

Isaiah 40:1-8
Hebrews 11:1-3

CHRISTMAS CAROL CHARACTERS #2
“FRED & FAITH”

THIS IS THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT & THE SECOND WEEK OF OUR STUDY OF “CHRISTMAS CAROL CHARACTERS.”

LAST WEEK, I SUGGESTED THAT THERE ARE ANY NUMBER OF DIRECTIONS ONE MIGHT GO IN LOOKING AT ADVENT THROUGH THE CLASSIC DICKENS’ NOVEL A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

THE DIRECTION I’VE CHOSEN IS THAT OF TAKING A LOOK AT THE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL.

SOME OF THEM SEEM TO CORRESPOND VERY NICELY WITH THE TRADITIONAL THEMES OF ADVENT THAT WE ASSOCIATE WITH EACH OF THE FOUR SUNDAYS & CHRISTMAS EVE.

THOSE THEMES ARE ALSO VERY MUCH INTERRELATED.

WE BEGAN LAST WEEK WITH HOPE & HOPE NATURALLY FLOWS INTO FAITH.

FAITH BRINGS ABOUT JOY & JOY INFUSES US WITH PEACE.

AND THEN, ALL FOUR OF THEM – HOPE, FAITH, JOY & PEACE - CULMINATE IN LOVE.

LAST WEEK, IT WAS JACOB MARLEY WHO SERVED AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF HOPE.

TODAY, IT IS SCROOGE’S NEPHEW, FRED, WHO REPRESENTS FAITH.

FRED ISN’T A NAME THAT WE READILY ASSOCIATE WITH A CHRISTMAS CAROL – SURELY NOT AS WE DO SCROOGE, MARLEY, TINY TIM OR EVEN FEZZIWIG.

ONE OF THE REASONS FOR THAT IS THAT, FOR WHATEVER REASON, HE IS MOST-OFTEN REFERRED TO IN THE NOVEL – NOT AS “FRED” – BUT AS “SCROOGE’S NEPHEW.”

IT ISN’T UNTIL MORE THAN HALFWAY THROUGH THE BOOK, WELL INTO THE SECOND APPEARANCE THAT FRED MAKES, THAT DICKENS FINALLY TELLS US HIS NAME.

PERHAPS THAT’S TO HIGHLIGHT THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP OR, EVEN MORE, TO HIGHLIGHT THE FACT THAT FRED WAS THE SON OF SCROOGE’S DEARLY-LOVED SISTER, FAN, WHO HAD DIED LONG BEFORE THE NOVEL BEGINS.

INTERESTINGLY, DICKENS HIMSELF HAD A SISTER, WHOSE NAME HAPPENED TO BE - FAN.

AS WE CONSIDER THE THEME OF FAITH FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YOU CAN SEE IT CLEARLY IN OUR NEW TESTAMENT READING FROM THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

THESE ARE THE INTRODUCTORY WORDS TO THE MOST WELL-KNOWN CHAPTER ON FAITH IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE.

THESE ARE THE WORDS THE WRITER USES TO USHER US INTO WHAT WE MIGHT CALL “*THE HALL OF FAITH,*” WITH A LISTING OF THOSE WHO SERVE AS WORTHY EXAMPLES FOR THE REST OF US.

HE EVEN OFFERS A PROFOUND & POETIC DEFINITION OF FAITH – “*THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN.*”

THERE WE SEE THAT INSEPARABLE BOND BETWEEN “HOPE” & “FAITH.”

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON FROM ISAIAH, HOWEVER, DOESN'T SET FORTH THE THEME OF FAITH NEARLY SO CLEARLY.

WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THESE WORDS IN THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT.

"COMFORT, O COMFORT, MY PEOPLE."

NOT ONLY ARE THESE THE WORDS THAT OPEN HANDEL'S MESSIAH; THEY ARE THE WORDS THAT OPEN WHAT IS KNOWN AS II ISAIAH.

THE FIRST 39 CHAPTERS OF ISAIAH – WHILE CERTAINLY NOT COMPLETELY VOID OF HOPE – ARE MOSTLY CENTERED ON A CONDEMNATION OF THE PEOPLE FOR THEIR LACK OF FAITH & THEIR TURNING FROM GOD TO THE IDOLS OF THE AGE.

BUT WITH THESE WORDS, SOMETHING NEW HAS BEGUN.

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO HEAR THESE WORDS – *"COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE?"*

CAN YOU IMAGINE BEING A SLAVE IN BABYLON, KNOWING THAT YOUR HOMELAND HAS BEEN DESTROYED, YOUR FAMILY CRUSHED & YOUR PEOPLE'S IDENTITY NEARLY BLOTTED OUT?

WHAT WAS REQUIRED FROM THE PEOPLE WAS PRECISELY WHAT THE WRITER OF HEBREWS SUGGESTS – THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN.

