

Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente

Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
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“Ghost of Christmas Past”

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(LUKE 1:26-33)

Third in the Series “A Christmas Carol”

A police officer in a small town stopped a motorist who was speeding over 50 km over the speed limit. The officer stopped him impounded his car and too him into custody. The man who was arrested said, "I can explain." "Just be quiet," snapped the officer. "I'm going to let you cool your heels in jail until the chief gets back." "But, officer, I just wanted to say..." "And I said to keep quiet! You're going to jail!" A few hours later the officer looked in on his prisoner and said, "Lucky for you that the chief's at his daughter's wedding. He'll be in a good mood when he gets back." "Don't count on it," answered the fellow in the cell. "I'm the groom."

Just because it is a special occasion doesn't mean there won't be problems. Just because there is a celebration like Christmas doesn't mean there isn't going to be problems because things don't always go perfectly – because kids get sick, people lose their jobs, others receive bad news and people even die. Trouble doesn't take a holiday even at Christmas. So it shouldn't surprise us that even on the first Christmas it wasn't picture perfect.

Scrooge wasn't having a very good day. The Ghost of Christmas past was arriving and he was terrified at what was going to happen.

Though Mary, was in no way like Scrooge, she was faced with a time that was supposed to be joyful and yet there was worry, and fear. The first Christmas was marked by uncertainty, unease, fear.

Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it. Those feelings. From last year until this; we all have been experiencing the confusion over the pandemic and the concerns for everyone's well-being and health and some fear and anxiety.

A cloud was hanging over Mary's head and yet, a messenger came to bring clarity to her confusion and concerns.

Like the Ghost of Christmas past that visited Scrooge, the messenger Gabriel sought to shed light on the events of her life and calm her fears offering God's **Peace**. *"In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee... to Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."(Lk 1:26-30)*

"Don't be afraid. You have found favor with God"

Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God in times of trouble.

A mother and father went Christmas shopping one Saturday afternoon with their seven-year-old daughter. The Little girl was so thrilled and enthusiastic about the season. But her parents were just the opposite- - they were so grumpy, so tense and uptight, so worn out with all the traffic jams and lists and bills and long line. When the family returned home that night, the little girl was singing Christmas carols; but her mother and father were arguing and irritated with one another. Finally, the father, told the little girl to stop singing and go to bed. The little girl started upstairs to her room; but she stopped on the stairway, opened the window, and looked out. "Why did you open the window and let in the cold air?" Her father asked. "Because I thought I heard the angels singing," she answered. Still angry and tired, the father said, "I don't hear any angels singing, and neither do you. Now get upstairs, and get in that bed right now!" The little girl started up the stairs; but then she paused and said gently, "Daddy, if you want to hear the angels sing, you have to listen with your heart."

Many people cannot slow down long enough and cannot turn down the volume level enough in our lives- - to enjoy Christmas. That's why the holidays are for some a burden. And we find ourselves at times feeling like Scrooge and joining him in the chorus of Bah Humbug. The obligations, the guilt, the exhaustion of the season can easily outweigh the pleasures. And the hopes and dreams are replaced with fears and worries.

There was a study on 'worry' which was carried out on more than 1,600 men ages 40 to 90 at Purdue University by Dr. Daniel Mroczek. During the 17 year study it was discovered that those who chronic worriers - the "worrywarts" - who cope poorly with stress and tend to be highly anxious or depressed became even more so over time, half had died 17 years after the study started. Among

those who were chronic worriers at the start of the study but either did not increase or learned techniques to worry less 75% to 85% were still alive.

The good news: "People can change," Mroczek says. "If you learn to worry or fret less, you may add time to your life."

Like the Ghost of Christmas past who visited Scrooge; that messenger Gabriel sought to shed light on the events of Mary's life and offer her God's peace; and to also offer **God's promise**. "You have found favor with God...*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.*

There was a promise of a brighter future Scrooge just as there was for Mary and for us; but first Mary had to get past her fears.

