**"God Bless Us—Every One"**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, December 26, 2021**

**Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

**Traditional Word**

The Word Became Flesh

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. --John 1:14

**Contemporary Word**

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future." - Ebenezer Scrooge, 'A Christmas Carol.'

 "God Bless Us—Every One"

 Why would a Victorian magazine serial story about grim, ghoulish ghosts and one of the greatest fictional misers the world has ever known become such a beloved Christmas classic? What was Charles Dickens trying to do when he wrote his masterpiece, A Christmas Carol—the story of the miser Ebeneezer Scrooge and his nightly ghostly visitors who come to teach him something? What sparked in Dickens' imagination this idea of transformation and love? Of truly forgiving others of their debts to us.

 Charles Dickens saw something happening in the world about him—Victorian England, a technological hellscape in my opinion—and it concerned Dickens greatly. Charles Dickens addressed a horrible new theory that had recently appeared: Robert Malthus' theory of population growth—this controversial theory had taken root and was being cited by leading scientists of the day: Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace Russell. At its most basic level, Malthusian theory has to do with this: who has the right to live and to thus consume resources. This selfish belief leads Scrooge to think aloud about the poor tenants he is evicting on Christmas Eve when the barrister representing the poor family tells Scrooge that they are likely to die if he kicks them out on the street. Scrooge responds: "If they would rather die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population." To Scrooge, the world was filled with an oversupply of human beings begging for a handout—people who refused to work—they had it coming, he believed, because that was their lot. And it was this attitude—this belief about the poor—that Charles Dickens was addressing in "A Christmas Carol." Who gets to choose who lives and who dies?

 How many of us think this very thought when cultivating our own attitudes about poverty and homelessness? Many of us believe (and then say loudly) that the poor are "getting what they deserve." I've heard it from many of you, and in the interest of total disclosure, until I became involved in the ministry of this congregation, I felt that way on occasion myself. But…Really? Do you think that belief—the weighing of someone's worth based on their financial status--is justice? When we blame the victims of systemic injustice for their injury and suffering, we are blinding ourselves to the fact that we are complicit in those systems of injustice—we perpetuate them every time we justify our beliefs by defacing another human being.

 The first two hundred years of the Jesus story had his followers trying to figure out how to deal with poverty and with injustice themselves. The community of believers that was growing up around the writings purportedly authored by John had an overarching way to see order in the universe--because we need order to be able to understand dis-order, right? The Johannine community was trying to order the world in such a manner that Jesus assumed the mantle of divinity and that Jesus was the realization of the messianic promises of the Jewish people.

 Listen to the first words in the Gospel of John—and see if you can discern what the Johannine community was trying to do: This is John 1:1-14 from a casual adaptation of the bible called The Message—it's the bible written in more colloquial, story-like form, and some people love it—I like it for us this morning because it opened my eyes to something new: From the Gospel of John:

The Word was first,

the Word present to God,

 God present to the Word.

The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one.

Everything was created through him;

 nothing—not one thing!—

 came into being without him.

What came into existence was Life,

 and the Life was Light to live by.

The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;

 the darkness couldn't put it out.

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing:

 Every person entering Life

 he brings into Light.

He was in the world,

 the world was there through him,

 and yet the world didn't even notice.

He came to his own people,

 but they didn't want him.

But whoever did want him,

 who believed he was who he claimed

 and would do what he said,

He made to be their true selves,

 their child-of-God selves.

These are the God-begotten ones…

The Word became flesh and blood,

 and moved into the neighborhood.

We saw the glory with our own eyes,

 the one-of-a-kind glory,

 like Parents, like children,

Generous inside and out,

 true from start to finish.

 Now that is a very hopeful message about the Jesus incident that sounds really good on this Christmas Sunday, am I right? The Gospel of John is written for a group of believers that was beginning to form the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, the Holy One who had come to earth to experience life among us and to point us in a different direction. This is not necessarily the way the other three "synoptic" Gospels tell the story—the Jesus in Mark did not claim divinity, and the claims in Mathew and Luke are built upon certain interpretations. But, John! Oh, John lays it out bare right there in the beginning—literally—the Gospel of John claims that Jesus was in existence even before the world. In the beginning, was the word—and Jesus is that word. Not unlike how Charles Dickens makes us see the poor in a new light, so does the writer of John's Gospel ask us to see Jesus in this new light—the light of divinity. John is written much later than the other Gospels, and the authors had some experiences to share in the 70 or 80 years since the Jesus Incident.

 OKAY—Back to Dickens: So what exactly can A Christmas Carol in general, and the act of celebrating Christmas in particular, do for us today? Does it point us in a different direction? Most in this congregation understand the complexities of poverty. Many of you work tirelessly to find supplies for our hygiene pantry and meals and funds for our other outreach to the poor. But how do we help our neighbors see the humanity in the poor?