IT WAS TO BELIEVE IN SOMETHING SEEMINGLY TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.

BUT PARADOXICALLY, IT'S SOMETHING THAT'S TOO GOOD *NOT* TO BE TRUE.

I THINK THAT'S WHAT WE FIND WITH FRED IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

HE MAKES HIS FIRST APPEARANCE VERY EARLY ON – ENTERING SCROOGE'S OFFICE JUST AFTER THE INITIAL ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SCROOGE & HIS CLERK, BOB CRATCHIT, THAT TELLS US THE KIND OF MAN SCROOGE IS.

FRED'S FIRST WORDS AS HE ENTERS OFFER A STARK CONTRAST AS HE BELLOWS OUT, *"A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS, UNCLE! GOD BLESS YOU!"*

NOW FRED OBVIOUSLY KNOWS WHAT HIS UNCLE IS LIKE.

IT'S NOT AS IF HE'S NEVER MET HIM BEFORE.

HE'S KNOWN HIM HIS ENTIRE LIFE!

BUT FRED REFUSES TO ALLOW HIS UNCLE SCROOGE'S CROTCHEDYNESS & CYNICISM DAMPEN HIS SPIRIT OR HIS FAITH.

AS HE ENTERS THAT OFFICE & SPEAKS, HE KNOWS WHAT HE'LL HEAR FROM HIS WRETCHED UNCLE.

AND, SURE ENOUGH, IT'S FRED'S POSITIVE & UPBEAT ATTITUDE & ENTHUSIASM THAT ELICITS FROM SCROOGE THE MOST WELL-KNOWN LINE OF THE NOVEL – *"BAH! HUMBUG!"*

IT IS ONLY IN THIS FIRST STAVE, THOUGH – THIS FIRST CHAPTER – THAT SCROOGE UTTERS THIS PHRASE, BECAUSE, BY THE END OF IT, HE HAS ALREADY BEGUN TO CHANGE AND, IN NO SMALL PART, BECAUSE OF THE SPIRIT OF HIS NEPHEW, FRED.

BEFORE THE END OF THIS INITIAL CONVERSATION, FRED SAYS SOMETHING TO SCROOGE THAT, FOREVER AFTERWARD, DICKENS WOULD CALL *"THE CAROL PHILOSOPHY."*

WHAT FRED SAYS TO HIM MUST HAVE TAKEN A GREAT DEAL OF BOTH COURAGE & CONVICTION.

EVEN KNOWING THE KIND OF MAN HIS UNCLE IS, FRED BOLDLY PROCLAIMS:

"THERE ARE MANY THINGS FROM WHICH I MIGHT HAVE DERIVED GOOD, BY WHICH I HAVE NOT PROFITED, I DARE SAY – CHRISTMAS AMONG THE REST. BUT I AM SURE I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF CHRISTMAS TIME, WHEN IT HAS COME ROUND – APART FROM THE VENERATION DUE TO ITS SACRED NAME AND ORIGIN, IF ANYTHING BELONGING TO IT CAN BE APART FROM THAT – AS A GOOD TIME: A KIND, FORGIVING, CHARITABLE, PLEASANT TIME: THE ONLY TIME I KNOW OF IN THE LONG CALENDAR OF THE YEAR, WHEN MEN & WOMEN SEEM BY ONE CONSENT TO OPEN THEIR SHUT-UP HEARTS FREELY, AND TO THINK OF PEOPLE BELOW THEM AS IF THEY REALLY WERE FELLOW-PASSENGERS TO THE GRAVE, AND NOT ANOTHER RACE OF CREATURES BOUND ON OTHER JOURNEYS. AND THEREFORE, UNCLE, THOUGH IT HAS NEVER PUT A SCRAP OF GOLD IN MY POCKET, I BELIEVE THAT IT HAS DONE ME GOOD, AND WILL DO ME GOOD; AND I SAY, GOD BLESS IT!"

IT WAS SUCH A ROUSING & INSPIRATIONAL SPEECH THAT BOB CRATCHIT, SITTING NEARBY, COULDN'T CONTAIN HIMSELF & BROKE OUT IN SPONTANEOUS APPLAUSE.

THIS IS THE FAITH OF FRED.

IT'S A FAITH THAT KNOWS THERE IS SOMETHING IN CHRISTMAS THAT GOES BEYOND ANY KIND OF PERSONAL FINANCIAL GAIN, BEYOND ANYTHING THAT CAN BE SEEN WITH OUR EYES OR HEARD WITH OUR EARS.

THERE IS SOMETHING INTRINSICALLY GOOD ABOUT WHAT CHRISTMAS REPRESENTS.

IT REPRESENTS GOD IN OUR VERY MIDST TO TRANSFORM US FROM OUR SELF-SERVING & SELF-CENTERED DESIRES INTO THOSE WHO CARE FOR OUR FELLOW-TRAVELERS THROUGH THE PILGRIMAGE OF LIFE.

