**Sermon – Sunday, December 1, 2019: Christmases Past**

Well, good morning! Today, we are going to kick off our Advent season together. For centuries, Christians have taken the season of Advent to focus on the powerful and beautiful reality that Christ came to live among his people. Advent not only focuses on Christ’s birth, His first coming but also on Christ’s second coming, which will take place sometime in the future. We will do the same over the next four weeks, preparing our hearts for our celebration of Christmas, looking forward to the day when Christ truly and finally makes all things new.

This year for our Advent series, we are going to be using the plot of one of the most well-known Christmas oriented stories in the world and pair it with a familiar Christmas song to help us explore ways that we can participate most fully in the season. To get this all underway, let me ask you a question: what do Michael Caine, Patrick Stewart, Jim Carrey, Alistair Sim and Bill Murray all have in common? All five of these actors have played – or played an adapted form of - the dastardly character Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dicken’s classic tale, A Christmas Carol. Over the next four weeks, we are going to use some of the happenings embedded within this classic tale to help bring the season of Advent alive as we make our way through our Advent series. For those of you less familiar with this Dickens’ classic, the basic premise of the story is that Ebenezer Scrooge, an unpleasant, difficult man driven by greed and selfishness, is visited one Christmas Eve by three apparitions – the ghosts of Christmases past, present and future. These apparitions confront Scrooge with the reality of his life, particularly the consequences of continuing to live in the way he presently does. Obviously there’s a whole lot more to this Christmas classic, but that’s the Coles Notes version.

This morning, I’d like to explore with you the various things that Scrooge’s interaction with the first apparition – the ghost of Christmas past – might reveal to us about our experience of Christmas. In short, in Dickens’ tale, this apparition takes old Ebenezer on a journey into the past to previous Christmases from the curmudgeon's earlier years. Scrooge revisits his childhood school days, his apprenticeship with a jolly merchant named Fezziwig, and his engagement to Belle, a woman who leaves him because his lust for money eclipses his ability to love another. At the close of this encounter, Scrooge, deeply moved, sheds tears of regret before the phantom returns him to his bed. What can this literary encounter teach us about the intersection of Christmas and faith? Sorry to those who prefer to rip and tear open your Christmas presents, but we’ll slowly and patiently unwrap that question in our time together this morning.

The Christmas carol that I’d like for us to reflect upon today is perhaps the most well-known Christmas carol of all time, Silent Night. Written in 1818 by Franz Gruber to lyrics by Joseph Mohr, you’ll no doubt be familiar with the almost dreamy, lullaby like tune. Can you hear it? The imagery communicated through the lyrics of the carol is so serene and peaceful – “silent night, holy night, all is calm all is bright”, “holy infant tender and mild”, “sleep in heavenly peace”. Kinda just makes you want to curl up by a roaring fire – or at least a television tuned to the “Fireplace channel” - with a cup of hot chocolate, doesn’t it?

In my mind, Christmas is perhaps the most sensory of all the holidays we celebrate, enhanced significantly by the fact that we live in the beautiful frozen tundra that is Canada. Brainstorm with me for a moment … when you think of Christmas, what sights, tastes, smells, sounds and sensations come to mind? Don’t be shy! The tendency of Canadian Christmases to involve softly falling snow, intricately decorated fir trees and bright clear moonlit nights only further romanticizes the holiday. It’s no wonder that so many Hallmark Christmas movies are shot on location right around us … a Canadian Christmas is an incredibly beautiful sensory experience.

Now, with all that wonderful Canadian Christmas imagery dancing like visions of sugar plums in our heads, let’s for a moment reflect on the sensory reality of that first Christmas some 2,000 years ago in ancient Bethlehem. Just listen to the gospel writer Luke’s description of the scene:

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.  He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” (Luke 2:4-7)

