

Salvation from the Margins

Part 5 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 2:1-20

and delivered on
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Christmas Eve (Year C)

at
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Last night, Susan and I were talking about how we haven't really watched any Christmas movies yet this season. There are those movies that we have to watch each year: her favorites, "It's a Wonderful Life," "White Christmas," "A Charlie Brown Christmas;" my favorites, "Christmas Vacation" and "A Christmas Story;" and together the almost obligatory "A Christmas Carol" and maybe one of its many variations "Scrooge" or "Scrooged."

In that vein – I'd like to invite you on this holy night to be a Scrooge. Bear with me. I promise I'll try to have this make sense. But let's consider the story and the characters that surround Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge.

I don't know about you, but most of the time if I were to sum up the story, I would say it is about a mean miser visited by three ghosts (the Ghost of Christmas Past, The Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Past) and that these visits show him what a miserable excuse for a human being he is. Are you with me there? Or somewhere like that?

But here's the thing. The story isn't just about Ebenezer Scrooge. It's about Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim and the rest of their family. It's about Nephew Fred. It's about the beggars who should stop their begging and just go to the poor houses, unless of course "If they would rather die, . . . they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." It's about Jacob Marley haunting Scrooge but haunted by ignoring the real business of life as he cries, "Mankind was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The deals of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Dickens was not just a writer but an observer of and commentor on the human condition. Scrooge is mean for harping on Bob Cratchit for his persistent tardiness, but Ebenezer knows nothing about the extra time he needs to spend tending to Tim. To Scrooge, Bob is ungrateful for asking for a raise, even though he works mostly without complaint and to the service of so many others.

To Uncle Scrooge (Ebenezer that is. Not McDuck) – to Uncle Ebenezer, nephew Fred's embrace of life's pleasantries is a frivolous distraction from the amassing of wealth. To Scrooge, the poor beggars should only try harder or rid themselves from existence.

In each situation he makes his judgment with only that information that is immediately available and which reinforces his own self-importance. After all he has all the hallmarks of success: a large house, a house keeper, business men have to come to him to request money. He's the man. And yet we know he is miserable, while somehow Nephew Fred is happy, and the Cratchit family finds even in their meager means time for laughter and joy . . . and even thanks.

Only when Ebenezer is forced to see the life – the embrace of life – even among those on the margins who would refuse to abandon their thanksgiving to God by giving up hope: that he finds hope. It's not until he goes down to the Cratchit home or to his nephew's that he finds joy.

In the story that brings us here tonight, we hear about those on the margins – the people who don't really matter: shepherds, a carpenter and his young bride. The story that we brings us here tonight is not set in a mansion or princely palace. It's not even set in a place that has enough room.

But like "A Christmas Carol," we sometimes miss those details lurking behind our expectations and what we – like Ebenezer Scrooge – already know. We miss that the "inn" was not some B&B or Motel 6. The "inn" – the *katalymati* (καταλυματι) – in the Greek was not a hotel or motel, but refers to the spare room reserved for visitors in the humble homes of Palestine that were fortunate enough to have more than one room. Think about it... Why did Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem? Because that was the home of their ancestors – because it was where their families came from. Of course they would go to stay with family. But so did everyone else. Without room in the guest room of a house likely built by creating an outdoor wall at the entrance of a cave with a little place set aside for the livestock and a feeding trough – a manger –

carved into the stone floor – in the only place to get a little bit of privacy – God entered the world as one of the normal folks – as one of us. Like Tiny Tim – Jesus was surrounded by family who rejoiced at his birth even though it probably added to the inconvenience.

Likewise we miss that the angels didn't announce that Salvation had been born to the mayor, the governor, the king or the priests, but that they appeared to the working stiffs – the shepherds out taking care of their business in the field – and that it was they who first gave Mary and opportunity to “treasure in her heart” what was taking place.

God came to dwell among us in the midst of ordinary folk – and people who just took each day as it came. These were the people – all of them – who were in many ways powerless to make the big decisions of life. Did Joseph really think that it was a good idea to load up a ready-to-pop pregnant woman for a ninety-seven mile journey on foot or by donkey? A twenty minute car ride with a pregnant woman can be miserable for everyone in the car. The only reason they went to Bethlehem (besides fulfilling prophecy) was because Caesar Augustus demanded it.

Let's face it. One of the joys that we experience in this season running up to Christmas is a different sense of hope. So much of the year is filled with the expectations placed on us by our employers, our families, our friends, our teachers and coaches, and even ourselves that we feel out of control. Christmas though... Christmas brings hope. We remember the past – nostalgically for sure – but with fondness – and find opportunities to relive those moments and to share them with others. Most of the time those fondest memories – aren't the big gift that came one year, but the simple enjoyment of time with others. Maybe that's why it's so hard for some folks to face Christmas – those others aren't around anymore – and not just at Christmas. If it were only one day there wouldn't be a burden. And yet that same God who chose an ordinary working man and his fiancé to bring salvation into the world in the margins – in the outlying area – that same God continues to bring salvation and the joy of its promise into the world through our remembrance of the nativity. God offers us hope in the midst of our ordinary – and sometimes powerless lives – with the promise of Jesus' birth.

It took awhile for that promise to be realized – about thirty years. It wasn't easy on him. Joseph and Mary had to rush him away as migrants seeking asylum in Egypt because Judea wasn't safe. Jesus had to face rejection and ridicule, torture and death, so that in his resurrection kings and emperors would eventually find the hope of salvation through the witness of everyday ordinary folks just getting by.

Everyone in that house – gathered around that manger – on that night so many years ago had their lives changed. Even in the crowded chaos of a government census – they discovered hope and joy in the birth of Jesus. They were changed when they realized that God loved them – even though they weren't wealthy or powerful. The shepherds were changed by the visit from the angels. Will Christmas change us?

Remember when I began that I said that I'd like you each to be a Scrooge this Christmas? I meant it. Because you see Ebenezer Scrooge became a new man after those ghostly Christmas Eve visits. He began to keep Christmas better than any man from that day forward. And what changed? Mostly – he started looking at others for what they had to offer. He realized that Bob Cratchit was a harder working man than he'd ever imagined, and that the hardest work – caring for a sick child – was the most rewarding. He realized that his nephew was keeping life in perspective. He realized that his business, like his haunted old friend Jacob Marley was to care for humankind. He found healing – he found salvation – in Christmas the day of our dear Savior's birth.

May each of us – right here where we are – find our salvation this Christmas as our lives are changed by that visit from our God in Jesus Christ. AMEN.