

Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church  
By the Rev. Capt. Dr. John S. Niles MSM  
**“A Dickens of a Christmas”**  
**First in the Series “A Christmas Carol”**

*November 28, 2021*

(Mark 1:1-8)

There was an elderly woman who was giving evidence in a trial in a small town courtroom. The defense attorney said opened by saying, “Mrs. Anderson do you know me?” “Yes”, she said, “I know you. You are James Crawfield. I’ve known you since you were a little boy and a nasty little boy you were, always lying, stealing and trying to get away with things. Just like you are now.” Rattled, the Defense Attorney pointed to the Crown Attorney and said, “Well do you know him?” “Of course I know him” She said, “I taught him in school. He was a bully, and as mean as mean could be; always trying to beat up on people, including now his wife.” At that moment the Judge slammed down his gavel and said, “If any of you ask her if she knows me, you are all going to jail!”

Mrs. Anderson reminds me of Ebenezer Scrooge when he retorted, "Every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

Scrooges. They come in all shapes and sizes.

We opened our Christmas season at Stouffville United with the truly wonderfully organized and well-prepared reading of the Dickens of “A Christmas Carol”. Which will be performed this evening. You will again see in vivid detail the penny-pinching and miserly Ebenezer Scrooge; who cared nothing for the people around him. He had come to believe that humanity existed only for the money that can be made through exploitation and intimidation. We will be reminded that he particularly detested Christmas because he viewed it as 'a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer.

And yet there was a transformation because Scrooge was visited, on Christmas Eve, by the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley who died seven Christmas Eves earlier. That night he was given a second chance. He was offered the option of living life differently if he listened to the Ghosts of Christmas’ past, present and the Christmas’ yet to come.

I couldn’t help thinking again about when Scrooge as the words from St. Mark were read of John the Baptist – who like the three Ghosts of Christmas - in his own dramatic way wanted to have the people face their past, present and future. He wanted them to be prepared.

*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— 3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make*

*straight paths for him.” 4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

It was a Dickens of a Christmas yet to come even then, John was saying to **prepare for the future**. Just as Scrooges old friend Jacob Marely came to him to get him prepared for one future or another. It was up to him. Just as it is up to us. *“It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" 3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'”*

Did you hear about the two men who were watching the 6:00 o'clock news? There was a man on a ledge wanting to jump. One of the men said, "I'll bet you \$10.00 that he will jump." And the man's friend said. "You on." The man on the news, jumped. The man who lost the bet, pulled out his \$10.00 dollars ready to give it to his friend, when his friend said, "I can't do this to you. I've got to be honest. I watched the 5 o'clock news. And they had the same story on then. So I knew the man was going to jump. "No", said the other man. "You take the money. To be honest, I watched the 5 o'clock news too. I just didn't think he'd do it again.

Sometimes I think this way not just about Christmas time but about all our time. Why do we keep doing what we do? Why do we keep putting ourselves through so much stress? As the old saying goes, “Those who fail to learn from their past are doomed to repeat it.” And we do repeat it.

A survey a few years ago asked people if they were looking forward to Christmas. While most answered "Yes," far too many said "No." When asked why, they gave a variety of answers, "Christmas reminds us of things that ought to be, but are not. Christmas is a time of love, but we feel very unloved." "Christmas is a time of giving, but we don't want to give, or can't afford to give. Christmas is a family time, but there is anger and hostility within our family circles. You see, Christmas is a time of peace and good will, but too many are at war with themselves and with others.”

Typical of last minute Christmas shoppers, a mother was running furiously from store to store. Suddenly she became aware that the pudgy little hand of her three-year-old son was no longer clutched in hers. In a panic she retraced her steps and found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window. He was gazing at a manger scene. Hearing his mother's near hysterical call, he turned and shouted with innocent glee: “Look Mommy! It's Jesus - baby Jesus in the hay”. With obvious indifference to his joy and wonder, she impatiently jerked him away saying, “We don't have time for that!”

