
“Eyes Wide Open”

A SERMON on Luke 21:25-36 for the 1st Sunday of Advent, Year C
Preached 28 November 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
Cloverdale United Church, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

Slowly.

Gravely.

Silently.

That’s how Charles Dickens described the approach of the third spirit, the ‘Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’, as it first came to Ebenezer Scrooge. “It was shrouded in a deep black garment,” Dickens writes, “which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this[,] it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.”

Scrooge, we are told, “bent down upon his knee” upon the Ghost’s arrival, “for in the very air through which this Spirit moved[,] it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.” And it wasn’t just the air that the Spirit affected, but Mr. Scrooge, too. “Its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread.”¹

Solemn dread. Ghostly hauntings. These are not usually things we associate with the Advent and Christmas seasons. And yet, any of us who know the story from that famous Dickens work, *A Christmas Carol*—whether you’ve read the original novella or seen any of its numerous retellings and adaptations (my favourite is probably *A Muppet Christmas Carol*)—we know the important role that *haunting presences* play in that seasonal favourite. The warnings of Mr. Marley, the nostalgia of past, and vision of present, and then, of course, the ominous hauntings of a possible future: these are the things upon which the story turns. It is a Mr. Scrooge who is filled with solemn dread that makes the final turn to a different life and a different observance of Christmas.

Is it a solemn dread with which Jesus sought to fill his disciples—and, in turn, us—with what we heard from him in today’s reading? After all, much in the same way that we do not usually connect hauntings and ghosts with Christmas, so too these words about signs in the heavens and distress among nations... These predictions of fear and foreboding, they seem to many modern ears an odd place to begin the lead up to Christmas.

And yet for at least some fifteen hundred years, it is to just such a place that the Christian church² has turned to begin the Advent journey. This passage from Luke 21 can be found as the reading for either the first or second Sunday of Advent in lectionaries going back as far as the sixth century. In our modern day patterns of worship, either this passage from Luke or its parallel in either Matthew or Mark gravely makes its way into our ears every year as Advent begins. The

¹ The above is based upon, and all quotes were taken from: Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave 4.

² In the west, at least—Roman Catholic and Protestant alike.

church calendar says Advent, most people think “getting ready for Christmas” and then in worship Jesus shows up to scatter what some would see as gloom and mystery, perhaps filling some of us with solemn dread.

But why?

Again I ask: *is* it, in fact, a solemn dread with which Jesus sought to fill his disciples—and, in turn, us? Whether it comes in the form of Dickens’ black-shrouded Spirit or Jesus’ trembling apocalyptic predictions, is the ‘Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’, full of gloomy warnings of a dark future, somehow necessary to the journey? Are we like Mr. Scrooge, that we have to be warned... or haunted... or *frightened*... into a more proper, more holy, more joyful and jolly celebration of Christmas?

I suppose that’s possible. Scaring people into obedience is, after all, one of the oldest tricks, isn’t it?

But I wonder... Perhaps there’s something else to be heard here.

Some of you may remember a 2008 masterpiece of a computer-animated film from Pixar that was titled *Wall-E*. The film takes us to some distant future here on earth where we have consumed so much stuff that the planet is not capable of sustaining us anymore. (Of course, some would argue that such a future isn’t so distant anymore.) With creation spoiled and the earth ruined, humanity headed to outer space on these huge cruise-ship-style spacecraft. Wall-E, the title character, he is a little robot, left behind on the earth with the mission of crushing the trash. He smashes and compacts all our junk into little cubes that he spits out and stacks into towering skyscrapers that reach into a smoggy brown atmosphere.

Not a terribly interest plot, admittedly, until another robot shows up, a robot named Eve. Wall-E doesn’t really know what Eve is all about, what she’s up to, but through a bit of comedic robot romance, they strike up a friendship. Eventually Wall-E takes Eve back to his home, a bunker where he’s gathered together various odds-and-ends that he found interesting out of our left-behind junk. A toy, a string of Christmas lights, a spork (after all, who doesn’t find sporks fascinating?!). And then Wall-E shows Eve an old boot that has something inside it. And at that moment, everything changes. Inside this boot is a little bitty sprout of a plant. Just a tiny shoot. One puny little leaf—but it’s alive and growing.

