

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2008
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

“Marley was dead.”

That’s how Charles Dickens’ famous Christmas Carol begins.

Marley, of course, was Jacob Marley, Ebenezer Scrooge’s partner in the accounting house of Scrooge and Marley. The story, I’m sure you know, is the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge’s transformation from definitive miser to beneficent keeper of Christmas.

These past weeks before Christmas, I think I’ve seen almost every repeat of the story: Alastair Sim’s, George C. Scott’s, Patrick Stewart’s, Bill Murray’s and just last week, for the first time, Albert Finney’s 1970 remake. All told, there have been over 250 versions of the story told in theatre, verse and screen, and I believe I must have read or seen at least 90% of them. But even though I know the story as well as anyone, this year I discovered something I had never seen there before.

I know you know the story, but for the one person here tonight who may not, allow me to give you the briefest of synopses. Ebenezer Scrooge is cold hearted, calloused, uncaring, miserable..., well, why should you listen to my words of description when Mr. Dickens does ever so better a job at describing him?

He writes, “Scrooge was ...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; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog days; and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn’t know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often “came down” handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Well, Scrooge comes home from work one Christmas Eve after having oppressed his employee, insulted his nephew, thrown two charitable solicitors out of his office, chased down some well wishing carolers with his cane and sniggering at all the Christmas “fuss” in the streets on the way home, enters the yard to his dreary domicile, only to pause at the door for a moment while

he searches for his key. It was there that it happened, and it was there where his journey began.

Upon gazing at the door knocker, what should he see but not the door knocker he had gazed upon countless times on the ways in and out of his house, but rather, the face of Jacob Marley, his dead partner. The face soon fades from the knocker, only to be joined by the rest of his apparition a little time later in Ebenezer's bedroom.

Ebenezer is now sitting in his bedchamber and hears this ungodly sound coming from down below. Dickens writes, *"The cellar door flew open with a booming sound, and then he heard the noise again, much louder still, on the floors below; then coming up the stairs; then coming straight towards his door. 'It's humbug still!' said Scrooge. 'I won't believe it.'*

His colour changed though, when, without a pause, it came on through the heavy door, and passed into the room before his eyes. It was Marley's Ghost, the same face, the same name. "The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound around him like a tail; and it was made of cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel."

"Mercy," Scrooge said, "Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?"

"Man of worldly mind!" replied the ghost, "do you believe in me or not?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "I must. But why do spirits walk the earth and why do they come to me?" It is required of every man, "the Ghost returned, "that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes forth not in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness."

"You are fettered." Said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost, "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you, Ebenezer?"

Scrooge trembled more and more. "Or would you know, "pursued the Ghost, "the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as mine, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!"

Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing.

"Jacob," he said, imploringly. "Old Jacob Marley, tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob."

"I have none to give," the Ghost replied. "it comes from other regions and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men."

Jacob Marley then goes on to tell Ebenezer that that night he is to be visited by three spirits, the spirits of Christmases' past, present and future. And so, that night, each in turn, comes to Ebenezer to present to him his life as it was, as it is and as it might be. Each Spirit lays bare a piece of his life and unwraps it in a sequence that seeks to show him how he came to be the man he was; a bitter, tired, untrusting, lonely and angry man, and the reader, or the hearer, is allowed to come to her own conclusion as to whether this life is justified by the circumstances it has endured.

And so is Ebenezer. So the three Spirits do their work. Near the end of the story, the final Spirit takes him on that last prophetic journey into his life as it might be and shows him the consequences of only seeing the darker side of life and humanity, eventually showing him that his end is death, as is the fate of all humanity, and that on this side of the resurrection we have choices to make as to how we choose to live that life.

Ebenezer is taken to his own gravesite and there he finds his lonely, neglected and forsaken gravestone and he breaks down in tears. It is his transformational moment, it is his defining moment, one that refigures him from what he was, into what he could be, if only given the chance no one is given, to live his life over again, not in hopes of changing how it ends, but how it is remembered.

At the grave he reaches up and grabs the final spirit's hands and as he does, the hand and cloth surrounding it melt away only to become the bedpost of his familiar home.

He learns that his nighttime journey through the entirety of his life is over and that scarcely an evening has gone by and that the new day dawning is just the next day, Christmas Day. It is the first day of the rest of his life and he is transformed to the point that Mr. Dickens tells us that, quote, "It was said of him from that day onward, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge," and then admonishes us to do the same.

--Which brings me finally to my point of discovery. As Ebenezer, which, by the way is a name that means, **rock of hope**, as Ebenezer leaves his house that bright Christmas morning to live his new life, the last thing he touches on the way out of the house, is the door knocker-- the very same door knocker that was transformed into Jacob Marley at the beginning of his journey. He pats it lovingly and thanks, in his own way, his old partner, Jacob Marley, for having saved him from who he might have become.

The new revelation, therefore, is that Jacob Marley, therefore, is Ebenezer's Christ. The Christ figure in Mr. Dickens story is Jacob Marley. Jacob Marley is the suffering servant who lays down his life as it is, as it has become, in front of Ebenezer, to save him. He bears the chains of suffering and takes on the manifestations of sin and greed and avarice and provides Ebenezer

the possibility of a new life offered through the presentations of the three spirits so that he might be redeemed; and he is and we with him.

Ebenezer becomes our “Rock of Hope,” because surely if he can be redeemed, that “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner,” so can we. And who among us has not finished the story, watched the end of the movie, put down the text and thought, “What can of person have I been and what kind of person can I be tomorrow?” Will it be said of me, that I kept Christmas as well as anyone?

The Church has a word for what you just experienced, it’s called repentance. It’s the change we all hope to make in our lives so that we can be motivated more by love than by love of self, to be remembered not for how much we made of ourselves, but how much we loved others and how much we made them feel they were cherished and valued and loved.

In order to become that kind of person, each of us needs our motivation, each needs his own Jacob Marley, and all of us need our Christ.

The theologians among us this evening may take issue with me at some point, but what is Christmas if not our motivation to be someone for others? What is the Incarnation other than God becoming human to show us that the divine rests in each of us, that divine possibility exists in each of us and that God is part of who we are, not only because we are made in God’s image, not only because God breathed the breath of life into our nostrils, but because God revealed himself in Jesus; born the way we are born, lived the way we can live, died the way we will die, and resurrected the way we hope to be, so that we may, in him and through him, see our lives the way God sees them, filled with infinite possibility and infinite hope.

May you find your rock of hope, may you find your lives transformed, may you be motivated by your Christ to live for others and may this Christmas prove to be your defining moment.

Let us pray

God of all time and God of our time, we come to you in prayer this holy night to thank you for the gift of Your Son, whose birth announced the coming of a new age. By the power of his presence, may the ceremonies of the season be more than ceremonies, may they call up in us a new determination to live by our vision and persevere by our faith. Where we have sinned against innocence, taken up arms in anger or in fear, where we have forgotten human sorrow, or denied pity, or excused ourselves from love, allow the shadow of your grace to come across the landscape of our lives so that we may again learn that peace that passes all human understanding. Keep us open to the needs of both neighbor and stranger, to the presence of angels in our day and the joy of the shepherds in our time. Protect those we love, bring comfort to those who are sick, keep alive in us the memory of those we have returned to your eternal keeping, and enable us with all your saints, to keep Christmas in our hearts this night and forevermore.

Amen.