I THINK ONE OF THE MOST NOBLE & NOTABLE ASPECTS OF THE FAITH OF FRED IS SEEN IN HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD SCROOGE.

HE NEVER LETS HIS UNCLE ALTER HIS OWN ATTITUDE & OUTLOOK ON LIFE.

BUT NEITHER DOES HE EVER GIVE UP ON HIM.

HE MAINTAINS FAITH THAT SCROOGE CAN CHANGE.

HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS UNCLE IS, INDEED, *"THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN."*

IN STAVE III, AS SCROOGE – IN THE COMPANY OF THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT - LOOKS IN ON FRED & HIS FAMILY, EVERYONE IS UNDERSTANDABLY CRITICAL OF HIM – EVERYONE, THAT IS, EXCEPT FRED.

HE GOES SO FAR AS TO PROPOSE A TOAST TO HIS UNCLE, SAYING, *"A MERRY CHRISTMAS & A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO THE OLD MAN, WHEREVER HE IS. HE WOULDN'T TAKE IT FROM ME, BUT MAY HE HAVE IT NEVERTHELESS!"*

WE ALL NEED A FRED IN OUR LIVES – SOMEONE WHO BELIEVES THAT THE BEST IN US IS YET TO COME – SOMEONE WHO'LL TRY THEIR HARDEST TO UNDERSTAND US, EVEN IN OUR MOMENTS OF GREATEST WEAKNESS.

CONVERSELY, WE WOULD ALL DO WELL TO *BE* A FRED TO SOMEONE ELSE – TO STAND BY THEM & BELIEVE THE BEST ABOUT THEM.

IT'S NOT EASY, IS IT – ESPECIALLY WITH CERTAIN PEOPLE – PEOPLE WHO ARE MODERN-DAY SCROOGES.

IT'S NOT EASY TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO JOIN IN WHEN OTHERS SPEAK HARSHLY ABOUT SOMEONE – ESPECIALLY WHEN THE CRITICISM IS WARRANTED.

THAT'S WHY FRED'S ATTITUDE TOWARD HIS UNCLE WAS SO NOBLE.

WHY NOT TRY TO FOLLOW HIS LEAD THIS SEASON?

WHY NOT TRY TO SPEAK ONLY GOOD ABOUT EVERYONE – EVEN THE SCROOGES OF THIS WORLD.

WHY NOT BELIEVE – TRULY BELIEVE – THAT FOR EVERYONE WE MEET, THE BEST IN THEM IS YET TO COME.

WHY NOT MAINTAIN A FAITH IN OTHERS OF THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN?

WHY NOT COMMIT OURSELVES TO BELIEVE THAT FOR EVERYONE – GOOD & BAD, OLD & YOUNG, POOR & RICH, THE BEST & WORST AMONG US – WHY NOT BELIEVE THAT GOD HAS SOMETHING MORE IN STORE FOR THEM & WHO THEY ARE?

FRED NEVER GAVE UP ON SCROOGE & GOD WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU.

SOME OF YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED A SIGN IN FRONT OF A HOUSE ON NEWBURGH ROAD THIS PAST WEEK.

IT READ “FOUND – WHITE CAT” AND THEN THERE WAS A PHONE NUMBER.

IT TOOK SOME EFFORT FOR SOMEONE TO PUT THAT SIGN UP.

IT'S ON A PIECE OF PLYWOOD, MOUNTED ON BOARDS & DRIVEN INTO THE GROUND.

IT'S SPRAY PAINTED ON BOTH SIDES.

AS I SAW THAT SIGN, I THOUGHT OF A COUPLE YOUNG CHILDREN WHO MAY SEE IT – CHILDREN WORRIED SICK ABOUT THEIR LOST PET.

THEY'LL SEE THAT SIGN & REJOICE THAT THEIR CAT HAS BEEN FOUND.

IT'S THE SAME JOY THAT A FATHER FELT AS HE LOOKED DOWN THE ROAD & SAW HIS WAYWARD & DISHEVELED PRODIGAL SON COMING HOME.

IT'S THE SAME JOY THAT FRED FELT ON CHRISTMAS DAY WHEN HIS TRANSFORMED UNCLE SCROOGE CAME KNOCKING AT HIS DOOR TO JOIN THE FAMILY FOR DINNER.

ALL THREE SEEMED TO BE UNLIKELY OUTCOMES.

AND YET FAITH – THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR & THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN - ENABLES US TO EXPECT THE VERY BEST FROM A LOVING, PATIENT & FORGIVING GOD.

THAT'S WHAT ADVENT – THAT'S WHAT CHRISTMAS – IS REALLY ALL ABOUT – EXPECTING THE VERY BEST FROM GOD BECAUSE, IN JESUS CHRIST, THAT'S WHAT WE'RE GIVEN. AMEN.

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