 The Ghost of Christmas Present has some sound advice for our anti-hero, Ebenezer Scrooge, in this regard, and thus for us. At one point, two children appear at the Ghost's feet, and Ebenezer asks the spirit who they are; the spirit responds: "They are Man's, and they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance, and this girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all, beware this boy for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." And Scrooge asks who can erase such writing? And the spirit says look to yourself, man—and Ebenezer Scrooge has a slight inkling of his possible transformation. You see, to Charles Dickens, WANT that eternal enemy of humanity was present, and we must address it, but the horror of ignorance was far worse. And I'm quick to agree with him. I do not understand how people can be fooled into believing the most outrageous of lies simply because they don't like what happened, what they heard, or who is telling them the news.

 There's a scene in A Christmas Carol where the Ghost of the Present brings Scrooge to the house of his clerk, Bob Cratchitt, where he sees Bob's son, Tiny Tim, and is moved by his plight. In this scene, we begin to see a primal humanity awakening in Scrooge. In this young boy, he sees his own boyhood. BUT—instead of consigning the poor boy to the recesses of his imagination, Scrooge is smitten by this young child and his story. He asks the spirit if the child will die, and the Ghost of the Present throws back at Scrooge his own words: "If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none …will find him here. What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." Scrooge is ashamed of what he said and begins to realize the power of his words. Also, a dawning realization that Scrooge might help the boy begins to be kindled in his heart We begin to see the monster of the Industrial Revolution, the Judgement-ridden Man who has decreed that all the poor must die so that the successful, such as him, might survive—we begin to see him transform into something else. He becomes softer, gentler, less inclined to judgment, and Scrooge starts to end his transactional ways. He allows himself to become vulnerable—the first step in our transformation into something new.

 Don't get me wrong—I'm not anti-transaction (these are necessary of our way of life)—I'm anti-transactionalism—that is, we should not base our entire lives on who owes us and how much. Our lives are more than a ledger sheet of wrongs done against us that we are constantly trying to see redressed.

 Ebeneezer Scrooge encountered the same losses you and I have already or will face. The loss of his beloved Belle because he chose his work over a family, the early death of his precious sister, Fan, and how he began to close off his heart after both losses. You and I face these losses in life—it's simply a fact of being alive. We will face terrible, grievously sad losses. But, it is how we respond to these setbacks that determine our futures. Do you close off from life altogether, like Scrooge, holding fast to your precious material belongings and ignoring the pain of your neighbor? Or do you re-engage with life after a setback—tentatively—gingerly--cautiously—do you mourn and grieve, yes, but do you connect with life in new ways—do you find hope in going forward and wisdom in remembering the past?

 This is the promise of the Gospel of Jesus—the good news that you can choose a life-giving way of being in the world as opposed to a death-dealing way of being in the world. Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning a transformed man—he clings to his bedpost muttering in horror and then realizes that it was his grave, which the Ghost of the Future showed him, and this was indeed IN HIS FUTURE—as it awaits us all; Scrooge saw his death, and how few mourned his passing and the scarce congregation that attended his funeral—all to a person there to gloat and mock him—and he decrees that Christmas morning when he awoke from the nightmare presented him by the spirits—he testifies to the world that: "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future." And he sends the boy who told him it was Christmas day and that he was not too late to run to the store and fetch the biggest turkey and take it to Bob Cratchitt's to surprise the family. Scrooge takes GREAT delight in imaging Bob's face when he is told who sent the gift.

 Scrooge then dresses hastily and runs down the street and knocks at his Nephew Fred's door—the nephew who NEVER gave up on him—the true hero of the story, in my opinion—and Fred is so delighted that his uncle, who has always refused his invitation to Christmas dinner, has finally accepted—and he throws open the doors of his house, and welcomes his estranged uncle Scrooge back into the family's embrace. Fred never gave up on Scrooge, and Fred had so many reasons to give up on him, but we should never give up on the Scrooges of the world as well.

 You know—it's tough to be vulnerable. But it is the only way we are going to heal the world. When you are vulnerable—when you lower the walls that guard your heart--Your heart then opens to the world--ALL OF IT—HOW IT IS. Not how we want it to be. The world—how it is. We have so much work to do, and we can't do this work to love God and neighbor unless we open our hearts

 So, on this Christmas Weekend of 2021, as we face the dawn of a new year, how will you enter that year? What will you say to the Scrooges in your life? Will you invite them to your house? This coming week is always a liminal one for me—as we stand on the threshold of a new year—we look back on the pain and losses of the past—and turn our eyes towards the future, confident that the Holy One is with us, guiding our wisdom and our love as we seek to truly love God and love our neighbor. I know I make that choice for myself—but I claim the promise of it for all of you. Become as a Scrooge transformed—buy the biggest turkey—go to your nephew's Christmas party—have some fun. And keep Christmas well all the year-long—honoring your past, your present, and your future.

Amen