



from the desk of ...
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Jesus At The Movies

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

How would you finish this sentence ...

"For me, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without ____"?

I suspect for all of us there are certain things that have to happen, or certain things that we have to have, without which ... Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas.

Let's have some interaction here. What are some of the things that are "necessary" for your Christmas to be Christmas? ...

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I asked this very question to my grandson over Thanksgiving & his eyes immediately sparkled, & he looked at me as if I had just asked him the most stupid question in the world. His response ... "presents!"

I love the old joke about 2 boys spending the night at their grandparent's house.

It was bedtime, & as they said their prayers, the youngest one began praying in a loud voice ...

"I PRAY FOR A THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE TRAIN SET! I PRAY FOR AN ELECTRIC SCOOTER! I PRAY FOR A NEW SPIDERMAN ACTION FIGURE!"

His older brother leaned over & asked ...

"Why are you shouting? God isn't hard of hearing."
"I know," his little brother responded ... "but grandma is."

But it's true isn't it? ... We all have those things, those traditions that, without which, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas! And we so look forward to them.

My traditions include, (which have already begun):

- listening to Christmas music
- eating off our Christmas dishes
- lots & lots of Christmas decorations
- reading Christmas books
- setting up my nativity sets
- setting up my Santa Claus collection
- Christmas Eve candlelight service, with "O Holy Night" being sung
- &, of course, I especially love watching a # of holiday movies throughout the season, i.e.
 - * "One Special Night"
 - * "Fallen Angel"
 - * "A Season Of Miracles"
 - * "Unlikely Angel"

And in that same vein, I look forward to a special time on the 24th & 25th of December, after all the day's activities are over, when I sit down, with only the Christmas lights on, & a glass of eggnog at my side, & watch on Christmas Eve ... "Miracle On 34th Street," & then on Christmas night ... "It's A Wonderful Life."

As I was thinking about all this, & some of those wonderful old Christmas shows that we all enjoy, I decided for our Advent Season, to do a sermon series entitled ... "Jesus At The Movies." (X)

So, over the next 4 weeks we'll be looking at:

- "A Christmas Carol"
- "A Christmas Story"
- "Miracle On 34th Street"
- "It's A Wonderful Life"

And since we did Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" last night at our Dinner Theatre, & because it's so fresh in our mind,

I thought that that would be a good place to begin. (X)

Now of the 4 were going to be talking about, I suspect "A Christmas Carol" is the most familiar. It was 1st published in 1843, & became an overnight success. It's now read or seen throughout the world. It's playing on stage at the Goodman Theatre down in Chicago, right now for the 39th straight holiday season ...
another Christmas tradition.

I know that I read the story before I ever saw it on stage or screen. It's been performed by: Jim Carrey, Albert Finney, Kelsey Grammer, Frederick March, Patrick Stewart, & George C. Scott, not to mention Disney's version with Scrooge McDuck, & of course, the Muppets with none other than Oscar the Grouch.

Most of you are familiar with the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is a mean & intimidating character, who lives only to make money. He's a man who has no time, & no patience for religion or sentimentality, of any sort ... especially at Christmastime.

Even the very name "Scrooge" has become synonymous with that kind of attitude.

Listen to the way Dickens describes Ebenezer Scrooge ...

"No warmth could warm him; no wintry weather could chill him. No wind that blew was more bitter than he. The heaviest rain, & snow, & hail, & sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often came down handsomely, & Scrooge never did."

At one point in the story, his nephew Fred stops by to wish him a Merry Christmas. That's where those famous words were spoken ... "Bah, humbug."

In another scene, 2 gentlemen arrive to ask for a donation to help the poor during the holidays. They even offer to keep Scrooge's gift anonymous if he wishes.

"What I wish is to be left alone.
I don't make merry myself at Christmas
& I can't afford to make idle people merry."

They replied ... "Then many will die."

