



Redeeming Past Hurts
(2nd in the Advent sermon series)
Luke 2:15-20

Sunday, December 9th, 2018 ~ Second Sunday of Advent
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

Text: But Mary kept all of these things, pondering them in her heart. (v. 19)

For a number of years I have been haunted by today's text; "But Mary kept all of these things, pondering them in her heart". I wonder if "these things" gave her comfort.

Years ago a woman named Nancy was diagnosed with a form of leukemia. This was in the days when bone marrow transplants were in the very early stages of development, and the donor had to be a close family member for the best results. The preparation for the transplant was brutal. The transplant itself resembled a blood transfusion but the threat of "host versus graft" or "graft versus host" was very real. Nancy was the mother of four and rightfully very frightened at what lay ahead. We talked many times. One day, though, she stopped by my office at church and stood in the doorway. She had a "aura" about her. It was almost mystical. I asked her how she was doing, and she told me that Jesus came to her in a dream the previous night. "He told me that I was going to be alright. He didn't say if I would live or die; he just said that I would be alright." "How did that make you feel," I asked. "I have this peace. I am no longer afraid."

I told her that I believed she had a mystical experience were heaven and earth touch, or, as the Scots would say, she experienced one of the "thin places" where heaven and earth touch. I also told her that this was a gift, one that she would need in the coming days, especially when things become difficult.

Nancy died a few months later. Host versus graft won the earthly battle but she died with a sense of peace that passes all human understanding. And, her family is doing well. They mourned. Adjustments were made. But they have been blessed with so many happy memories.

Sometimes memories fill our hearts with joy. Sometimes they weigh our hearts down with sadness. I imagine that Mary experienced both. From the beginning she knew that her Son had a special destiny but did she have any sense of how difficult his road would be? I wonder. I guess that that is the way it is with memories.

In Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol Ebenezer Scrooge is haunted by past memories. At exactly the stroke of one after midnight the Ghost of Christmas Past appears. And in that kairos time--that Eternal heavenly time that the Psalmist spoke of when he said that "a thousand years is but a day in your sight, O Lord (90:4) the Ghost took Scrooge to scenes from his youth.

The first scene or memory was of a boarding school where his father had sent him for some unknown reason. In this scene we see a young Scrooge, all alone at holiday time--presumably Christmas. He sits in a darkened room. His only friends were the characters in the books that he read--Ali Baba, and Robin Crusoe and his "man Friday".

The second scene is also at that same boarding school. In this scene, though, a door opens and a little girl, much younger than the boy, bounds in throwing her arms around his neck. "Dear, dear brother," she says, "I have come to bring you home. Home, home home."

"Home, little Fan?" Scrooge says.

"Yes, home for good and all. Home for ever and ever. Father is so much kinder than it used to be, that home is like heaven"

And so Scrooge, that lonely boy left behind at one holiday opens a second chapter in his story.

Two other scenes remind Scrooge not only of the wounds that he suffered but also the choices that he made that contributed to those wounds.

First there is the scene of him enjoying a Christmas Eve dance in the home of his employer Mr. Fezziwig. It was there that he met Belle, the love of his life and future fiancée. In this relationship he experienced the riches of life and love. As Scrooge enjoys the memory the Ghost of Christmas Past comments about Fezziwig's small gesture. It was, the Ghost said, "such a small matter to make these silly folks so full of gratitude."

"Small?" Scrooge responded.

"(Old Fezziwig) spent but a few pounds of your mortal money," the Ghost reminded him, "three or four pounds, perhaps. Is that so much that he deserves this praise?"

"It isn't that, Spirit," Scrooge reflected. "He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. ... The happiness that he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."

In the next and final scene, which happened a few years later, we see Scrooge and Belle once again. But something is different. Belle confronts Scrooge the subtle but the radical that she sees in him. He had become "a man of business", in her words. "Another idol has replaced me," she said, "and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come as I would have tried to do, I have no must cause to grieve."

"What idol," Scrooge asked.

"A golden one...you fear the world too much. All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall aside one by one until the master passion, Gain, engrosses you." With those words and that insight, Belle released him from his pledge.

Scrooge sought comfort in the arms of the Spirit of Materialism--that Golden Calf around which the Israelites danced when faith became too hard to maintain.

Memories remind us that things have been different before and can be different again. Memories are made day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment.

Here's a different memory. Dr. Ron Jackson wrote about a young girl he met at St. Jude's Ranch for Children. St. Jude's Ranch is a home for children who cannot live with their families because of severe abuse and neglect. They can never go back to their homes. St. Jude's becomes their home and their family.

One year a little girl lovingly made and wrapped Christmas gifts for her family. She mailed them and was so excited when she received a box in return. But when she opened the box she saw that it contained all of her gifts, unopened.

Dr. Jackson reflected that some wounds cut very deep. Our memories are what they are, and we can't change them. But they can be redeemed. At St. Jude's Ranch that little girl learned what unconditional love is. It is a safe place where you can bring your hurt and brokenness. Through the staff, the residents, and counseling she learned to trust God and to forgive her family. She learned to trust, again. She learned to laugh and to play. Today she is a healthy, happy, productive young woman.

"Sometimes people who have suffered much come to understand much and love much." This is especially true if they do not turn inward into themselves. In John's Gospel Jesus talked about God's saving redeeming love.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world
but that the world might be saved--find life--through him.

(John 3: 16-17)

Redeem the Past. Go out into the world returning no one evil for evil or reviling for reviling. Forgive as freely as God has forgiven you. Forgiveness does not mean "forgetting", it means being freed from the chains and bind you. It means giving up your right for revenge and moving on. It means being respectful and treating others as you want to be treated. It means learning the lessons of the Past, living in the Present, and looking forward to a Future in Christ. Amen.