

Sermon Advent Week 3: *God Bless Us Everyone!* December 18, 2016

On the Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue as He normally did, and stood up to read. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because the Lord has anointed Me. God has sent Me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:16-19

So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as God's children. Romans 8:4b-17

Today begins the fourth week of Advent, and each week we've lit a candle to signify the coming light of Christ into the darkness. Each candle has represented something for us to pray for, and a gift for us to give, to help bring the light of Christ into the world: Peace. Love. Hope. And today, Joy. Christmas seems a harried season (fun, but busy bordering on frantic for many of us.) What I love about Advent is that it's an intentional season... only one word each week to be mindful of, to pray over. In Advent we are meant to slow down, even as holiday parties and Christmas pageants and last-minute shopping speed up and pile up. Advent invites us to be still, and reflective, and to make space in us, to welcome the Christ-child. And this makes Advent weirdly joyful because the emphasis isn't on external things as much as internal space... like a warm and hospitable place in the heart for Jesus to be born. Joy, because rather than see us lost in the darkness of sin and self-centeredness, Jesus came to be one of us, to share this life, to redeem our humanity. The last candle we light in Advent is joy, to remind us that Jesus (and the peace, love, hope and joy He gives) is the most longed-for gift of the human heart.

Joy seems like an underused word, and an unfamiliar experience to many people. Peace, love, and hope are common desires, but joy seems somehow more fleeting and mysterious. I think what joy and Advent have in common is that they're both internal experiences that happen in the heart. The children told us what the angel said, when they sang about the birth of Jesus, "Don't be afraid!" The rest of the message from the angel was "I bring you news of great joy!" It seems that joy and fear can't exist in the same moment.

Every week in Advent we've heard a dramatic reading from Charles Dickens' book, *A Christmas Carol*; a story of a hardened and heartless, penny-pinching miser named Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge rejected everything that had no monetary value - love and compassion and even simple kindness - and bitterness and indifference to his fellow humans had marked his features, making him sour and pinched-looking. Scrooge valued only commerce, that which made him money, and he'd shut out the rest of the world... he'd shut out life, he'd closed his heart. But *A Christmas Carol* is a story of redemption, just as Christmas is a story of redemption...

On Christmas Eve (which was Scrooge's least favorite holiday) he received a visit from the ghost of his old business partner, Jacob Marley. Yesterday our family went to see a one-man play, called *One Christmas Carol*, adapted from Charles Dickens' book. The actor who played all of the characters, was most convincing as the ghost of Jacob Marley, wrapped in chains of guilt and regret that he was forced to drag through eternity. During his life Marley'd also had no time for love, for compassion, or for anything other than a profitable business transaction. Now his chains weighed him

down so terribly that he occasionally fell to the floor. He warned Scrooge that unless he made a change, he would also wear chains of despair and remorse in the afterlife.

On Wednesday morning I met in here with our preschoolers to talk about Christmas. I told them that a long time ago God saw the darkness in the world and wanted to give us light. Nancy Sanders turned off the lights and we sat here in the dark for a few seconds. And I lit the Advent candles, one by one, and we looked at the light. We don't notice the light until we see the darkness. I told the children that when Jesus was born at Christmas, He brought light into the world. The preschool has been participating with us in the "Tree of Kindness"... as the teachers have noticed acts of kindness, they've written the children's names on the gift cards and hung them on the tree. I told them that whenever we are kind, whenever we care about other people, we're showing them the light of Jesus, the light of Christmas.

There was no light in Ebenezer Scrooge's soul, and on Christmas Eve, he was visited by three ghosts in the dark of night. With the Ghost of Christmas Past Scrooge relives the happiness he'd known as a young man, and regret that he'd rejected love and pushed away whatever stood between himself and making money. With the Ghost of Christmas Present Scrooge is engaged by simple pleasures of love, and family, and his heart is touched by Tiny Tim's expression of faith, "God bless us, everyone!" The last Ghost is the Ghost of Christmas Future, and with this Ghost, Scrooge is forced to face his fear of the unknown. With the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge sees himself clearly, as if he is looking in a mirror, and he hates and fears what he sees.

I too have had the most difficulty with this ghost. The other Ghosts instructed and chastised Scrooge, but the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is a "shrouded, silent spirit"

and Scrooge is uneasy and fearful in his presence. Words can be reassuring or something to combat, but silence is difficult. There's little silence in our lives, unless we make space for it. St. John of the Cross, a 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, wrote that "Silence is God's first language." Being silent in God's presence is so hard that many of us avoid it, preferring to believe that we and God are too busy to sit together, and listen, just listen, to each other. I recently read that silence is "what it sounds like when God is listening to us."

When we pray, with the understanding and expectation that God is like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, who has already decided our future, and our prayers and expectations are unmet, the silence can feel like we've fallen into an abyss. God's silence can feel like God's absence. One of the most difficult questions to answer is "Why doesn't *God* answer?" Perhaps in silence God shows us who we are... fragile creatures, dependent on God's love and mercy, interconnected with all others, and, like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge, we are not in control.

The last Ghostly visitor shows Scrooge his own bedroom and silently points to a body covered by a sheet. "The room was very dark, too dark to be observed with any accuracy, through Scrooge glanced round it... A pale light, rising in the outer air, fell straight upon the bed; and on it, plundered and bereft, unwatched, unwept, uncared for, was the body of a man." The Ghost points to the body with insistence that Scrooge look under the sheet, at himself, but Scrooge can't bring himself to do it. The Ghost takes him to the home of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, and Scrooge sees the family's grief, he notices it, he feels it, because Tiny Tim, the child who cracked open the rusty hinges of Scrooge's heart, has died. Scrooge receives two gifts, two lessons from the silent Ghost

of Christmas Yet to Come: one that life is brief, and two, that he is not an island. There are other people to be considered... one of them a poor and helpless child named Tiny Tim. Light is breaking through the darkness Scrooge has lived in for most of his life.

Scrooge asks the Ghost about his own unmourned death (and his unlived life!) and the grievously mourned death of Tiny Tim, "Tell me, Spirit, are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they the shadows of the things that May be, only?" The Ghost is silent but Scrooge answers his own question: "Hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been... why show me this, if I am past all hope! I will [honour] Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future... I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

Part of the liturgy of Communion is our confession of faith that God is in the past, the present, and the future. "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." God was with us in the past, God is with us in the present, God will be with us in the future. We don't have to be chained to regrets of the past, or fear of the future, because Jesus, who is known as Emmanuel, God-with-us, is here. This is the reason for joy. This is our prayer this coming week as Christmas rushes towards us like it's being pulled by reindeer... let us practice joy... let us share joy.

"It was always said of him [Scrooge] that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge." Like Scrooge learning the lessons from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future, let us learn the lessons of Advent and keep Peace, and keep Love, and Keep Hope, and keep Joy... Let us keep these lessons well.

Let us pray. Amazing and Creative God, You who make all things new, renew us this day and every day, so that we might be strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit to keep the lessons of Christmas well. Keep us from falling into fear, and lead us into the joy of Your salvation. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.