Scrooge responds ... "If they would rather die, they had better do it, & decrease the surplus population."

Not many cared for Ebenezer Scrooge, but worse yet, he cared for no one but himself.

And then one Christmas Eve, he received a terrifying wake-up call. He's visited by the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley was a miser just like Scrooge, & he had been condemned to roam the face of the earth, tormented by the things he neglected to value in life. Condemned to drag behind him "the long chains" that he had forged in life.

And he's desperate to give his old colleague a final chance to avoid the same fate. This is Scrooge's last opportunity to turn from his ignorant, selfish, greedy ways; to turn from his materialistic, moneymaking business ... & begin making humanity his business.

Then Marley warns him that he's going to be visited by 3 ghosts: the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, & Future. The 1st 2 make quite an impression upon him. And the 3rd one brings him face-to-face with what will ultimately become of him.

And it's at this point that we pick up the story.
Let's watch ...

(VIDEO ... BEGIN AT 1:21:46 & END AT 1:25:31)

Listen now to Good News from Paul, to the Church in Corinth, & to the Church here in Rolling Meadows.

Within your hearing now comes the Word of the Lord ...

No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. Our message is that God was making all human beings his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends.

Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends! (2 Corinthians 5:16-20)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

What if you were given a 2nd chance to get your life right? ... Have you ever thought to yourself,

"boy, if I only had the opportunity to do that all over again, I would've done it much differently"?

In Dickens' story the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, & Future gave Scrooge that chance!

And in essence, if we stop & think about it ... that kind of summarizes the whole Christmas message. Truth be told, the meaning behind the Christmas story is about a **God** who gives humanity a **2nd chance**. (John 10:10)

And the fact of the matter is ... it's because of that that we have the opportunity to spend eternity with Him.

So, this morning, very briefly, I want to explore the ghosts of our Christmas' past, present, & future ... to help us rediscover, in what is a very familiar & comfortable story ... the God of 2nd chances.

We begin with the ghost of Christmas Past. And this spirit takes Scrooge back through time to confront him with the pain & the agony of Christmases gone by.

1st they go to a schoolroom where they see a lonely little boy sitting by the fire, whose only companion is the book he's reading. The boy is Scrooge himself. And as he looks on he remembers how he had been rejected by his father who blamed him for the death of his mother, who died giving him birth.

Scrooge reminisces how Christmas after Christmas, as the other children went home for the holidays, he was left alone & deserted. He remembers his childhood loneliness & pain; how he had yearned for the presence & warmth of friends,
& how he longed for the love & acceptance of his family.

Then the spirit whisks him off & shows him his former fiancée, Belle, a girl whom he once loved deeply, but who had come in a poor 2nd to his passion for wealth.

“A golden idol displaces me,”
she complains to him from the past.

And as they travel from Christmas to Christmas, Scrooge is faced time & time again with his broken relationships, with his rejection, & with his loneliness.

You know, the Christmas season is supposed to be full of joy & happiness. But for many, it can be the hardest time of the year. Psychologists tell us that depression increases dramatically in December.

I'm sure that most of us have had Christmases that we'd rather forget. Christmases that were difficult to get through. I know I've had a couple.

There are 5,280 people like Scrooge today who will find celebrating Christmas this year problematic because of the failed & broken relationships of their past.

They dread the very thought of it.

Because of the painful memories that each Christmas season brings, i.e. ... broken families, broken friendships, loss, rejection ...

it feels like they're dragging Marley's "heavy chains".

And yet Christmas time is a time of hope, a time of joy,
a time of reconciliation.

There's a Christmas Past that echoes down through the pages of history. A Christmas Past whose timeless message haunts our every Christmas Present.

And if we were to travel back further than the history of our own Christmas Past, if we were to travel back further than the history of Scrooge's Christmas Past, if we were to travel back & re-visit that very 1st Christmas ... a little over 2,000 years ago, if we were to gaze upon that 1st nativity scene ...
at the Christ Child born in Bethlehem & lying in a manger.

