

2010 Sermon Advent 3  
Text: Is. 35: 1-10  
Theme: "Bah-Humbug"  
December 12, 2010

The little girl looks through the front window of the store longingly, wishing that the doll could be hers...but it is not to be. Her parents work as hard as they can just to keep a roof over her head and clothes on her body and at least one hot meal a day in her stomach. Dolls are not for her.

A man stares out his window from the nursing home at the snow falling on the parking lot. Christmas for him is just another day of loneliness and loss. But it is worse because his roommate has grandchildren coming to pick him up and take him home for a family celebration. His Christmas day, however will be a day of sleeping in front of the television or staring out the window while nurses do their best to make him feel better.

I hate to be Debbie Downer, but Christmas is not a thrill for everyone. My therapist friends are booked to the gills this time of year with emergency appointments. My pastor colleagues all know to prepare for at least one if not several funerals and marriage catastrophes during the so called "holidays."

Scrooge says, "Bah-Humbug!" to Christmas. But he did not feel that way after his night with the spirits. Of course the premise of the story is that Scrooge understood that his priorities were all wrong. He was focusing on money and worldly success instead of the relationships with the people who he could love and who could have loved him. Now Dickens was not trying to write a theological treatise so that was where he stopped but I think there are theological nuggets to be gleaned.

Isaiah is writing to people who are headed into exile because of their sin. Like Scrooge spent his night with the spirits so the people of God were about to spend 70 years with the Babylonians to help them reorganized their priorities. What is more important; worshipping the one true God or compromising your beliefs so that you can get business from that Canaanite guy down the street? What is more important; sacrificing your time and your money to worship God or frolicking at the temple of pleasure down the street? They would have the better part of a century to decide.

Notice that even in the prayer of the day, we recognize that we too live in exile. We prayed, "we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation." This is not a very Christmassy sentiment, yet it is reality for all of us. Sometimes what makes this season so difficult is that the dark reality of life and the joy for which we yearn are in such stark contrast. We see all too well the visions of the spirits of Christmas past and Christmas present. Though we may lock it away from public view, we know that pain we have caused and the people we have hurt. We know as well the injury that has been done to us and while we strive to forgive, we simply cannot seem to forget and in the season of joy and peace, that pain throbs unmercifully beneath the surface. There is a reason that therapists are booked and relationships come unraveled when we are in emotional and spiritual pain but no one thinks we should be. Perhaps we need a visitation from the spirit of Christmas future and perhaps Isaiah can provide that for us.

Like the spirit of Christmas future, Isaiah shows us what life will be like. Of course the people of Israel probably thought he was just talking about the return from exile. But we know that while the return from exile was part of it, the ultimate fulfillment was Christ's birth and Christ return at the end of time.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.” Like the Garden of Eden, there will be no more droughts; neither literally nor droughts of love, droughts of joy, droughts of peace and everything will be lush and beautiful.

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” That last phrase reminds us that this is Gospel for us. God comes to save us. He comes to reverse all the pain to mend all the brokenness to heal all the hurts. And when he comes “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” That’s why Jesus did all those healings while he was on earth – to give us a glimpse of what truly being completely whole will be like!

“And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.” A way of holiness; even for fools who have gone astray! So there is the promise even for the lousiest Christians! That is what we celebrate during these holy days. Holy days, not holidays. When someone wishes you happy holidays, don’t say Merry Christmas. Say happy holy days to you too! These are the holy days that lead up to the celebration of the Nativity that reminds us that all this evil and all this madness WILL BE REVERSED!

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” That is what the Spirit of Christmas Future promises us, as we trudge on through life but wait – there is something for us that Scrooge did not get.

Did you ever think what Scrooge did after Christmas? What about the days when Bob was late for work or just irritating? What about the days when Ebenezer was feeling lonely? What about the days when nothing went right? Did the spirits keep coming back and encouraging him? Ours does.

Each week our Lord comes to us when life is marching on and sometimes over us. We kneel at his altar and receive not just kind words or an inspirational vision but his very body and blood. The Lord Jesus, who came to earth as a human being, physically enters us and lifts us up healing us, always spiritually, often mentally and sometimes even physically. This is something Scrooge never had before or after the visits of the spirits.

Bah-Humbug? Yeah, if Christmas is about gifts and parties and warm fuzzies, Bah-Humbug indeed! But if Christmas is a celebration of our Lord’s visitation when he became human in order to pay for our sin, and a celebration of his continual visitation as he comes to us in his body and blood....well..... then.....no Bah-Humbug but instead.....Alleluia!