

## Welcome

One of the most popular Christmas stories of all time is *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Ebenezer Scrooge is a wealthy businessman who won't even let his poor employee Bob Cratchit off early for Christmas Eve. Not only is Bob poor, but he has a disabled kid and Scrooge barely pays him enough to feed his family.

Anytime anyone wishes Scrooge a 'Merry Christmas!', he responds with 'Bah! Humbug!'. That night, Scrooge receives visits from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. Each shows him the reality he has closed himself off from - that his isolation and misery are largely of his own making, that the possibility of love and community exists if he will only change his ways.

But it's not until the Ghost of Christmas Future shows him the horrors that await if he doesn't change - an unmentioned death, a lonely grave and hellfire - that Scrooge awakens a changed man. He makes a large donation to a charity, anonymously sends a huge turkey to the Cratchit family and spends the day with his estranged nephew. The next day, he gives Bob a raise and is thereafter known as a kind and generous man.

It's a terrific story - no wonder it's been remade and reimagined so many times! But I think there's a reason it's a *Christmas* story too. Even though it doesn't talk about God becoming human or the manger or the shepherds and magi.

At its heart, *A Christmas Carol* is a story about an unjust world, and what happens when one of those who perpetuate injustice has a chance to change. How many Christmas movies can you think of where there's a real villain? It's most of them, isn't it? Even *Elf* is, at its heart, a story of a dad changing his ways.

Even though this theme is embedded deeply in the way we think about Christmas, it's not one we readily associate with the Christmas season. So I want to ask today what happens when we take repentance seriously? What happens when we make returning to God a central part of our Christmas celebration?

## Message

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is the beginning of the Church year. Advent is a season of preparing for Jesus' arrival - Christmas. Think about that for a moment: the beginning of the Church year is marked by waiting. By preparing.

That in and of itself is counterintuitive. We mark New Year's by making resolutions - we're going to be slimmer, richer, bolder, smarter in the new year! We do, do, do.

But faith says, "Let's begin by waiting. By watching. By preparing." Let's let life be a response to God's action.

We're preparing for Jesus' return to Earth, what Christians call the Second Coming. And for a couple of thousand years, we've thought the best way to prepare for Jesus' *second* coming is by looking back at how God's people prepared for Jesus' *first* coming.

So: Advent to prepare for Christmas. A time to look forward by looking back. This year, our series is called, "I'll be Home for Christmas." We're going to be looking at the Gospel of Matthew. In the passages this Advent season, we're going to hear about what the world will look like when God returns, and how we can be preparing even now for that life.

We began last week by affirming the central truth of the Christmas story: this world belongs to God, and we are all part of God's great rescue mission. We asked last week if we're paying attention and preparing ourselves.

Today, we're looking at the first piece of that preparation: personal holiness. One of the things we love about the Christmas season is the cheer, the joy to the world. And you and I know it can be fake. Maybe we, like Scrooge, need to change our ways.

Turn with us to [Matthew 3](#).

Today, we're meeting John the Baptizer. He's Jesus' cousin, and he functions in this story as all three of Scrooge's ghosts - Christmas Past, Present and Future. He comes as a harbinger of what's to come, and a demand that we recognize how close God is to us and change our ways in response.

John was a weird dude. He lived in the desert across the Jordan river - the same wilderness in which God's people wandered after their liberation from Egypt. He wore camel hair clothing (which is about as glamorous as it sounds) and he only ate what he could find, which was locusts and honey.

That was intentional, too. When John showed up looking like he did, the people immediately thought of the great prophet Elijah, who spent his whole life fighting idolatry among Israel's

kings and priests. Imagine a guy showed up at the Potomac River wearing colonial garb and carrying an ax and criticizing our political leaders. We'd almost immediately think of George Washington. Same thing here - John was not subtle.

So let's read John's appearance as the Ghost of Christmas Past:

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

"He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!  
Clear the road for him!'"

