with receipts, we are trying to empty ourselves of soul-clutter: clearing out anything inhospitable to make a welcoming place in us for the birth of the Baby Jesus. This is a sacred season when we look for Jesus' coming... into our hearts, and into the world, to heal and to redeem all creation. Jesus came as one of us, to share this human life, and to love and save us all.

In this sacred season (whether you call it Advent or Christmas) we look for Jesus, in our own hearts and lives, and in our common humanity with Him, and with all people. During these four weeks we are to see, to wonder at, and be in awe of, the miracle of His coming as Emmanuel, God-with-us. I sometimes forget to celebrate the miracle of His coming... in the midst of the yearning we all feel for the healing and redemption of this fractured and war-torn world. Earlier we prayed - would you look at the bottom of page one? - and let's pray that sentence together, starting with the words, "Open us to Your miracle." "Open to us the miracle just begun... [turn the page and let's finish this sentence] "and in this season transform us into those whose giving brings love to a turbulent world."

This is the prayer and focus of Advent... that we celebrate the miracle of Jesus' coming... and that because the miracle has begun, we are transformed into people whose giving (gifts to friends and enemies alike: peace, love, compassion, and humility; and gifts desperately needed by the poor: food and shelter and hope) ... that we are people whose giving helps heal and transform the world.

This is the third week we've spent time with Ebenezer Scrooge, from Charles Dickens' book, *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge is a miserly, frozen-fish of a man, soulless and irredeemable, who sees no good in his fellow humans, and values only what makes him money. One Christmas Eve (Scrooge's least favorite time of year) he's visited by the ghost of his long-dead partner, Jacob Marley, who's wrapped in chains of misery and regret. Marley lived a loveless and compassionless life, similar to Scrooge's, and Marley has come to warn Scrooge that he too will drag those chains in the afterlife if he doesn't change. Each week we've heard a dramatic reading with excerpts from *A Christmas Carol*.

Each week in Advent in worship - and some of us do this at home - we light a new candle, to signify the coming, increasing light of Christ into the world, into the darkness. The first candle of Advent was peace, and the second hope, and today's candle is love. Advent asks us to be mindful of yearning for the coming of Jesus, and to look for Him, even in places we'd rather not see Him... like at a family argument, or in hungry children, or in broken relationships, or in loss and heartache. Advent asks us to have our eyes wide open to see (with love!) Jesus even in the darkest places.

Because love has no monetary value, and Ebenezer Scrooge lived most of his life without it, he shielded his eyes (and his heart) from human contact and human need. As Jacob Marley had promised, Scrooge was visited on Christmas Eve by three ghosts: Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. The Ghost of Christmas Present is the second unwelcome visitor to Scrooge, and he brings Scrooge into the town where Scrooge notices for the first time how bleak and dingy it is. But he also sees that people are happy and joyful because it's Christmas.

Today's gospel seems weirdly out-of-place in the beauty of this season, and this place... the crèche, and greenery, and ribbons and candlelight. "When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: *'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving. Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more.'*"

Human want, and human suffering, is not a new thing. This is the world Jesus was born into... a backwater town under a regime of oppression, in a dismal time in history, to young parents who had to flee to another country to save their child's life. Many of us shut out this world of want and suffering. But this is the world Jesus came to mend and save. King Herod reacted with fear to the news of the newborn King, to a new kingdom come... but when we open our eyes and hearts to God's love... God uses us to become ambassadors of hope, and healing, and mercy. God uses us to be agents of the new kingdom - Christ's Kingdom - which is still struggling to be fully realized on earth as it is in heaven. This is the miracle just begun.

The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to the home of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, where Scrooge sees great want (hunger, poverty, and a desperately frail child, Tiny Tim) but there's also abundant faith and love. The Cratchit's have eyes wide open to see the gifts they possess of family, and laughter, and even their meager Christmas dinner is celebrated with thanksgiving. This is an unfamiliar world to Scrooge... faith and love, joy and generosity, and he's captured by it. This is what we hope people who visit

here will see in us, and these are holy and lasting gifts we share with the community, and in our homes, and places of work: faith and love, joy and generosity. These are gifts that Scrooge has never seen, never bothered to unwrap, and they speak to his cold and indifferent heart, which is “strangely warmed” by Tiny Tim’s words: “God bless us everyone!” Scrooge asks the Ghost to reassure him that Tiny Tim will live, and the Ghost says, “I see a vacant seat... in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.” And then the Ghost then echoes Scrooge’s own words back to him, “If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

Scrooge’s eyes and heart have been opened to a child... to laughter, to love... and he cannot return to who he was before. The unfreezing process has begun... the miracle of Scrooge’s redemption has begun. When our eyes and hearts are open wide to human suffering here, now, in the present, we will see Jesus, Emmanuel: God-Present-with-us. And we cannot return to who we were before... only aware of our own desires, and needs, of our own Christmas lists. I think then we can see Jesus in the faces of the poor, the immigrant, the friendless, and the enemy. Then we’ll be transformed into people whose giving brings love to this turbulent world.

Last Tuesday evening a somewhat rowdy group of people from our congregation went to the Orinda Theatre to support Fran and Vic Smith, who were honored by Diablo Magazine’s “Threads of Hope” award. We saw heart-lifting and inspiring video interviews of everyone receiving the honor. It felt like worship (the Holy Spirit seemed so present!) because of the ways love and service were celebrated and valued. The people who were honored, including Fran and Vic, all had something kind of extraordinary in

common. They all have eyes wide open to human need, and human suffering, and have decided to change it. And all of them (I hope it's okay with you, Fran and Vic, if I say this) all of them are ordinary people... who are changing the world.

The miracle just begun... the coming of Jesus in this Present moment with us... inspires us to change, and to change the world: Not just a meal for the poor, but a place at the table with us... Not just sympathy for the refugee family, but a home for them... Not just a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, but radical, openhearted hospitality for all people.

Let us pray: Amazing and ever-present Lord Jesus, help us let go of fear and anger, of coldness and indifference, so that we might see You, here, now, with us, as the real gift of Christmas. By Your Spirit, help us to share faith and love, joy and generosity, as signs of Your Kingdom come. We pray in Your name. Amen.