

The Real Christmas Story: A Christmas Carol Monday, 12/24/18

1 All right, Christmas Eve is finally here, so it's time for true confessions. Every Sunday in December I've ended my message with this slide and asked you to reflect in some way on the real meaning of Christmas. Only, here's the thing: What you see in this slide never happened. Oh, I'm down with the star and the baby in the manger, but if you read the Gospel of Matthew carefully, you'll notice that the wise men, sometimes called the three kings, came to visit Jesus at his parent's house, about two years after his birth. We also don't know if there were two wise men or twenty. So forgive me my artistic license as we hear the real Christmas story tonight. Even if this picture does conflate the sequence of events, the Christmas spirit conveyed is one and the same. Christmas Eve is a time to worship the newborn child who would grow to become our King. On this night of all nights, we come to bow down before Jesus, to give our hearts and our gifts to Jesus, and to affirm our faith in the promises of hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus was born to usher in. The truth of how that Kingdom has been coming is quite a bit more complex than anything you could draw for the cover of a Hallmark Christmas Card. Still, it is a pretty picture.

2 It turns out there are echoes of the real Christmas story in our favorite movies, books, and plays as well. This month we've rediscovered hope in *Miracle on 34th Street*; found peace in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*; Experienced joy in *It's a Wonderful Life*; and learned to choose love after the example of Buddy the Elf. Tonight, we turn back the hands of time to a Christmas film that's based on a story from way back in 1843. Of all the films we've seen clips from this month, it's the only story I can confidently say was written before anyone in this Sanctuary was born!

There have been so many film and theater productions of *A Christmas Carol*, surely you've seen a least one. I've always enjoyed seeing it live at the Guthrie Theater, but the film version with George C. Scott is good as well, which is where our film clips come from tonight. So many of us have seen *A Christmas Carol*, that the very name of Scrooge has become synonymous with miserliness; stingy with money in a kind of mean-spirited way.

Just as the real Christmas story is one of transformation, so is the story of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Let's take a look at Scrooge's hard-hearted attitudes before his fateful encounter with the Spirits of Christmas past, present, and future.

{Show Scene 4 of A Christmas Carol (2:50)}

3 Not a very flattering portrayal of Scrooge, is it? How does a person get so twisted up inside that they care so little for the welfare of other people? I love this picture of Scrooge, because it seems to me that you can just barely detect an underlying sadness to him- in his eyes, and the down-turned corners of his mouth.

By the way, the workhouses and debtor's prisons that Scrooge was applauding in the clip were institutions that were created in 19th Century England as a means for the middle and upper classes to protect themselves from economic responsibility for the poor. Their cruel and harsh living conditions, combined with the inability of those living there to earn enough to gain their freedom, eventually led to their abolishment, although some might say that our modern criminal justice system is swinging back to similarly oppressive practices that unfairly burden the poor. The father of Charles Dickens was sent to a debtor's prison, which may explain his particular concern in writing *A Christmas Carol*.

As *A Christmas Carol* unfolds, we learn something about Scrooge. While he's almost universally despised in the present, and nobody shows up to mourn him in the future, it turns out he wasn't always so "Scroogy" in the past. It was a series of events and choices in Scrooge's past that created the miserly man we meet at the opening of the film, especially his failed engagement to Belle, who rejects him because of his misplaced priority on money.

If we're honest, we're all vulnerable to Scrooge's plight. Each day is placed before us as a gift, and yet we tend to squander those days in haphazard living, unaware that each day spent is a day of training our hearts and forming our relationships. Are we training our hearts to love the creature comforts our money can buy or to love the God who created us and loves us without measure? Are we building relationships with others that are based on advancing our own prosperity, or are we engaging every chance we're given to serve others, sacrificially and in love?

4 Scrooge had four dramatic spiritual visitations in one night: The Ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. I'm guessing the Ghost of Christmas Present is most people's favorite- the other ones tend to be somewhat scarier! And perhaps they should be scarier. After all, none of us can change the past, and the only way to change the future is to live intentionally in the present.

While I don't expect to be haunted this Christmas, Christmas is a time to remember that Jesus came into this world to bring radical change, to turn the world upside-down, or as our Bishop said in his Christmas letter, to "turn the world right-side up!" Every Christmas is a reminder that because of what God has done for us, every present moment is an invitation to change. Hope, peace, joy, and love don't just happen. They're gifts from God that we choose to open in the present. There are seven more days left in 2018. The real Christmas story is an invitation to make each of those days count by letting the light of Christ shine into some of those dark and dusty corners of your life. It's an invitation for you to let the light of Christ shine in the lives of the people you live with, work with, study with, and play with. Don't wait for a haunting, because that Ghost of Christmas yet-to-come is the scariest one of all.

5 By the way, have you ever thought about the name, Ebenezer Scrooge? Ebenezer is a transliteration from Hebrew words appearing in the Old Testament of the Bible, meaning "stone of help." An ebenezer was a stone erected to remember that God had been a help at a particular time and place. What a delightful literary device to give Scrooge the name of Ebenezer, he who against all odds was transformed into a man who lived to help the poor, rather than disdain them.

What is the real Christmas story? It's the story of how God stepped into creation in the most unexpected way to come to our rescue. It's the story of the beginning of God's plan to restore us, and all of creation, to the fullness of God's glory. It's a story of change.

Uncomfortable? Of course. Worth it? Watch the transformation in Scrooge's life, and then decide if it was worth it for Ebenezer.

{Show Scene 21 of A Christmas Carol (3:15)}

{Film clip is end of message}



Buffalo United Methodist Church
...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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