

“A ‘DICKENS’ OF A CHRISTMAS (#4): THE PERSON THAT I WAS...”

(Isaiah 6:1-7; Matthew 2:1-3, 11-12)

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[PROPS NEEDED: Two “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” Movie-Clips;

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-24-23, AM Service]

--I--

1. **[ONE COMBINED SERVICE... Read Text: Matthew 2:1-3, 11-12 & Pray]**
(Isaiah 6:1-7 = Advent Wreath Text read previously)]
2. **[WATCH FIRST MOVIE-CLIP (Ghost of Christmas Future Montage) -- Time: 3:02]**

A--Today we're concluding our series "A 'Dickens' of A Christmas" in which we're relating Charles Dickens' classic tale "*A Christmas Carol*" to the biblical Christmas story, and what we can learn about life and faith from these.

B--To do that, we come face to face with the final of the three spirits sent to bring about the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge: ...a voiceless, faceless shadow known only as the "Ghost of Christmas Future."

C--And through Scrooge's encounter not only with this spirit but the other two, as well, by the end of Dickens' tale, Scrooge is able to say, "*I'm not the man [the person] that I was...*" -- he was *changed!*

3. If we think about it, CHANGE is precisely what Christmas is all about -- the change that can take place in our own hearts and lives when we encounter the Christ-child Jesus.

A--Someone once said, "*Change is God's main business.*" ¹

B--So if Christmas is all about the power to change, then what exactly brings this about? & how can *we*, like Scrooge, experience the power of change in our *own* lives today?

C--Well, both in Dickens' story & today's scriptures, I believe we find a basic outline for "**Three Steps To Change**" that I want us to explore briefly. ²

--II--

4. First, if we want to experience the power of change in our own lives this Christmas, we've first got to **ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES.**

A--In today's scripture from Isaiah 6, we find the author's *sinful* self being confronted with the holiness & *sinlessness* of God, leading them to call out in Vs.5 "*Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, & I live among a people with unclean lips.*"

B--And while they're different words, Isaiah's reaction here is essentially the same as Ebenezer Scrooge's when confronted by the Ghost of Christmas Future with the harsh truth about his own self -- "*No, don't let it be so, spirit!*" Scrooge says.

C--In John 8:32, Jesus says "*the truth shall set you free*"--and this is so true of ourselves.

1--But as one person has observed, "*the truth will make you free, but first it will probably make you miserable.*" ³

2--...Because you see, it's difficult to face truth about ourselves -- as Scrooge learned from the Ghost of Christmas Future and those who rejoiced in his death, truth can often be uncomfortable, awkward, and even painful.

3--Remember too, though, that it wasn't until he faced this harsh reality of who he *really was* that change in Scrooge became even possible.

D--In the same way in our own lives, those of us who never *admit* that we need help to change an attitude or behavior can never grow or mature in life.

E--So, part of what it means to be a mature Christian is to look in a mirror (so to speak) and see ourselves as we truly are -- to be honest with God, with ourselves, and even with each other about the truth of who we *really* are, warts and all. ⁴

5. A second step, however, must always follow the first... -- that if we're to experience the power of change in our own lives, we must also **ACCEPT THE REALITY OF GOD'S GRACE.**

A--Recall that in the scene where this Ghost invites Scrooge to uncover the shroud, after trying Scrooge says, "*I'd like to spirit, but I haven't the power-- I haven't the power.*" ⁵

B--In today's first scripture, Isaiah is similarly confronted not only with a lack of power to deal with his own *sinfulness*, but also (in Verses 6-8) with the God's *grace and forgiveness*, which makes his "*guilt*" disappear and his sin be "*blotted out.*"

C--In the Matthew 2 passage, we hear the story of a man who (*unlike* Ebenezer Scrooge) *refused* to accept God's grace offered that first Christmas: ...King Herod.

1--Later in the chapter (Vss. 16-18) it tells how he was so jealous of the baby Jesus and so infuriated about being tricked by the Magi that he orders all children in Bethlehem under the age of 2 to be killed.

2--Herod, you see, represents those of us who, when confronted with the hard truth about ourselves, choose to be bound up by arrogance, pride and self-righteousness, rather than allow God's grace to forgive and transform us.

D--At one of the churches I served, there was a staff member who -- while good at her job -- at the same time was very arrogant & sure of herself... to the point where she was blind to her weaknesses, and not open to any constructive critique.

1--While both I and our SPRC committee tried to work with her lovingly for several years on her job shortcomings, the whole time she refused to acknowledge her need to grow or change, and when she grew to be abusive & insubordinate about our attempts to help her, we reluctantly had to let her go

2--Unfortunately there are a lot of narcissistic folks in our world just like both her and Herod... unwilling to see their own shortcomings or need to change.

E--But *unlike* either of them, both Isaiah and Scrooge discovered that by the power of Christmas, we don't *have* to be the same selfish people that we've been in our past.

1--In the words of 2 Cor. 5:17 (NRSV), "*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*"

2--Through our acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness, we *can* change-- in Scrooge's words (and the words of today's title), we *don't* have to be "*The [Person] That We Were.*" ⁶

6. Finally, though, for our transformation to actually work, there's a third step we have to take: we have to **COMMIT TO CHANGE & TO A PROCESS TO SEE IT HAPPEN.**

A--Scrooge himself illustrates this in today's video when he tells the Ghost of Christmas Future, "*I WILL keep Christmas in my heart and all the year long. The Spirits of all three Christmases shall thrive in me. I will not shut out the lessons they teach.*"

B--Scrooge here is acknowledging that true change can only occur when we both commit ourselves to it *and* to a process to ensure that it lasts "all the year long."