Jacob Marley like John the Baptist was saying, to prepare for the future, by **facing the past**. *“And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”*

Like the Ghost of Christmas when asked by Scrooge why he was being visited, the Ghost said, “For your welfare”; John was calling the people to face their past and get free of it for our welfare.

Little girl went to see Santa Claus she gave him a list of all she wanted then waited expecting him to give it to her right then. After which, he reached down and pulled out a candy cane and said, “Here you go; now what do you say?” “What my mother says, ‘I want to exchange it.’”

I came across a framed poster a number of year ago that that said: “I believe in the sun - even when it does not shine; I believe in love - even when it is not shown; I believe in God - even when he does not speak.” After finding this I came across Robert Schuller’s version of the story behind those words: “Sweeping across Germany at the end of World War II, allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There on the crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message: “I believe in the sun - even when it does not shine; I believe in love - even when it is not shown; I believe in God - even when he does not speak.” John the Baptist was quoting Isaiah when he said, "A voice is crying in the wilderness, clear the way, prepare the way for the Lord. Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. " (Isa.40:3)

In other words, face the facts! If you want to make peace with your past and life. Mother Teresa said “Peace begins with a smile.” If you want to smooth out the rough relationships it begins with forgiveness. Forgiving yourself for the choices you made that you wish you hadn’t but now, like scrooge have left that root of bitterness to grow into a forest of fear and mistrust. For one who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which they themselves must cross" "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." – Paul Boese.

Christmas isn't about putting on the religious mask. It is about maintaining a relationship with the Lord. It is about coming clean about what our life is really like. It is about opening ourselves up to God in such a way that we will forever be changed. It is about admitting our need for God. Don’t let your past take from your present, nor taint your future.

Jacob Marely wanted his old friend Scrooge to fair better than he did and like John the Baptist calling us to prepare for the future, by face the past that he might **live fearlessly in the present**.

*“John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with the water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”*

Grandpa and his granddaughter were sitting talking when she asked, "Did God make you, Grandpa?" "Yes, God made me," the grandfather answered. A few minutes later, the little girl asked him, "Did God make me too?" "Yes, He did," the older man answered. For a few minutes, the little girl seemed to be studying her grandpa, as well as her own reflection in the mirror, while her grandfather wondered what was running through her mind. At last she spoke up. "You know, Grandpa," she said, "God's doing a lot better job lately."

John the Baptist like the little girl lived fearlessly. John was dressed dramatically with his camel hair clothes and his leather belt and eating locusts and honey. He was declaring by his presence in the desert the destitution and despair and dryness of life. Yet, we stood by an oasis where he was to baptize those who came to faith. He symbolically was showing the difference between what life is and what it could be for them when they have faith in God; because God meets us at the point of our need.

Isaiah 40 that is referred to by St. Mark in this passage would have been known and speaks of "... every valley being exalted and every mountain being brought low, and the crooked made straight and the rough place smooth." In other words, God will meet us where ever we are in life.

For many people this can be an awful time of the year. It can be awful because of grief due to loss loved ones. It can be awful because of some problem in our lives. Yet, John stands in the most desolate place he could find to remind them that even in the most desolate moments of your lives there is One Who is to come that will give you the power to live life fearlessly.

Derrick Redman was in an Olympic race. When the race was almost over he pulled a hamstring and fell to the ground. Not wanting to lay on the track, and wanting for finish the race he struggled to his feet. Just then out of the audience a man jumped onto the track and ran to Derricks side. Security guards surrounded them. It was Derricks father. He said, "Son, you don't have to do this." Derrick said, "Yes I do." And His father said, "Son, if that is what you want, then we will do it together." So one very strong and one very weak person pushed away the security guards and headed for the end. The crowd was silent until they realized what was going on and then as one person they rose to their feet and began to cheer.

Christmas points us to a God that doesn't begin with how awful we are; but Who begins with how awful you feel. You think about that. Amen