It was the day of the big Christmas sale. A long line of people formed in front of the store by 6 AM, the store's opening time. People were getting incensed that the store wasn't yet open. A small man pushed his way to the front of the line, only to be pushed back, in the midst of loud and colorful curses as people got more and more upset. On the man's second attempt, he was punched square in the jaw and knocked around a bit and then thrown to the end of the line again. As he got up the second time, he complained to the person at the end of the line, "That does it! If they hit me one more time, I'm not opening the store!"

Like those people in the story there are always fears, regrets, hurt or bitterness that push us back or hold us back from getting what is promised. Our past can often chain us in place and keep us from experiencing our God's favor.

When the frightening specter of Marley's ghost confronts the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, he is weighed down with a long, heavy chain. Marley replied, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." And Scrooges chains were heavier and longer.

The Ghost wanted to free him from those chains, just as Gabriel wanted to free Mary from her fears.

Throughout our lives we come up against many things that stop us in our tracks. Things that bind us to the point we feel unable to move forward physically, emotionally or spiritually. It can be as small as an unkind word or as big as the death of a loved one or loss of a job or as hard as an addiction. I see people every day who are bound—so tied up they are useless to anyone, including God.

I'm reminded of a situation I encountered many years ago while working as a prison half-way house counselor and supervisor. One of the men wanted to go home. He was despondent. I assured him that in 6 months his sentence would be over and he would indeed go home. He said, "You don't get it. That isn't hope. Prison is

home. I want to go back to prison. And if you don't send me back I will do something to be sent back. Understand of my 38 years I have spent 30 of them in prison of one kind or another. It is home. Send me home."

My heart sank for him. Eventually, I made the call. And when the guards came to the halfway house with chains in hand to take him back to prison he began to relax. Once, the chain was on his wrists and on his ankles the tension fell away.

For some the chains are all they know. The message of the Gospel is one of freedom from our past, freedom from our fears, freedom from whatever binds us. But we have to want it.

I remember when I was a student minister, in a country parish in Saskatoon, I was preaching on Lazarus and his being raised. During the sermon I said, "Lazarus, Lazarus LAZARUS!" A few seconds later, I hear the words coming from the basement, "I'm coming I'm coming." It turned out the janitor's name was Lazarus.

And Jesus said of Lazarus in the passage "Free him" When Jesus makes us free we are free in deed.

Mary was being freed from her fear and offered that peace and promise and also God's **purpose**. Yet, she had to be willing to accept it and so do we. *"31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The LORD God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

Scrooge wasn't yet ready to accept what was being offered him by the Ghost of Christmas past. However, Mary was. And that changes everything.

There was a situation in an airport where a person overheard a father and daughter in their last moments together. They had announced her departure and standing near the security gate, they hugged and he said, "I love you. I wish you enough." She in turn said, "Daddy, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Daddy."

They kissed and she left. He walked over toward the window where I was seated. Standing there I could see he wanted and needed to cry. I tried not to intrude on his privacy, but he welcomed me in by asking, "Did you ever say goodbye to someone knowing it would be forever?"

"Yes, I have," I replied. Saying that brought back memories I had of expressing my love and appreciation for all my Dad had done for me. Recognizing that his days were limited, I took the time to tell him face to face how much he meant to me.

So I knew what this man experiencing.

"Forgive me for asking, but why is this a forever goodbye?" I asked.

"I am old and she lives much too far away. I have challenges ahead and the

reality is, the next trip back would be for my funeral," he said.

"When you were saying goodbye I heard you say, "I wish you enough." May I ask what that means?"

He began to smile. "That's a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone." He paused for a moment and looking up as if trying to remember it in detail, he smiled even more." When we said 'I wish you enough,' we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them," he continued and then turning toward me he shared the following as if he were reciting it from memory.

"* I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright.

* I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more.

* I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.

* I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.

* I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.

* I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.

* I wish you enough hello's to get you through the final goodbye."

He then began to sob and walked away.

My friends, I wish you enough! You think about that. Amen