Then all of our Christmas fears & disappointments would be eliminated & we would become filled with hope.

For on that 1st Christmas night, an angel appeared to shepherds & declared to them the Good News that a Savior had been born. Their message was "to all the people" (Luke 2:10) ... for young & old, for rich & poor,
for Jews & Gentiles, for you & for me. (Colossians 3:11)

Christ had come, God in the flesh, (John 1:14) to save us all.
His birth can wipe our past clean.

All of our pain, all of our sorrows, all of our hurts, all of our rejection, all of our broken relationships ...
are wrapped up in His love for us.

(X) "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

That's the hope & the promise of Christmas Past.
That's the hope & the promise of the God of 2nd chances.

Next, we come to the ghost of Christmas Present.

What becomes very obvious is that Scrooge is a product of his history; he's a creation of his Christmases gone by. And so, the 2nd spirit to visit him is the ghost of Christmas Present. This ghost comes to give him an opportunity to see what his life is truly like in the here & now ... & it's eye-opening.

He's shown the house of his employee, Bob Cratchit, where, despite their poverty, it's a home filled with joy & compassion & love for one another. A home where, as they sit down to their feeble Christmas dinner, Bob Cratchit still takes the time to share a toast to his greedy, selfish, miserly boss ... (Luke 6:28)
the one who keeps him in abject poverty.

Then he's shown the home of his nephew ... the only person alive who has any affection for Scrooge
Whatsoever ... even though it's totally unwarranted.

Year-after-year his nephew had invited Scrooge to come & share in the joy & merriment of Christmas with him & his wife ... & year-after-year Scrooge had rejected his invitation. But his nephew keeps on inviting him.

The ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge exactly what he's become; the hardness & callousness of his heart; his dismissal of the poverty & needs of those around him;

& his total disregard & disdain for humanity itself.

Oh, he tried to justify his actions by the money that he had earned & how successful he was, but in the things that counted, in the things that really mattered ...

he was nothing & he had nothing.

And the ghost of Christmas Present shows him that even though he's utterly hard-hearted, bitter & twisted, & may well seem beyond the point of redemption, but despite all that, the spirit shows him that others still loved him & had not given up on him.

And that's the promise of Christmas Present. Each year we're reminded that, no matter how bad we are, no matter how selfish we are, no matter how greedy we are, no matter how rebellious we are, no matter how much we reject Him ... **God loves us & never gives up on us.** (2 Peter 3:9) Isn't that an amazing thing? ...

Who can understand that kind of love? ... (Romans 5:8)

Christmas should be a time of love, joy, peace, & goodwill to all. However, Scrooge was so self-centered, so embittered, so materialistically motivated that he'd lost sight of all that completely.

Now before we become too critical ... every one of us is capable of falling into the same trap, neglecting that which is truly important in life, & viewing **money** ... & the things it can buy as the **answer** to our **problems**.

If we're not careful, the spirit of Scrooge can easily hijack our every Christmas;
turning our pilgrimage of faith into a trip to the mall.

Christ-mas is exactly what it says it is ... a holy **celebration** of the Christ. But for many people, Christmas stopped being about Christ a long time ago. Now it's all about self-indulgence, extravagance, materialism, & money. Now it's about me, myself, & I.

"What do you want for Christmas ...
& by the way, here's my wish list."

And yet the true account of Christmas is the exact opposite. It's about the One who left all riches, who left all glory, who "gave up all he had" (Philippians 2:7) & "became like a human being." He was born in a stable,
wrapped in clothes, & laid in a manger.

He's the One who came, not to be served but to serve.
(Matthew 20:28) That's the reality of Christmas Present.

Then comes the final ghost ... the spirit of Christmas Future, who has no face & doesn't speak.

