

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

CHRISTMAS CAROL CHARACTERS
"MARLEY & HOPE"

LAST WEEKEND, WE WERE PRIVILEGED TO HEAR FROM CHERYL KINCAID, WHO HAS WRITTEN A FASCINATING BOOK ABOUT THE CHARLES DICKENS CLASSIC, A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

SHE SUGGESTS THAT THE BOOK VERY CLOSELY FOLLOWS THE PATTERN THAT IS FOUND IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER AND ITS OBSERVANCE OF ADVENT.

I THINK THERE ARE ALSO WAYS IN WHICH THE BOOK CORRESPONDS TO OUR OWN MODERN-DAY OBSERVANCE OF THE SEASON.

FOR EXAMPLE, EACH OF THE TRADITIONAL THEMES OF ADVENT IS REPRESENTED BY ONE OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL.

THAT'S WHERE OUR FOCUS WILL BE DURING ADVENT THIS YEAR.

WHEN CHARLES DICKENS WROTE A CHRISTMAS CAROL, IT WAS ONE OF THE LOWEST POINTS OF HIS ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER.

HE HAD FALLEN ON HARD TIMES & THERE WAS SPECULATION THAT HIS STAR WAS FADING & HIS TIME HAD PASSED AS A NOTED WRITER.

IN THE FALL OF 1843, DICKENS WORKED IN A FRENZY ON THE BOOK TO COMPLETE IT IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS OF THAT YEAR.

HIS ACCOUNTS OF THE EXPERIENCE ARE REMINISCENT OF THE EXPERIENCE HANDEL DESCRIBED IN COMPOSING "MESSIAH."

DICKENS LOCKED HIMSELF AWAY & FELT DIVINELY-INSPIRED AS HE WROTE.

THE BOOK WAS COMPLETED IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS & WAS AN INSTANT HIT, BOTH IN ENGLAND & THE UNITED STATES AS WELL.

BEFORE THE END OF THE NEXT YEAR, THE BOOK WAS IN ITS 12TH PRINTING & THERE WERE EVEN A DOZEN DIFFERENT STAGE PRODUCTIONS PRESENTED IN ENGLAND.

REVIEWS OF THE BOOK WERE VIRTUALLY UNANIMOUS IN THEIR ENTHUSIASTIC ENDORSEMENT.

VERY PROPHETICALLY, ONLY A MONTH AFTER ITS PUBLICATION, ONE REVIEWER SAID, "A CHRISTMAS CAROL WILL BE AS SURELY HEARD & REMEMBERED A HUNDRED CHRISTMASSES TO COME."

I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT PROPHECY HAS BEEN FULFILLED.

IT'S ALSO SAFE TO SAY THAT DICKENS SOUGHT TO ACCOMPLISH TWO THINGS IN WRITING THIS LITTLE NOVEL.

FIRST OF ALL, HE SOUGHT A REVIVAL OF THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS.

SECONDLY, HE SOUGHT TO REVEAL & REVILE THE UNJUST TREATMENT OF THE POOR IN SOCIETY.

AND IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT HE ACCOMPLISHED BOTH OF THOSE OBJECTIVES.

AS WE BEGIN OUR ADVENT STUDY OF THIS DICKENS CLASSIC, WE'RE GOING TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING.

AND HOW DOES A CHRISTMAS CAROL BEGIN?

"MARLEY WAS DEAD: TO BEGIN WITH. THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT."

GRANTED, THAT MAY NOT HAVE THE MELODIC RING OF *"IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES,"* BUT IN TERMS OF OPENING LINES OF A DICKENS NOVEL, IT'S PRETTY GOOD.

THE USE OF THAT NAME – MARLEY – IS AN INTERESTING STORY ITSELF.

SUPPOSEDLY, CHARLES DICKENS HAD ATTENDED A ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARTY AT THE HOME OF A MAN NAMED DR. MILES MARLEY & IN THE COURSE OF CONVERSATION, DICKENS SUGGESTED HE HAD AN INTEREST IN UNUSUAL NAMES.

THE DOCTOR TOLD HIM HE THOUGHT HIS OWN NAME WAS RATHER REMARKABLE & DICKENS REPORTEDLY REPLIED, *"YOUR NAME SHALL BE A HOUSEHOLD WORD BEFORE THE YEAR IS OUT."*

THAT, TOO, OF COURSE, WAS PROPHETIC.