Let’s be honest … there’s not a whole lot of description in that paragraph; it’s pretty matter of fact and plain. Scripturally, Matthew’s account is even less descriptive, Mark completely skips any mention of Jesus’ birth and John simply employs a whole lot of metaphor and figurative language. In a word, the first Christmas sensory experience was quite stark. While this passage is stark and plain, think for a moment about all that was actually entailed in the above summary. Joseph and Mary first had to engage in some awkward conversation about this mysterious pregnancy; thanks be to God that He sent envoys to both Mary and Joseph to help them understand their circumstances. Nearly eight months into her pregnancy, Mary and Joseph received word that the Romans, who had been seriously oppressing the traditional inhabitants of the land of Israel, were now requiring that all residents of their occupied territory now return to their ancestral hometowns for a census. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 150 km through some pretty unforgiving terrain – rife with lions, bandits and bears, oh my! - and likely took upwards of 10 days to travel. Whereas we enjoy cool temperatures for our Christmas travels, Mary and Joseph likely endured more summer-like conditions throughout their travels – warm temperatures during the daytime, plummeting temperatures southward of 5 degrees Celsius at night and regular rainfall.

Hygiene was less of a concern in ancient Israel, so it’s doubtful that Mary or Joseph had enjoyed a warm shower and those little bottles of hotel shampoo or soap at any stop along their way. Soggy, sweaty and dirty, the youngish couple found respite in the most odd of places. Their eventual place of lodging was most likely a cave used to house the livestock used by travellers for transportation – donkeys and oxen mostly - so those of you familiar with barn-life will know the scents that filled the air there. It’s possible that other livestock were present too, including a few of the smelliest creatures I know of, the soggy cotton balls we call sheep. To sum it up, let’s just say that the first Christmas didn’t smell very much like pleasant Christmas spice.

And the sounds. Add the sounds of donkeys, oxen and sheep to the wonderful sounds of child birth, a squawking newborn, and panicking new parents and you get an idea of the noisiness of the scene. Luke also tells us of an angelic choir informing a ragtag group of Middle Eastern shepherds about the baby born in Bethlehem, so throw in a gaggle of excited and smelly shepherds, fresh off the nearby fields and we shortly realize that “silent” and “calm” are not likely the most accurate descriptions of the first Christmas.

Why the difference in our depictions of that first Christmas? Apart from the lyrical nightmare that writing a song about braying donkeys, smelly visitors and screaming children might be, there may be another reason for our reluctance to acknowledge the full truth of that first Christmas. That reason? We often handle very poorly difficult experiences and emotions and, rather than engaging in the tough work of learning from such circumstances, we seek to romanticize or sanitize the past. Our tendency to sanitize and romanticize that first Christmas however only serves to strip it of some of its bold, raw power. You see, when Jesus, the eternal Son of God, chose to enter into human existence in the form of a child born to an unwed Galilean woman, there was very little romantic about the consequences of this decision. We’ve returned to this idea repeatedly as of late, but scripture describes Jesus in Philippians 2:6-8 in this way:

“who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8)

Far from an “all is calm” choice, Jesus’ incarnation was a bold, profound, and dizzying option. It was a baffling choice to trade in the majesty of eternal opulence for the squalor and pain of human life and death. When I consider that in that little child in the manger “all the fullness of God lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9), I’m completely awestruck. When I consider that Christmas is not about a sweet little baby peacefully sleeping in a manger, but about a God who chose to experience not just a messy birth, but a difficult life and an incomprehensible death all for the sake of others, I experience a devastating “silent moment, holy moment”. You see, when we fail to apprehend the truth of that first Christmas, exchanging the brutality for a watered down romanticism, the awesomeness of the incarnation is lessened. Now, I don’t want to burst too many Christmas bubbles this morning, but there is little doubt from a scriptural perspective that our visions of that first Christmas are both quite romanticized and significantly sanitized. As is human tendency, we often exchange the muck of the manger for the tinsel of the Christmas tree when it comes to our recollection of Christmases past. Like Ebenezer Scrooge “forgot” both the joys and pain of prior Christmases, failing to recognize this impact upon his present condition, we too either romanticize or sanitize not only our past experiences of Christmas, but much of our past experiences, so that we can get through the day.

We exchange the muck for the tinsel because it’s often easier to convince ourselves of the goodness of our past than it is to deal with the pain that is present there. Sometimes this pain is of our own making; other times it is something completely exterior to us, something inflicted upon us. But we trick ourselves into believing that pushing this pain aside by fondly recalling the “silent nights, holy nights” of our past allows us to move forward effectively in life. For those of you who have tried to do this, allow me to honestly ask you a question this morning: how effective is romanticizing or sanitizing your past in eliminating it as a source of present difficulty? Does your past pain, either pain you inflicted on others or pain inflicted upon you, ever serve to impact your present?

