



The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

Luke 1:39-55

(Fourth in the Advent sermon series)

Fourth Sunday of Advent ~ Sunday, December 23rd, 2018

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Text: “His mercy goes from generation to generation to those who fear him. (v. 50, *The Restored New Testament...* translation, Willis Barnstone)

If you have been following this series and reading Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, you may recall that prior to the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* we read, “(Scrooge) remembered the prediction of old Jacob Marley, and lifting his eyes, behold a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded coming, like mist along the ground, towards him.” And that which he grew to dread began to envelop him.

“Ghost of the Future,” Scrooge exclaimed, “I fear you more than any spectre I have seen.”

Fear. What was Scrooge afraid of? The accumulated weight of the Past that he forged? The Present in which he lived? Maybe it was the House of Life that he had constructed with his own will.

In the beloved Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” Phillips Brooks wrote, “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” That line applies to both *A Christmas Carol* and to our Gospel lesson.

Scrooge hoped that Time was fluid, that courses could be altered. “Men’s courses,” he acknowledged to the “Dark Spirit”, “will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus.” Scrooged what the response would be to his logic.

In the Gospel lesson Luke skillfully brought two story lines together “in a poignant scene.” (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, p. 179. c. 2004) Elizabeth and Mary are united in a sacred “wrinkle in time”. The child that leaped in Elizabeth’s womb would herald the end of one chapter in God’s salvation history while the child in Mary’s womb heralded the birth of a new one.

Touched by the Holy Spirit felt her baby move, Elizabeth said to Mary,

*“Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb.”*

This confirmed what the angel Gabriel said when he appeared to Mary. Awed by the wonder of it all Mary replied in words hauntingly similar to Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving in I Samuel (2: 1-10).

*“My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit is joyful in God my savior.”*

Mary’s song is not only about celebration but revolution. We miss this important aspect of the *Magnificat* because it has been domesticated by centuries of sentimental tradition. But like a good mystery writer who drops clues throughout a story, Luke tells us time and time again that this new age that is about to dawn with the birth of this Child, this new chapter in salvation history, is going to turn the world upside down!

Listen again to Mary’s words:
*His mercy is from generation to generation
to those who fear him.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and scattered those who were proud in the mind of their heart.
He has toppled monarchs from their thrones
And raised the poor to their feet.
He filled the hungry with good foods
And sent the rich away hungry.*

Did you pick up the tenor of the ministry of Mary’s Son? He came into this world not to satisfy the status quo but to challenge it.

Later in Luke’s gospel Jesus was in the Temple and was handed the lectionary reading for the day. It was a reading from the 61st chapter of Isaiah.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim
good news to the poor,
release to the to the prisoners,
sight to the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

Jesus then simply rolled up the scroll and said to those in the Temple, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your presence.”* In Him, Jesus, the poor hear Hope, the prisoners are liberated, the blind see, and the oppressed find relief.

This “acceptable year of the Lord” is a reference to the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Also known as the “Jubilee”, “the year of the Lord” occurred every fifty years. It was a time when the “playing field” of life was leveled. Debts were forgiven, properties returned, and “the deck of life’s cards” were reshuffled.

Of course, there is no historical evidence that the time of Jubilee ever occurred, but it was a hope, a vision of what the reign of God, the Kingdom of God, would be like. The human sins of “selfishness” and “greed” won the day. Yet, Jesus’ reading and his words hit worshipers in their most vulnerable spot; their “pocket book”. In doing that, Jesus crossed the line from “preaching” to “meddling”. It is no wonder that the crowd wanted to kill him, to throw him headlong over the brow of a hill.

But this theme of Jesus is seen in each of the gospels. In Matthew's gospel with the news of the Jesus' birth, the sacred Star, and the Magi King Herod and all of Jerusalem were "troubled". (2:3, *ibid.*)

In John's gospel, Jesus--the Word of God made flesh--came as a revelatory Light like the Light of Creation. But the world, so accustomed to darkness, "loved the darkness rather than the light". (3:19, *ibid.*)

While each said it in a different way, the meaning is clear; the values of God's Kingdom is in conflict with the world's values. "*Be not conformed to this world*", the apostle Paul wrote, "*but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" (Romans 12:2)

In Luke's parable of the rich man and Lazarus that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, we saw at a transactional man who was consumed by himself and completely oblivious to the needy huddled at his door. In the Reality that lies beyond this reality, the rich man was beyond shocked when he discovered to his horror that he was in a place of Eternal torment while a beggar named Lazarus was cradled in the arms of Father Abraham. The rich man didn't understand. He always thought of himself as blessed, a good man of business. He was respected in his community. He was successful. He had done nothing wrong, ... except... live in the comfort of his own little walled world.

In *A Christmas Carol* Ebenezer Scrooge didn't believe that he had done anything wrong. So the surprise visit by the ghost of his old partner Jacob Marley came to him as quite a shock. On that night of Marley's appearance Scrooge commended Marley as being "a good man of business"? It wasn't until it was too late that Marley realized the Eternal Truth that his "business" wasn't the counting house, Humanity. Humanity was his business. The Common Good was his business.

It wasn't too late for Scrooge, though. Or was it? Scrooge certainly hoped not. "Men's courses," he acknowledged, "will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus."

*His mercy, Mary said, "is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ...
He scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He brings the powerful from their positions of power and lifts up the lowly.
He fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.*

May we, as individuals, as a community, and as a people of faith - truly have the ears to hear.

To the glory of God. Amen.