WITH THE OPENING LINE OF THE NOVEL, WE KNOW THAT MARLEY WILL PLAY A KEY ROLE IN THIS TALE.

HE DOESN'T TAKE CENTER STAGE IMMEDIATELY, AND YET BEFORE THE END OF STAVE ONE, THERE HE IS.

THE USE OF "STAVE" INSTEAD OF "CHAPTER" WAS BECAUSE DICKENS WANTED THIS TO BE, AS HE SAID, "A CHRISTMAS CAROL IN PROSE" AND A "STAVE" IS SIMPLY AN ARCHAIC FORM OF "STAFF," AS IN A STANZA OF A POEM OR SONG.

INTERESTINGLY, DICKENS DID THE SAME THING IN TWO OF HIS LATER CHRISTMAS BOOKS.

CHAPTERS IN "THE CHIMES" WERE DIVIDED INTO 4 QUARTERS AS IN THE TOLLING OF A CLOCK & IN "THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH," THE CHAPTERS ARE CALLED "CHIRPS."

BUT BACK TO MARLEY - OUR MAN OF THE DAY.

SEVEN YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, HE APPEARS IN SCROOGE'S DOORKNOCKER ONE EVENING & THEN HE EMERGES FROM THE CELLAR AND PREPARES HIS OLD PARTNER FOR VISITS FROM 3 OTHER GHOSTS WHO WILL GIVE SCROOGE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO WHAT MARLEY HIMSELF COULDN'T BRING HIMSELF TO DO IN LIFE – CHANGE HIS WAYS.

THAT'S WHY MARLEY CONNECTS WITH THE THEME FOR THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT.

WHAT HE OFFERS IS PRECISELY WHAT ISAIAH IS OFFERING IN OUR OLD TESTAMENT READING FOR TODAY.

HE'S OFFERING SCROOGE THE SAME THING JESUS IS OFFERING IN THIS PASSAGE IN MARK.

HE LOOKS INTO THE FUTURE & TELLS HIS OLD BUSINESS PARTNER THAT THINGS CAN BE DIFFERENT FOR HIM.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT AT ONE POINT IN THE NOVEL, WHERE MARLEY IS TALKING TO SCROOGE, DICKENS CHANGED A LINE FROM WHAT HE HAD INITIALLY WRITTEN.

IN HIS ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT, MARLEY SAYS, *"I MAY NOT REST. I MAY NOT STAY. I MAY NOT LINGER ANYWHERE."*

DICKENS CHANGED IT TO READ, *"I CANNOT REST. I CANNOT STAY. I CANNOT LINGER ANYWHERE."*

HE WANTED TO EMPHASIZE THE FACT THAT MARLEY NOW HAS NO CHOICE IN THE MATTER.

BUT HE COMES TO SCROOGE, WHILE SCROOGE IS ALIVE, BECAUSE – FOR HIM – THERE IS STILL TIME, THERE IS STILL A CHOICE, THERE IS STILL HOPE.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE PARABLE JESUS TOLD ABOUT THE RICH MAN & LAZARUS – HOW THE RICH MAN WHO DIED & WAS SENT TO HELL WANTED TO RETURN TO EARTH TO WARN HIS FAMILY MEMBERS TO CHANGE THEIR WAYS?

THAT IS, IN ESSENCE, WHAT WE HAVE HERE WITH MARLEY.

HE'S COME BACK FROM THE DEAD TO WARN SCROOGE – AND, DARE WE SAY, TO WARN US AS WELL?

THERE IS A WONDERFUL EXCHANGE BETWEEN MARLEY & SCROOGE THAT POINTS OUT THE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES OF MARLEY'S LIFE.

IT BEGINS WITH SCROOGE SPEAKING: *"BUT YOU WERE ALWAYS A GOOD MAN OF BUSINESS, JACOB."*

AND MARLEY RESPONDS, *"BUSINESS! MANKIND WAS MY BUSINESS. THE COMMON WELFARE WAS MY BUSINESS; CHARITY, MERCY, FORBEARANCE, AND BENEVOLENCE, WERE ALL MY BUSINESS. THE DEALINGS OF MY TRADE WERE BUT A DROP OF WATER IN THE COMPREHENSIVE OCEAN OF MY BUSINESS!"*

AT THIS TIME OF THE ROLLING YEAR, I SUFFER MOST. WHY DID I WALK THROUGH CROWDS OF FELLOW-BEINGS 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!"