C--In the same way, today's Matthew scripture speaks of some foreign astrologers ("Magi" or "Wise Men" as we sometimes call them) who follow a star to find and pay homage to the baby Jesus, but who (Vs. 12 says), "*went home another way.*"

1--Now, I know that *literally* this means they traveled a different road back to their own country, but I think it could also represent the way that they *figuratively* left the manger as changed/different people.

2--Upon seeing Jesus, you see, perhaps they were not only changed by the experience, but in "*going home another way,*" they were committing themselves to a process that would ensure that change.

C--You know, at this time of year many of us begin making promises about things we're going to do differently: we're going to exercise more; eat better; be nicer to our workmates or family; attend church more; etc..

1--But by February or March, those "New Year's Resolutions" have often fallen by the wayside, and we're right back where we started. WHY?

2--It's because when we promised to change, we *forgot* to commit to a *process* to ensure that it happens.

D--Well, like the Magi, you and I can experience a joy this Christmas as we come face to face with the living Christ-child Jesus.

1--But let's remember that for us to be able to "*keep Christmas [today] and all the year long*" (as Scrooge says) -- we'll need a *process* to ensure that it happens.

2--The good news of Christmas is that we *can* be different people if we'll *commit* to "*go home another way*" & like the Magi, take a journey to actually *DO* it.

--III--

7. The bottom line that both the Ghost of Christmas Future and today's scriptures teach us is that **Christmas is about the POWER TO CHANGE.**

A--...And that as we learn to accept (#1) the truth about ourselves, (#2) the grace of God, and as we (#3) commit ourselves both to that change & to a process to see it happen...

B--...we'll find our hearts and lives transformed by the power and joy of the Christ-child.

8. Ebenezer Scrooge did these three things. And as a result, listen once more to Dickens' words describing both what happened to Scrooge and what can happen to us, with God's grace and help...

[WATCH 2nd CLIP (Fred's summary of Changed Scrooge) -- Time: 1:11]

10. [PRAYER: *Almighty and Ever-gracious God, we confess that we have often been caught up in selfish pursuits, ignoring your power to change us in our hearts and our behaviors. Too often we've been like Herod, missing our opportunity to let your love break through our cold, callous hearts to truly CHANGE and TRANSFORM us through the power of Christmas. So this season, Lord, grant us the power of your Holy Spirit so that we can look in the mirror of our lives to face the uncomfortable truth about ourselves, and also to receive the freeing reality of your grace and forgiveness. Take our old selves and make us NEW this Christmas, that we may follow you all of our days and walk unafraid into all of our tomorrows. We ask this in the name of the one who is the master of all change, your son Jesus Christ. Amen.*]

10. [SUGGESTED CLOSING HYMN UMH:#230 “O Little Town of Bethlehem”]**ENDNOTES:**

¹ Cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B34.

² These steps are based loosely on the processes described in two resources: (#1) *Event; Awareness; Decision* (“decide to do something about it”); *Commitment; Process* (“behavioral change over a period of time” ‘ this is the area most people fall short in); and *Change* (“the desired result ‘ an alteration in our behavior and/or a new and higher level of maturity”), cited in Vince D’Acchioli, “Beyond the Quick Fix,” New Man magazine (July/August 2002), pp. 54-55; and (#2) From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, pp. B90-B92.

³ Douglas Rumford, From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B90.

⁴ Even though NONE of us is sinlessly perfect, part of being in a community of faith (a church) means occasionally holding each other accountable for unChrist-like actions and behaviors, and like the Ghost of Christmas Future, reminding each other of the consequences of NOT changing. Remember that Jesus didn’t just come to “comfort the afflicted.” He also came to “afflict the comfortable.” Sometimes that means reminding each other that, uncomfortable as it may be, we will ALL face a day of reckoning -- a day when the truth about our lives (warts and all) will be fully revealed to all. The Bible doesn’t give us this as threat, but merely as a fact (As one example, re-read Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31).

⁵ As Scrooge learned there, the power to change *does NOT* come from ourselves (or even from *us* accepting the hard truths *about* ourselves, as important as that is). Instead, change comes *ONLY* from God Himself through his offer of grace, mercy and forgiveness. The good news of God is that the message of the gospel doesn’t stop with the truth about ourselves. God’s purpose in calling us to faced the uncomfortable truth about ourselves is not to discourage us -- any more than a doctor intends to upset us by telling us the hard truth about our disease. No, he has us face truth about ourselves so that we can not only *understand* the possibilities of healing for ourselves, but can also *appropriate* those possibilities in and through Jesus.

⁶ Remember at the end of the Dickens story how giddy and excited Scrooge was when he awoke from his experience and realized the change in his own soul? Well, when *we* embrace the Christ of Christmas and allow his grace and forgiveness to enter our hearts and lives, a new excitement and joy transforms the very way that we approach life itself. You see, in all of this we are reminded that at Christmas we *can* become new people, transformed by the grace and forgiveness of God.