

Humbug or Hallelujah?

Luke 1:26-38

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016]

I

Arguably the most famous Christmas story ever written—
beside the ones found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—
is *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

Published on December 19, 1843, it was an immediate hit,
and its impact has been long-lasting.

The phrase "Bah, humbug!" became part of the English language,
and everyone knows what it means to call someone a "Scrooge."

In Dickens' story, Ebenezer Scrooge is a bitter, miserly old man.

Dickens gives us clues about the unhappy childhood and other painful
disappointments that left him embittered.

Ironically the author himself had a difficult childhood.

Charles Dickens' own father was often in debtors' prison,
leaving the family destitute.

So Dickens can write about poverty in such a compelling way because he lived it.

Of course, you know how the story goes.

On Christmas Eve Scrooge falls into a lonely and troubled sleep.

He wakes suddenly to find himself visited by the ghost of his only friend and
business partner, Jacob Marley.

Seven years have passed since Marley's Christmas Eve death,

and Scrooge has not changed a bit.

He still refuses to give to help the poor, saying instead that they should die and thereby “decrease the surplus population.”

Only grudgingly will he give his clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas day off,

He grumpily declines his nephew Fred’s invitation to Christmas dinner.

Ebenezer Scrooge dismisses the whole holiday as "humbug."

II

But, on this particular Christmas Eve, a procession of ghosts visits his dreary home.

First, Marley arrives and warns that Scrooge will be visited by three more spirits—the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present, and Future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge on a tour of his unpleasant childhood,

his fall from grace with his father,
and the break-up with his fiancée.

He also showed Scrooge good times, when Scrooge learned what a joyous holiday Christmas could be.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows him the celebrations going on without him—

the modest Christmas dinner at the Cratchit’s,
and the more rollicking party at nephew Fred's.

But Christmas Present also warns Scrooge that without more money, the Cratchit family would lose its youngest and most fragile member, Tiny Tim.

The Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge the world after his own death:

his old business cronies don't care a bit about his demise,
his housekeeper steals the linens from his deathbed,
and the Cratchit family grieves the death of Tiny Tim.

Scrooge awakens the next morning shaken to the very core of his being.

He has been gloriously transformed.

He sends the largest turkey in the poultry shop to the Crachits.

He surprises Fred by showing up for dinner.

He doubles Bob Crachit's salary and provides the money to help make Tiny Tim well.

The story concludes by saying that Scrooge fulfilled his promise—he kept Christmas all the remaining days of his life.

III

Now while it is true that Charles Dickens is one of the great authors in the English language (arguably the greatest author),

and *A Christmas Carol* is a powerfully moving story,
this alone does not explain its enduring popularity.

Why does its message resonate so clearly with every generation?

What does it say to us in our quest to experience Christmas joy in this holy season?

Well, maybe the gospel lesson offers a clue or two.

I mean, put yourself in Mary's shoes for a minute.

A mysterious messenger shows up claiming to have a message for you from God Almighty.

Now, be honest.

Just what would your reaction be?

Would you respond more like Mary?

Or more like Scrooge?

If that occurred today, before old Gabriel could get his wings back on,
he would be a suspect on an episode of *CSI*.

As the father of two daughters, I can just imagine how I'd react if they had come
home with a story like this.

I can't help but laugh when I think of the conversation between them and Gabriel.

Poor Gabriel would never know what hit him!

Besides, don't we teach our children to never talk to strangers,
especially strange men.

The angel tells Mary that she has been chosen, "favored" by God.

But what a strange blessing!

It brought with it none of the things that our world considers important,
none of the goals that so consume our daily striving.

We tend to assume that those whom God favors will enjoy the things that equate
with the good life—
social standing,
wealth,
good health.

Yet Mary, God's favored one, would be blessed with having a child out of wedlock
who would later be executed as a criminal.

Acceptability,
prosperity,
and comfort
have never been the essence of God's blessing.

Be careful lest we allow our familiarity with this story to mask its scandal.

V

But let us also remember that even as Mary embodies scandal,

she also exemplifies the obedience that flows from God's blessing.

Mary was favored and would bear a king,
but only if she gave herself obediently in response to God's call.

The glory of Christmas is that ordinary people like Mary,
like Joseph in Matthew's version,
are willing to obey God's claim on their lives.

The ultimate scandal is that God would enter human life with all of its depravity,
violence, and corruption.

Gabriel's message to Mary is an announcement of hope—
for Scrooge,
for Mary,
for you and me,
for all humankind.

God has not abandoned us to the consequences of our own sinfulness.

Rather, God has sent Jesus as our Redeemer to remind us that there is a better way.

Too often we find ourselves living in a Scrooge world,
rather than a Mary world.

Like Scrooge, we've all had our experiences of hurt, betrayal, and abandonment,
and it has left us more angry, cynical, and bitter than we are willing to admit.

The ghosts of our past haunt our lives.

We anticipate that our painful history will repeat itself.

Relationships become strained and tattered and fail because we project into our
present the pain of our past.

Is it any wonder that angels so seldom show up at our door with tidings of comfort
and joy?

Or, when they do show up, we miss them altogether.

Has anger blinded us to the message of hope?

Has cynicism deafened us to the heralds of peace?

Has fear left us too numb to hear the songs of joy?

If God did send Gabriel to us,
would we even notice?

Have the ghosts of our past left us with too much anger for hope?

Do our ghosts of the present make us too cynical for peace?

Have the possible ghosts of our future left us too afraid to live with joy?

According to Dickens, confronting the ghosts that haunted old Ebenezer Scrooge left him transformed into a joy-filled person,
but ultimately that too had to be Scrooge's choice.

When he awoke the next morning,
not a single circumstance in the world had changed,
except for his attitude...
which changed everything.

When the angel departed from Mary,
nothing really had changed,
except her willingness to say yes to God and become the vessel
through which the Son of God would be born.

VI

In 1995 Itzhak Perlman, one of the greatest violinists of our time, did a concert at Lincoln Center in New York City.

Just watching Perlman walk on stage and prepare to play is a powerful inspirational. Because of childhood polio he wears heavy braces and walks with crutches.

VII

My friends, here is a man who prepared all of his life to make music on a violin with four strings, then circumstances left him with only three.

He could have quit, but he chose to make music anyway.

Here is a young woman, whose whole life is ahead of her,
and suddenly everything is changed.

But because she had kept her heart free of cynicism, anger, and fear,
when the messenger from God appeared,
she was open to the new adventure God had for her.

And she was able to say:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

J. Wallace Hamilton once wrote:

“Every person's life is a diary on which he or she means to write one thing but is forced to write yet another.”

No...we can't always control our circumstances,
but we alone can decide to say yes to God;
we alone can decide if our story is written with cynicism or joy.

Will it be humbug or Hallelujah?

It can be, if we, like Mary, are able to say “yes” to God’s surprising choice,
and keep our hearts tender and open so that along with Tiny Tim
we too might be able to say:

God bless us, everyone!

Amen.

Sources:

R. Alan Culpepper, Luke, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. XI, Abingdon, 1995, pp. 52-53.
Michael Piazza, sermon preached December 14, 2003, Dallas, Texas.