MARLEY IS SHARING THE REGRET OF GOOD DEEDS LEFT UNDONE, OF LOVE NOT SHARED, OF HELP & ASSISTANCE NOT OFFERED.

FOR MARLEY, THE TIME FOR CHANGE HAS PASSED.

BUT FOR SCROOGE, THERE IS STILL TIME & THERE IS STILL HOPE.

I THINK IT'S INTERESTING THAT MARLEY IS LAMENTING – NOT THE EVIL THAT HE *DID* WHILE HE WAS ALIVE BUT RATHER THE GOOD THAT HE *DIDN'T* DO.

SOME OF YOU WILL REMEMBER A STANDARD PRAYER OF CONFESSION IN THE OLD RED PRESBYTERIAN HYMNAL THAT INCLUDED THE LINE, *"WE HAVE LEFT UNDONE THOSE THINGS WHICH WE OUGHT TO HAVE DONE; AND WE HAVE DONE THOSE THINGS WHICH WE OUGHT NOT TO HAVE DONE; AND THERE IS NO HEALTH IN US."*

IT'S THE FORMER OF WHICH MARLEY WARNS SCROOGE – THE THINGS HE HAS LEFT UNDONE WHICH HE OUGHT TO HAVE DONE.

AND ISN'T THAT TRUE WITH MANY OF US AS WELL?

IT'S NOT THE HORRIFIC SINS OF *COMMISSION*, BUT THE TRAGIC SINS OF *OMISSION* THAT LEAD TO OUR DOWNFALL.

WE BOUNCE THROUGH LIFE WITH OUR EYES CENTERED ON OURSELVES WITH NARY A THOUGHT TO THOSE IN NEED.

MARLEY CONFESSES AS MUCH WHEN HE SAYS, *"MY SPIRIT NEVER WALKED BEYOND OUR COUNTING-HOUSE – MARK ME! – IN LIFE MY SPIRIT NEVER ROVED BEYOND THE NARROW LIMITS OF OUR MONEY-CHANGING HOLE..."*

HE NEVER STEPPED BEYOND HIS OWN NARROW WORLD TO SEE THE STRUGGLES & TROUBLES OF THOSE AROUND HIM AND – NOW, IN DEATH – HE NEVER STOPS VISITING THOSE PLACES HE SHOULD HAVE TRAVELED TO IN LIFE.

THIS IS A FRIGHTENING TALE DICKENS HAS GIVEN US.

IN FACT, IN HIS PREFACE, DICKENS SAYS THAT HE HOPES, FOR HIS READERS THAT IT WILL “*HAUNT THEIR HOUSES PLEASANTLY.*”

THE ADVENT SEASON IS A GOOD TIME TO FEEL HAUNTED & A GOOD TIME TO FIND HOPE.

WE SHOULD BE HAUNTED BY THE CLAIM OF CHRIST UPON OUR LIVES THAT WE SO OFTEN FAIL TO HEED.

WE SHOULD BE HAUNTED BY THE THINGS WE HAVEN'T DONE, THE PEOPLE WE HAVEN'T SERVED & THE NEEDS WE HAVEN'T MET.

WE SHOULD BE HAUNTED BY OUR SELFISHNESS & OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO HEED THE CALL OF CHRIST TO SERVE HIM BY SERVING OTHERS.

ON THE OTHER HAND, ADVENT IS A GOOD TIME TO FIND HOPE.

MARLEY HAD BEEN BLESSED IN LIFE BEYOND ALL REASONABLE MEASURE & YET HE FAILED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THOSE BLESSINGS.

FOR SCROOGE – AND FOR US AS WELL – THERE IS STILL TIME.

THERE'S TIME TO BE THANKFUL FOR WHAT WE HAVE & THERE IS TIME TO LOOK FORWARD TO WHAT IS YET TO COME.

