

December 4, 2005

Reawakening the Joy Inherent in Christmas Luke 1:46-55

To my friends living the Call Together at the Norwalk Alliance church.

As I wrote you last week, Scrooge is a man who is forced to face the real issues of why he hated Christmas. He was fettered with chains that needed to be broken. In his life, because of events in his past Christmas had lost all it's joy.

His transformation continues as the Spirit of Christmas past leads him to reawakening the Joy of Christmas in his heart.

INTRODUCTION

Is it any wonder people have lost the joy inherent in Christmas. Christmas has become so trivialized and promoted in so many cheap ways that many of have become offended.

For instance I think it has to be hard to be truly joyous at these special Christmas events.

St. Nick gets in touch with his inner Cousteau for the second year running at Cincinnati's Newport Aquarium. The jolly guy takes the plunge all month long in full red-suit-and-hat regalia, hamming it up for the delighted all-ages crowd as he interacts with seahorses, sharks, stingrays, sea turtles and his sidekick elf in a 385,000 gallon water tank.

It's not Christmas in Baltimore until Santa, his reindeer, a few elves and other special guests (the Grinch is a favorite) **go careening down the Potomac River** –

Calistoga California Holiday Tractor Parade

ractors and "other ag-related conveyances" bearing lights and decorations coast down Calistoga's Lincoln Avenue in this annual tradition that also includes the lighting of Main Street and the town hall Christmas tree. Prizes are awarded in five categories: Antique, Not-So-Old, Contemporary, Lawn and Garden and Bizarre.

Night of 100 Elvises

Not a holiday event per se, but expect to hear some yuletide Presley chestnuts at this awesome two-night Kingstravaganza. Bands play all Elvis, all the time (with a strict no-song-repeats rule), showcasing more Elvis impersonators than you can shake a fried peanut butter-and-banana sandwich at. Speaking of which, this and other King favorites will be served at the buffet.

T.S. Unfortunately these events do little to inspire Joy, but our encounter with the miracle of Christmas should lead to joy. Indeed, that is the earliest response to Christmas.

T.S. Look with me at Luke 2:20

 **BY LOOKING INTO THE PAST WE CAN REAWAKEN OUR CHRISTMAS JOY.**

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is the story of a man who is changed when he is forced to face the real issues why he hated Christmas Eve. He too needed to reawaken the Joy inherent in the Christmas season.

When Ebenezer Scrooge returns home on Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his business partner Jacob Marley, who had died seven years earlier.

When Marley's ghost disappeared, however, Scrooge reconsidered the encounter, dismissed the whole thing as "humbug," and went to bed. Then, at one o'clock, he was indeed awakened by the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Even as the ghost took Scrooge to visit his past, I invite you to make your own journey down memory lane. When you do, you may discern some of the central experiences that have shaped--and often controlled--your attitude toward Christmas, and life in general.

I. The Ghost of Christmas Past: Forces Us To Face What Has Robbed Us Of Joy

The spirit takes Scrooge back to five scenes from his childhood. These encounters stir a mixture of strong emotions in Scrooge. They also give us the first glimpses of insight into the forces that shaped this now-miserable man.

Two about the past have the power to rob us of Joy in the present.

A. the memory of wounds we've received

The spirit of Christmas Past first took Scrooge back to his boarding school. It was a dark, lonely time where his only real friends were the characters in books that sustained him. Dickens doesn't fill in the details, so we are left to speculate as to why Scrooge was so lonely and desolate. The second Christmas scene, however, gives us a significant clue. It was the time when Ebenezer's younger sister came to the school, and indicated that their "father is much kinder now" and would finally allow Ebenezer to come home. Her comment indicates that Ebenezer was put in the boarding school not simply for his own good, but because of his father's rejection. Again, Dickens gives no details, but the message is clear: Young Ebenezer experienced times of bitter loneliness and separation from his family.

In another scene Scrooge refuses to accept the invitation of His Nephew, because he still is wounded over the loss of his sister who died in child birth.

For some of us Christmas is not a joyous time because of all the wounds we have received in the past.

- Wounds of abandonment
- Wounds of abuse
- Wounds of neglect
- Wounds of failure
- Wounds of loss
- Wounds of regret
- Wounds of broken relationship
- Wounds of disappoint

Very few of us has have Christmas memories that are not marred by some wound.

I remember the year we buried my Grandmother on Christmas Eve. I remember the first year I celebrated Christmas away from home. I remember the year I was sick on Christmas with vomiting and

diarrhea.