John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. -- Matthew 3:1-6 (NLT)

John arrives as a specter of Israel's past. He reminds them that God liberated them from slavery and delivered them into the Promised Land - the land where they all live currently. By dressing as Elijah, he reminds them of their long struggle with faithfulness. And Matthew reminds us that all his actions are in keeping with the long line of prophets.

John of Christmas Past reminds us that faithfulness is hard, particularly in uncertain times. We've always had a tendency to look elsewhere for security and assurance. Isn't that true these days as well? Can we look at our lives and see times when we were unsure, feeling lost, unmoored or afraid and look somewhere other than to the one who created us and called us?

This is where John is the Ghost of Christmas Present. He has a strong message for us:

"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." -- Matthew 3:2 (NLT)

Right now, in the present moment, God's kingdom is close to us. It's almost here (like Christmas!). So *now* is the time to repent.

You don't clean your house *after* the guests have arrived. You do it before they show up. In the same way, John is inviting us to respond *now*. To learn the lessons of our ancestors and respond in faith precisely because the nights are long and the days uncertain. This is the time that calls for faith!

## Song

If John has been both the ghosts of Christmas Past and Present, then we know there's one left - the Ghost of Christmas Future. And if we remember our Christmas Carol well, we know this is the scary one. True to form, John has a warning for those of us who refuse to change our ways:

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." -- Matthew 3:7–12 (NLT)

When the religious leaders show up, John condemns them. And it's worth noting that John condemns both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They're the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of religion in Jesus' day. It's sort of like MAGA Christians and super-progressive Christians both showing up and John saying, "God doesn't care what you say. God doesn't care how pretty your rhetoric is. Show by how you *live* that you've truly repented."

Those religious leaders put stock in their identity as the Chosen People. A lot of Christians today feel a similar sense of security - "We're the good guys. We're on God's side. We're safe."

John's warning is frightening: God is standing at the tree - prophets often used the metaphor of a tree to represent Israel. And God's got an ax and God's ready to cut down those who don't bear good fruit.

That sounds harsh, but let's remember what God considers good fruit:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! -- Galatians 5:22–23 (NLT)

And what does God consider bad fruit?

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these.

Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. -- Galatians 5:19–21 (NLT)

Selfish ambition, outbursts of anger, hostility - all that sounds like Scrooge. Idolatry and impurity? The classic sins of God's people.

John wants us to remember that God has always measured our faithfulness by the fruit our faithfulness produces. Faithfulness has never been intangible. And, like a good Gardener, God the good King will prune away all those who do not produce good fruit.

That's why Jesus' baptism is one of fire, according to John. It's why Jesus later warns us to count the cost of following him before we commit.

We don't actually have a problem with the idea of judgment around Christmas-time. When Scrooge faces the judgment of the Ghost of Christmas Future, we *like* it. We want Scrooge to be punished. We see the harm he's inflicted on the world around him, particularly on the Cratchit family and poor Tiny Tim.

We don't have a problem with the idea of judgment for the likes of Scrooge. What we have a problem with is the idea that we might be Scrooges.

Scrooge's first name is 'Ebenezer,' which is actually a Hebrew name. It means 'Stone of Help', and it refers to the stone pillars Israel established in the Promised Land to remind them that they had made it to where they are only with God as their helper, their ally.

Scrooge forgot that, which twisted him and made him into a joyless, cruel oppressor. So too, John had to remind Israel of the wilderness, of the God who liberated and preserved them. John had to remind them of the idolatry of their ancestors so he could warn them not to repeat the same mistakes.

Friends, do we remember God's work in our lives? Do we remember how God has rescued us, preserved and provided for us? Are we preparing ourselves for Christmas by turning from the idols in our lives and returning to the God who has always loved us?

## Communion + Examen

The table is how we remember God's love for us.

As I consider my past, where do I see God providing and caring for me?

As I consider my present reality, where do I see God providing and caring for me?

As I consider my future, how is God calling me?

In light of my past, present and future, what is God calling me to today? What is my next right spiritual step?

## Assignment + Blessing

Spiritual practices in the Christmas Season