

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Advent 3, Year B, December 17, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Gospel According to Scrooge”
John 1:6-8, 19-28

have you seen “A Charlie Brown Christmas” yet this year?; seeing it again reminded me how that TV program helped me take some of the ideas and words I’d grown up hearing in church and in Sunday School and think how they applied in my everyday life; Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is another of my favorite Christmas stories that did that for me also; but the story of what happens to Ebenezer Scrooge is not only a Christmas story, it is also a ‘gospel’ story in the true sense of the word—a story of the good news; and Scrooge’s story very closely parallels the story about John the Baptist we heard last week and which continues in today’s gospel reading

remember what’s happening with John; first he calls people to repent, to change their hearts and minds; then, after their baptism, to live out the change in their hearts and minds by a change in their actions; that was a new idea for the people who came out into the wilderness to hear him; they were used to having their sins taken care of professionally, by the priests offering Temple sacrifices on their behalf; they thought that was how their relationship with God and with other people was all taken care of for them; well, isn’t that like what we might too easily fall back on thinking about ourselves?; thinking that growing up in church, believing in God, being a Christian itself is enough?; John would remind us that we have to demonstrate what we hold dear in our hearts and minds with our actions; it is a good exercise for any of us to ask ourselves, “Do I demonstrate my faith in all that I do?”; try and answer that question as honestly as you can for yourself

John may have been a bit scary to some people, but ultimately what he brought was good news; good news because repentance and careful attention to living out one’s faith gives us a depth of living, gives a special relationship with God, and gives a special relationship with other people; that is the most rewarding life imaginable

now, look at how similarly this same process gets played out with Ebenezer

Scrooge; he certainly needs repentance: he did not grieve the death of this long time business partner, Jacob Marley; he sees no reason to celebrate Christmas, in either a religious or a secular way; to him work, money, and profits come before everything else; even though he has far more than he needs for himself, he will not contribute to charity for the poor; and he will not even give his hard-working employee a sufficient wage to support his family; it takes a lot to shake him out of his complacency; it takes the ghost of Jacob Marley and three other spirits to get his attention; and these “ghosts” are not all that different from the Holy Ghost, from the Holy Spirit; they fulfill the Holy Spirit’s role of guiding a person to right belief and to right action; and they are not all that different from the angel visitors and visions that occur in the Bible, as God send his special messengers and messages to people who need to receive and hear them

the ghost of Christmas past shows Scrooge how his love of money cost him the enjoyment of his youth and the love of his fiancée; the ghost of Christmas present shows him how there can be simple human joy in the family life of his employee Bob Crachit, despite their poverty and Tiny Tim’s illness; and the ghost of Christmas future shows him his own death, and also Tiny Tim’s premature death—unless someone does something to change the current situation he is in

Scrooge experiences a kind of baptism of repentance, through the tears he sheds at each ghost’s visit; he confesses his desire to change to each of the three spirits, and his mind and heart are changed in the process; immediately upon his waking from the dream, he demonstrates his repentance: he makes amends to those slighted in business dealings or by his personal rejections of friendship; he gives generously to charity, making up for the years he neglected to help people; he makes a personal commitment not only to help, but to share in the life of the Crachit family, becoming like a second father to Tiny Tim—whose untimely death is averted; he reconnects with relatives; and in the way that he gives so freely, and in the extent of his generosity, we see how repentance changed his life, and the lives of other people

instead of the gloom he had spread before, his enthusiasm, generosity, happiness, and joy became infectious; he goes to church; the message delivered to him by the spirits truly was good news for him and for all those around him who benefitted from his new way of life; a sad and closed-in life is redeemed into an open and rewarding life

maybe it is just coincidental that Dickens' story follows the same pattern as John the Baptist's preaching of repentance as good news; or maybe it is more than that; Dickens himself was a person of deep faith; it not only shows in *A Christmas Carol* and in his novels; he also wrote a private book, never intended for publication, a simple and straightforward story of Jesus' life, called *The Life of Our Lord*, which was for his children, so he could read it to them and leave them a personal record of his faith; fortunately for us, after his death the book did get published, and so we can see explicitly how his writings were guided by his faith

so, as this Christmas season approaches, think on John's message of repentance, the gospel according to John the Baptist; or think on that same message as demonstrated in the turnaround of the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, the gospel according to Scrooge; both of them convey the same good news—the same good news that we are called to live out, and especially at this time of year