Now, I know that Jesus was deity enfleshed, but for a moment, consider the pain of the past that He might have had to have endured. He seems to have owned the whole “born in a manger” thing. No doubt He endured the whispers of illegitimacy as He grew up in Nazareth. We see little mention of His father Joseph beyond Jesus at 12 years of age, so it is possible that He experienced the painful loss of His father at an early age. Rather than romanticizing the past, developing an alternate birth narrative or downplaying the difficult aspects of His story, Jesus seems to have faced each one head on, likely with much prayer, permitting them to shape Him. Do you think perhaps that enduring school yard taunts about his birth assisted Jesus in handling the much more vicious accusations of the Pharisees? Think that the reality of his first night’s sleep on earth occurring in a cool cave might have eased His later acknowledgement that “foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Or do you think that having experienced a distance in relationship with the death of His earthly father might have eased the distance Jesus experienced on the cross from His Heavenly Father? You see, a close examination of the life of Christ reveals that dealing well with painful and uncomfortable experiences through reliance upon God allows these experiences to shape us for better use in Christ’s kingdom.

But how, you might ask? Well, the Sunday School answer fits well … Jesus allows our painful past experiences to be used for our ongoing good. The wonder of the manger is that it points to the cross and the cross reminds us that it is not only possible to put to rest the pain of the past, but that it can better us through faith in Jesus. You see, as Ebenezer Scrooge visited his past Christmases and encountered both the joy and pain present there, he began to realize that he was not now the man he once was. For Scrooge, this was a terrifying thought because of how despicable a person he had become. When we place our faith in Jesus something absolutely incredible begins to occur. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”.

In Jesus, we are not now who we once were. Unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, this is an incredibly good thing for us because by faith in Jesus we are transformed through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Though we once shouldered a burden of sin, by faith in Christ, Jesus removes this burden. Though our past once defined us, through Jesus, the old had gone and we are new creations. Though “once [we] were alienated from God and were enemies in [our] minds because of [our] evil behavior ... now he has reconciled [us] by Christ’s physical body through death to present [us] holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:21-22). This is true for all who have placed their faith in Jesus; a sure-fire guarantee for all who have confessed their sin, accepted Christ’s forgiveness and covenanted to follow Him. By faith in Jesus, we have been transformed!

As potentially embarrassing or discrediting as it might have been, Jesus didn’t fancy up His birth narrative. The gospels present it plainly, starkly and unadorned. Bursting upon the scene around His 30th birthday, Jesus’ didn’t have to alter His past to step into His incredible future. I wonder this morning if we hold a similar view of things. Listen, we all have pain in our pasts; we all have muck that we are reluctant to admit. But the beauty of the manger is that we do not have to tinsel up our pasts to make us somehow acceptable in God’s sight. In fact, I believe our tendency to sanitize our past actually serves to limit our experience of salvation; you see, if we understand ourselves as already “pretty good” before encountering the good news of Jesus, then doing so serves an enhancement sort of function – a “better you” results. But if we are completely honest with the muck of our pasts, understanding that, as Romans 3 puts it, “there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”, then the true miracle of the manger – that Jesus would willingly enter into such a worldly mess for our sake – can be appreciated. Through Jesus, we can own the pain of our past, knowing full well that through the power of Jesus the muck no longer sticks! Fittingly for this time of year, God promises us in Isaiah 1:18 that “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”.

Jesus desires that right here and right now that you experience His peace with your past. As Philippians 4:7 puts it, it is a “peace that passes understanding” because it is a gift from beyond us, a precious present from God to us. We cannot earn this gift because it’s been freely given to us; as Romans 5:1-2 reveals “we have been justified through faith, wehave peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand”. Today, I ask, have you received this unfathomable Christmas gift? If you have not, but would like to, please come speak to me or Adam, or anyone whom you know is following Jesus today. So this year, might we refuse to tinsel up our Christmases past, recognizing the awesome fullness of that first Christmas so long ago. Might we, like Ebenezer Scrooge, face our past pain, but might we surrender this all to the child in the manger, the man on the cross, the Risen One now ascended to heaven, receiving the peace that He promises us as we pray together: Lord’s Prayer.