NOT ONLY IS THE BEGINNING OF THE ADVENT SEASON A GOOD TIME TO CONSIDER THIS, BUT THE SUNDAY AFTER THANKSGIVING AS WELL.

THIS IS A TIME OF YEAR WHEN MANY OF US FIND OURSELVES OUTSIDE WITH A RAKE, A LEAF BLOWER OR A MULCHING MOWER.

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU'VE SPENT A GOOD DEAL OF TIME DEALING WITH LEAVES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS.

IT'S BECOME AN ANNUAL RITUAL WITH ME – NOT TO JUST RAKE THE LEAVES IN MY YARD – BUT TO BE ABSOLUTELY OVERWHELMED AT THEIR NUMBER.

INEVITABLY, I FIND MYSELF – IN ONE OF MY FIRST ATTACKS UPON THE LEAVES – WITH MY EYES FOCUSED ON THE GROUND AND ASTOUNDED AT THE FACT THAT VIRTUALLY EVERY INCH OF GROUND IS COVERED BY THEM.

THIS YEAR, MY EXPERIENCE WAS A BIT DIFFERENT BECAUSE I TOOK A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT APPROACH & ATTITUDE.

IN THAT FIRST BOUT OF RAKING A FEW WEEKS AGO, I LOOKED AT THE THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF LEAVES ON THE GROUND – LEAVES THAT HAD BEEN SHOWERED DOWN FROM THE SKIES ABOVE.

THE THOUGHT CROSSED MY MIND – AS IT DOES EVERY YEAR IN THAT FIRST RAKING - THAT THERE ARE SO MANY THAT HAVE ALREADY FALLEN, THERE CAN'T POSSIBLY BE A SINGLE LEAF LEFT ON ANY OF THE TREES AROUND ME.

AS I LOOKED UP, THOUGH, IT AMAZED ME AS IT DOES EVERY YEAR.

NOT ONLY HAD EVERY LEAF NOT FALLEN, IT APPEARED AS THOUGH NOT A SINGLE ONE HAD!

NO MATTER HOW MANY LEAVES LAY ON THE GROUND AROUND ME, THERE WERE 10 TIMES THAT MANY STILL TO FALL!

THIS YEAR, WITH THAT FIRST DAY OF RAKING, I THOUGHT OF THOSE LEAVES ON THE GROUND AS THE BLESSINGS OF LIFE THAT HAVE BEEN SHOWERED UPON ME.

THERE ARE SO MANY THAT I COULD NO MORE COUNT THOSE BLESSINGS THAN I COULD THE LEAVES THAT COVERED MY YARD.

BUT, MORE IMPORTANTLY, I KNOW THAT NO MATTER HOW MANY OF THOSE BLESSINGS GOD HAS SHOWERED UPON ME, THEY ARE NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT IS PROMISED IN THE FUTURE.

I NEED ONLY TURN MY EYES TO THE SKIES TO KNOW THAT THERE ARE SURELY MORE BLESSINGS TO COME.

AS THOSE TREES CONTINUE TO SHOWER LEAF AFTER LEAF, LONG AFTER IT APPEARS AS THOUGH THEY MUST SURELY BE EMPTY, SO WILL GOD CONTINUE TO POUR BLESSINGS DOWN UPON YOU LONG AFTER YOU ASSUME THEY'VE COME TO AN END.

THAT'S WHAT JACOB MARLEY COULDN'T ACCEPT IN HIS LIFE.

HE HAD NO HOPE THAT LIFE COULD BE DIFFERENT – NO HOPE THAT GOD WOULD BRING PEACE & COMFORT & FULFILLMENT.

IN FACT, THE STATEMENT THAT OPENS A CHRISTMAS CAROL – “MARLEY WAS DEAD; TO BEGIN WITH,” MIGHT JUST AS EASILY BE TURNED INTO A QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT HE HAD EVER REALLY BEEN ALIVE.

FOR SCROOGE – AND FOR US – THERE IS STILL HOPE.

THERE IS HOPE THAT WE MIGHT YET LIVE.

THERE IS HOPE THAT WE MIGHT SERVE CHRIST BY SERVING OTHERS.

THERE IS HOPE THAT WE MIGHT LOOK UP & SEE THE BLESSINGS – BLESSINGS TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT – THAT GOD IS READY TO SHOWER UPON US. AMEN.

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