Are you being robbed of Christmas joy by some memory from the past? We find ourselves remembering harsh words, disappointments, and interactions we wish had been different.

B. the memory of choices we've made

Scrooge saw that he had smothered the Christmas spirit and quenched his own joy. He saw this through reliving an encounter with his fiancée, Belle.

In this scene she confronts him with the radical change she has seen in him since he had become "a man of business."

"Another idol has displaced me," she said, "and, if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come as I would have tired to do, I have no just cause to grieve."

"What idol has displaced you?" he rejoined.

"A golden one. . . . You fear the world too much," she answered gently. "All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one until the master passion, **Gain**, engrosses you."

When she asked if he still would have chosen her, with nothing to bring to marriage, his response is a long pause and then, "You think not." Belle responds sadly, "I would gladly think otherwise if I could. . . . I release you."

- Scrooge chose his career over the dowerless Belle.
- That choice leads him to had dealt with his wounds through ambition: the spirit of materialism that we often use to try to soothe the pain of life. And his ambition robbed him of love.

Do you come into this Christmas season robbed of Joy by the choices you have made?

But we will never be free until we face these memories and allow the Lord to touch them.

- This is not our natural reaction. Like Scrooge, we may want to "extinguish" the truth. This is often our first response to pain and regret, but there is a better way.

II. In spite of the past, we can choose joy

The gospel gives us the power to choose to respond differently to memory of wounds, to the memory of choice we have made.

The Good news is Good news. Mary after learning that she would bear the savior awakens within herself an incredible joy. She chooses joy. Why because God had made himself known to her.

It is expressed to us in Luke 1:46 -55, the *Magnificat*. Turn there with me now.

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." NIV

III. Take steps to reawaken the joy

A. First of all, choose to focus the things and memories that bring us joy.

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

We can savor them and let them awaken the full range of life-giving feelings that are within them.

B. Second, we can let the Living Lord touch and redeem the painful memories and circumstances.

48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

The power of our faith, you see, is that it is able to transform our memories and circumstances.

We can bring our memories before the Lord in prayer and ask him to transform them by his presence. We can ask him to reveal himself in them so that he gives us, in effect, a new memory of our memories. Experience the power of Christ, the Lord of Time, releasing you from the pain of the past so you can joyfully embrace the present and future.

C. Third, make a conscious choice to express Joy.

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

This is what we see with Mary, following the visit from the angel during which she learned she would conceive and give birth the Messiah. Mary found herself in a significant predicament. What looks to us like the highest of honors could well have looked to her like the making of a scandal. What would she do? What would she tell Joseph and her family? What would her future hold? We can imagine there were many emotions swirling around Mary, including fear and anxiety. Her joy may well have been dampened, if not quenched.

What did she do? Mary gave one of the most beautiful expressions of joy and praise in all Scripture, the Magnificat.

D. Share the joy with a spiritual partner.

46 And Mary said:

Mary found joy with a spiritual partner. You could call it a dance partner, to recall the image of Old Fezziwig's party. Pray that the Lord will give you someone to walk with you, to share with you, to make new memories with you. Someone who can help you rekindle the joy.

Are you struggling to revisit happy memories of your own? Ask someone to be your "dance partner," someone for you to pray with, bake cookies with--whatever will help you create new, happy memories to cherish."

CONCLUSION

Christmas is a season of unspeakable joy. It brings the message that God loves us and sent his Son to live with us, to die for us, and to bring us the gift of eternal life. It proclaims the fact that life is more powerful than death, that light overcomes the darkness, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. True, Christmas can be a time of painful memories, but they do not need to control us. We can take steps not simply to deal with our memories, but to choose to make good memories now--for a Christmas we'll never regret. We can say to ourselves, "I will make joyful memories with those I love."

On the way into day you were given a small Christmas bell. You can wear, or pin it in some visible location. But let this bell be your reminder, let every bell you hear or see this Christmas season be your reminder that this year in spite of the past you can Choose Joy. Take your bell and hold it now and pray with me.

Closing prayer: *Lord of all Time, Creator and Redeemer, we ask you to rekindle the joy of Christmas in our hearts. Forgive us for too often clinging to the wounds and regrets of life, instead of clinging to you. We know that the song of the angels is true: that the coming of Jesus brings joy to the world and peace on earth with those on whom your favor rests. Rest your favor on us. Give us a new song, a new hope, and a new vision of your grace, your power, and your victory in our lives. We ask in the name of our Lord, our Savior, our Joy-Giver, Jesus Christ. Amen.*