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December 2, 2007
Romans 13:11 – 14
Matthew 24: 36 – 44

Advent Journey: An Unexpected Visit!!¹

The Ghost of Jacob Marley:

“It is required of every man that the spirit within...should walk abroad among one’s fellows and travel far and wide; and, if that spirit does not go forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death.

It is doomed to wander through the world—oh woe is me! And witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned into happiness!

I am the Ghost of Jacob Marley, and I wear this chain I forged in life. 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? Or would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? ...

At this time of the rolling of the year, I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-bringers with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted *me*?

Hear me~~ My time is nearly gone.

I am here to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.”

And so the Ghost of Jacob Marley speaks, as he spoke that long ago Christmas to his business partner, Ebenezer Scrooge. Let us join him in his bedroom that night of Jacob Marley’s visitation:

¹ My Advent preaching this year is taken from Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*, using a four week bible study on the story for inspiration by Travis J. School, Creative Communications for the Parish.

Marley reveals to Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits, who will offer Scrooge the chance to escape his fate. After which Marley departs floating backwards through a window. Scrooge steps to the window and looks out:

“The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went.

Every one of them wore chains like Marley’s Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together; none were free.

Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite familiar with one old ghost in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw upon a doorstep.

The misery with them all was clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever.”

Scrooge closes the window, examines the bolts on his bedroom door to be sure they are fast; attempts a “Bah-Humbug!” but stops with the first syllable and with a fatigue before unknown to him, fall asleep fully dressed across his bed.²

What a truly unexpected visit! Marley and Scrooge were business partners in life, operating a Counting House together. Both had reputations for being tight-fisted penny pinchers!

Charles Dickens describes Ebenezer Scrooge as “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire.” He was so cold within that” he iced his office in the dog-days (of summer) and didn’t’ thaw it one degree at Christmas!”

“The story of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is an icon within the culture of Christmas. Yet prior to its publication in 1843, Christmas had

² Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, Stave One: Marley’s Ghost*, with paraphrasing by me

become a solemn holiday, closer to Good Friday than to the Christmas we celebrate today.

A Christmas Carol single-handedly revived the joyful yuletide celebration of Christmas.”³

This story will inform our Advent Journey this year as we wend our way toward Christmas day.

Advent asks us to wake up and take stock of our lives because *Jesus is coming!* [Advent means coming]. Not only at Christmas time as we observe his birth but *AGAIN!* When, no one knows the day or the hour as Matthew’s gospel informs us this morning, “neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father....Therefore you must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour!” Much like Marley’s unexpected visitation of old Scrooge.

But why does Marley come? Just to scare old Scrooge to death? No, he comes to warn him of his impending fate. He can, if he chooses reverse it and save himself. As Roman’s speaks to us this morning saying, “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day (by putting on) Jesus Christ.”

Lay aside the works of darkness. Are we not believers? Are we not saved? Yes—But. This “yes-but” is at heart our existence isn’t it? Martin Luther characterized this tension in the life of the redeemed of God as one of simultaneously existing as a sinner and a saint. So when we ask ourselves, ‘Who am I?’ we answer knowing that we are created by God yet shackled by sin, just like Marley, Scrooge, and the ghosts hovering outside his window.”⁴

We know that, as St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.” And

³ OpCit. Travis J. Scholl p. 24.

⁴ Ibid T.School p. 25

Paul recognized that death is not only physical but also spiritual. Scrooge is a man who is among the living dead. His heart has mummified. The chain he is forging, Marley informs him, “was as full as heavy and as long as (Marley’s) seven Christmas Eves ago.....(and now) is a ponderous chain!”⁵

How ponderous are our chains? What are the things we have done that shackle us? If we could confess them, would the links fall away? I am going to give you that opportunity.

Take out the paper strips in your bulletin. If Jesus were to return this very night would will our hearts be ready?

It is time once again to clean the house of our souls, dust out the cob webs, dig out the dirt, scrub up the walls of our hearts and take out the garbage.

Write on your link whatever is shackling you—whatever it is that is adding links to your chain: is it gossip, envy, jealousy, a grudge or hurt you are hanging onto? Is there an amend you need to make? Something you need to forgive and forget? Is it anger? Or hate? Is there someone whom you stand in judgment of?

Is there something you’ve done or not done that is hanging over you? Are you filled with regret that you haven’t done more for those in need in this world?

I saw a report on children orphaned by aids in Africa and felt my chain heavy around my ankles simply for the fact that we are all apart of the human race, children of God all---and I by virtue of birth and luck of the draw am here and have so much and they are so bereft. The poverty of my neighbor weighs heavily whether near or far away. And so I hope to do some good in my corner of the world by ringing bells for the Salvation Army. But it seems so little.

And yet as Marley’s ghost reminds us when he says to Scrooge, “Oh! Captive bound, and double-ironed,...Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere,

⁵ OpCit. P. 20.

whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness!"⁶

When we consider the needs of the world around us there is ample room for Christian kindness—and not just for the sake of saving our own souls but because of the love of Christ poured out for us, because our hearts are warmed by the wondrous gift of his coming—and full of the expectation and hope his shining Christmas Star engenders among us—may our hearts awaken this Advent to following wherever his Star light would lead us!

Fill out your link and then we shall forge our chain as a symbol of our fallen humanity seeking to re-awaken to our Redeemer's presence among us.

(Sit, fill out links and wait for everyone to conclude)

Pass your links to the end aisles where the ushers will collect them. Ask kids to gather at the back and staple the links into a chain and to bring it forward at the time of the offering.

⁶ Ibid. p. 21