It merely points. Scrooge looks to where the spirit is leading him, & sees the Cratchit family again, worn down in their struggle against poverty ... but now without Tiny Tim, who has died for lack of proper medical care.

The spirit takes Scrooge to visit the house of a man who has died in his sleep. A maid & a cleaner are dividing up his belongings before the undertaker arrives. 2 associates out in the street are discussing whether it's even necessary to hold a funeral service ...
since no one would bother to come.

"But who is this man?" asks Scrooge. At which point the spirit leads him to a grave, whose headstone bears the name ... "Ebenezer Scrooge". It's a chilling reminder that no one lives forever;

that the journey of life is brief. (Job 14:1)

As the Scriptures record ... "our days are like a passing shadow, & we cannot escape death." (1 Chronicles 29:15)

This is it, the life-changing moment of truth when Scrooge understands that it's now or never. He was known as a penny-pinching, mean, hateful, self-centered old miser. No one really wanted anything to do with him. And in the final stages of his life,
even his own family didn't care to be around him.

All that he had worked for would be stolen ... even the curtains from his bedroom. There would be no one at his funeral; for no one cared that he had passed. He would die as he lived, miserable & alone,
 & his life would have counted for nothing at all.

But the promise of **Christmas Past**,
 & the certainty of **Christmas Present**,
 means that **Christmas Future** can be filled with **hope**.

Jesus came to transform our lives. He came to make us a new creation, to take away our heart of stone & give us a spiritual heart. The Good News is ... whatever our **past** has been, because of the Christmas story, because God Himself came as an infant child ...
 we can have a better **future**.

You know, Scrooge considered the ghost of Christmas Future to be the most frightening of all. Many are scared of the future ...
 we're all a little frightened of the unknown.

But I want to say that just as we remember Christmas Past ... that 1st Christmas when God was born as an infant child ... so every Christmas we should also look forward to Christmas Future.

To that time when we know Christ will **come again**.

(The Acts 1:11)

The day is coming when Jesus Christ will return to take us home ... & that's the hope of Christmas Future!

Now at the heart of "A Christmas Carol" lies Scrooge's **transformation**. Through his encounter with Christmas Past, Present, & Future, Scrooge was changed from a selfish, greedy, & bitter old man ... & he becomes a grateful, generous, & compassionate human being.

On that Christmas Eve he's confronted by the reality of who he is & where he's headed ... & he responds by altering his ways. He repents, & changes his destiny.

Jesus, the Son of God, invites us to do the same. What better time than Christmas to receive His forgiveness, to renew our faith,
& rebuild our friendships?

I think there's a Scrooge in all of us that needs to be repented of. The Good News of Christmas is that we can learn from the past, to change the present,
so that we can create a better future.

It's not too late. Whatever our past has been, we can have a better future. Scripture records ... (X)
"Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favor;
today is the day to be saved!" (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Scrooge learned his lesson well. When he was given a 2nd chance he seized the opportunity & changed his ways to make the days of his life count. He became a man that understood the value of life, the joys of life,
& he learned to truly love life.

In the beginning, he didn't want to give Bob Cratchit the day off ... even though it was Christmas. In the end, Scrooge sends the largest turkey in the market over to the Cratchit house for dinner.

In the beginning, he despised the poor. But in the end, he gave a whopping sum of money to help those in need.

In the beginning, he ignored what little family he had.
But in the end, he restored that relationship.

Dickens' writes ... "Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, & infinitely more. He became as good a friend, as good a master, & as good a man, as the good old city knew. And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well."

"A Christmas Carol" is a story about a life transformed! And it's what Christmas is about ... it's what Jesus is all about ... transforming lives. Taking a messed-up life & turning it into something beautiful.

Now none of us will be visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, & Future as Scrooge was. But we will be visited by The Holy Spirit ... this Christmas & every Christmas ...

because God never stops trying to **reach** us.

So, why not let Jesus be born into your life, this Christmas season? ... God bless us, everyone!

MARANA THA