Eve, it turns out, is a probe sent back to earth to look for signs of life. She is supposed to collect specimens and take them back to the ship where humanity is taking its leisurely, but arguably life-devoid, refuge. You see, the thought was that if even just one plant could grow again on the face of the ruined earth, then maybe Earth can sustain life again. Then the people can come back and start rebuilding their world.

One little branch, with some tiny leaves, it is but a seemingly insignificant sign amidst all the mountains of discarded stuff. But it is sign enough.³

Rather than *scaring* us into obedience, is Jesus calling us to the same task as little robot

³ The majority of the preceding illustration, telling the tale of *Wall-E*, owes its debt to MaryAnn McKibben Dana, “Preaching the Advent Texts”, *Journal for Preachers*, 36.1 – ‘Advent 2012’, p. 4.

Eve? Surrounded by things and stuff and clutter, are we being asked to search out for the signs of life—*real* life—amidst it all?

Jesus speaks of signs in the sky and distresses on the earth, of fear and foreboding, of the powers of even the heavens being shaken. Honestly, I'm not sure we need Jesus to predict such things for us for some future, like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come pointing things out for Scrooge. After all, in era after era right down to the present day, all we have to do is look around us. We can see it now. The ruins of wind and wave and war, the despair of disease and death and distress and discord: these things stand all too tall around us, like so many trash cubes piled high into a smoggy sky through which the sun is but barely seen.

Assuming our eyes are open and our hearts are honest, we don't often need Jesus' warnings.

What we need is his witness.

What we need is his word.

What we need is Jesus' word that says "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

What we need, my friends, is the impossible possibility that in the midst of it all, in between the towers of trash and the depths of despair, Christ comes to save us.

Indeed, such is improbable, perhaps even impossible. But *that* is what the gospel ultimately is. What we need, truly and ultimately, it is <quote> "an impossible possibility," as one pastor puts it, "a reality that *transcends* the everyday real, a Truth *deeper* than all else we have been told is true, a story that stretches *beyond* and *encompasses* all our stories[,] so as to give them meaning, integrity, and purpose."⁴

And Jesus' promise that in the midst of the fear and foreboding our redemption is drawing near... it's not the first time we've heard such an impossible possibility...

After all, Exodus announces that God cares deeply about the way we treat each other... [which is] ridiculous! But true.

And the prophets promise God's comfort and mercy, even for those who have fled from God... Unlikely! But true.

In Mary's song that we'll hear in just three weeks from now, we will hear that the day *will come* when the world is turned, so that all who are hungry and poor and in need will be satisfied... Beyond our experience, but true.

And the Easter story tells us that death does not have the final word... beyond comprehension, but true.

And Galatians proclaims that in Christ there is no distinction between slave or free, male or female, that all are one in Christ... Extraordinary! But true.

And Colossians declares that we are more than the sum of our past failures and shortcomings, that God has in fact nailed the record that stands against us to the cross... Highly doubtful! But true.

And at the end of all this Revelation promises that God will wipe every tear from our eyes

⁴ David Lose, "A Promise Big Enough to Save Us", Dear Working Preacher, *workingpreacher.org*, 26 November 2012; http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=645. Emphasis added.

and create a new heaven and earth and dwell *with* all of us in peace... Sheer fantasy, [you could argue]! But true!

From beginning to end the whole Bible makes extraordinary, otherworldly claims and promises about God that are simultaneously too good to be true... and so good that when we hear them we just *can't help but believe* they're true... even know they're true and therefore live our life accordingly.⁵

Because of God's impossible possibility, we are called to an alternative response in the midst of the darkness that surrounds us. You have the choice. You can cower in fear, like Scrooge cowering and kneeling at the arrival of the third Spirit, or you can stand up and raise your head, as Jesus commands. You can raise your eyes and look to the horizon and see salvation coming. You can stand tall, filled with the strength that Christ gives. You can choose the Lord's righteousness, because such righteousness has chosen you. Such righteousness has promised to come again to save us. Such righteousness has already come among us as one of us. Such righteousness graces our presence every time we gather, every time we feast at the table.

And so, stand up and raise your heads. The true ghost of "Christmas Yet To Come" is here: not to point at your grave, but to point you to life. Stand up, my friends. Stand up.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

⁵ Ibid., adapt.