

Keeping Christmas

In the name of him born under the law to redeem those under the law's curse, dear friends in Christ: Charles Dickens' classic tale *A Christmas Carol* is surely one of the most popular stories associated with this time of year. And every December its heartwarming message is told again and again in countless adaptations on stages across our country and on TV in the over thirty film versions of the story that have been made over the years. The central character, Ebenezer Scrooge, has probably been played by more actors than just about any other since the cast requires at least different three actors to play him at the various ages he appears in the scenes. And so quite a few have played the role of Scrooge in the century and a half since the story was written; from such bright lights as George C. Scott whom we know better as Patton, Patrick Stewart (a.k.a. Jean-Luc Picard), and Bill Murray (who ironically played a lead role in *Ghostbusters* – think about it), to dimmer bulbs like Fred Flintstone, Mr. Magoo, and once in a grade school production, my own little brother (and yes, I listed him after Mr. Magoo on purpose).

In any case, because the story has been retold so many times and in so many ways, I'm reasonably confident that unlike most of the other references I've made over the years to books or films I mistakenly assumed everyone would be familiar with, this time I must be right. You simply have to know this story. And that being the case, I'd like to refresh your memory about a conversation that takes place very early in the plot. It's when old Scrooge is visited by his nephew, Fred, who has stopped by the counting house to wish his avaricious uncle a merry Christmas and give him his annual invitation to join him for Christmas dinner. Scrooge, in keeping with his character, wants nothing to do with Fred or Christmas and calls the whole thing a humbug. He can't understand why his frivolous nephew squanders his time and precious little money making merry at Christmas, nor why he keeps coming back year after year to annoy him with an invitation that he knows will be declined. Fred, full of good will, explains that Christmas is a special time when people are kinder and more charitable than at other times, and he means to share the joy of the season – especially with those who need it most. "You keep Christmas your way" says Scrooge, "and let me keep it in mine." "But you don't keep it", Fred protests. To which Scrooge replies, "Allow me to leave it alone then."

So that's the set up: we're presented with a greedy, coldhearted man who does not keep Christmas and no desire to begin. But the story is one of redemption of sorts—or of transformation, anyway. And through the visitation of the spirits of Christmases past, present, and future Scrooge is changed for the better so that by the end of the story it is said of him in the years that follow that if anyone did, Scrooge knew how to keep Christmas well.

Okay, it's a fictional story; one that is underpinned with what is really bad theology because in the end Scrooge avoids Marley's lamentable fate and finds salvation through his own good works rather than trust in the Savior whose birth Christmas celebrates. So, it's definitely not a Lutheran story. And when we're told that Scrooge kept Christmas well, we understand that it means pretty much the same thing it meant to his nephew, Fred: that for a couple weeks of the year he got into the spirit of the season and went out of his way to be kinder and more charitable than at other times.

True, we're led to believe that his overall transformation was broader than that; but I particularly want to focus on this idea of *keeping Christmas well* and what it means.

And I'll tell you why: there *is* something special about Christmas and there's great value in keeping it; but it is not captured by a few weeks worth of extra effort to be kinder, more cheerful, and more generous than usual. Nor is it contained within the lights and decorations, the family gatherings, the gift exchanges, parties, concerts, and other events and trappings that traditionally mark the season. These things are well and fine for a while once a year and they have their place; the trouble is that we cannot keep them up or keep them going. They are by design meant to be temporary and extraordinary. They're above and beyond what's considered normal. And in that sense, there's an artificiality about them. Take Christmas trees for example. They're either phony to begin with or they're real trees – in which case by the week after Christmas they're dried up and dropping needles everywhere. Either way, it's time to put them away or get rid of them. We don't want them there all the time. Or take our efforts to be kinder and more generous. The fact that it takes extra effort and expense on our part, extra effort and expense that we cannot maintain for the long haul, only goes to show that most of the year we aren't as kind or generous as we would like to be. And so if these are the only things by which we keep Christmas then we aren't really *keeping it*, are we? We're just enjoying it for a while and then throwing it away or putting it back into storage. It's like a roller coaster ride at a theme park: a few minutes of thrills and then back to normal. And it's largely on account of that that so many people come off the giddy rush of the holiday season and then experience the big crash of the post season blues. The problem is that they only *do* Christmas, they don't *keep* it.

Let me suggest that we should be seeking something more – especially we who understand the true mind-boggling miracle of Christmas, how that the Son of God, the Eternal Word, was born in human flesh to be our Savior from sin – we of all people should be seeking to keep present and ongoing that miracle in our hearts and use it a source of spiritual strength and sustenance for the rest of the year. Why, if we could do that then Christmas wouldn't just be short thrill ride; but more like a powerful locomotive moving us steadily along the path of sustained spiritual growth. Then I think it could be said of us that we keep Christmas well. The only question then is: how do we do that?

The answer is *we don't; God does*. I mean think about it: who is it that kept the first Christmas? Sure, Mary and Joseph were there, and they did their parts, and there were the angels, the shepherds, and later the wise men; but who is it that sent the invitations, so to speak, and brought them all together? Who is it that made the miracle happen? As we heard repeatedly in today's and last week's readings from Matthew's Gospel: "this happened to fulfill what the Lord spoke through the prophet" so and so. And as you read that statement over and over again as the story unfolds you realize that the Lord kept Christmas by keeping the many promises he made over the centuries and scattered throughout Scriptures concerning the birth of Jesus. And as you line up and begin to count the fulfilled prophecies, you understand how the Lord was carefully orchestrating events in history so that at just the right time and in just the right place everything would come together to fulfill exactly what he had spoken. The Lord our God kept the first Christmas by making a precise appointment saying, "Here is *when* and *where* and in *what condition* you will find your Savior, Christ, the Lord" and then keeping that appointment.

“Okay”, you might say, “I see that, and it’s just dandy for Mary and Joseph and the rest who were there for that first Christmas; but what’s that got to do with me in the here and now? What has the Lord’s keeping of Christmas way back then to do with him keeping it for us now in the present?”

Answer: everything. Look: ask yourself what the miracle of Christmas really was. Wasn’t it, as St. John says in his Gospel, The Word of God becoming flesh and making his dwelling with us? Isn’t that why the prophet Isaiah said, “The virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son who will be called Immanuel, meaning God with us”? Sure. Of course. And wasn’t it, as we have seen, all designed by God to take place at a certain preordained place and time and in a certain way that he had determined and made known? Right. Well, suppose I could point to another specific time and place and way that, according to the Lord’s design, the Word of God becomes flesh for our benefit? Wouldn’t that be essentially Christmas all over again? Well, yes; when you put it that way, sure it would.

Well, isn’t this precisely what our regularly scheduled Sunday morning worship services are? Do we not gather here at an appointed time and place for the purpose of hearing the Word of God” —Which is not an *it*, it’s a *Who*; namely the Word of God is the Son of God. And does he not take flesh in us when we hear the Word spoken and expounded upon? Yes, he does. I mean, that’s why right before the Scripture readings and the service of Holy Communion the pastor turns to the congregation and says, “The Lord be with you.” It isn’t just a polite, churchly way to say hello. It’s the recognition that Jesus is coming into our midst and the prayer that through the pastor’s performance of his duties – reading the Word and administering the Sacrament – Jesus, God’s Son in flesh, will be part of you and your body – and that your body will become part of his. The Word of God becomes flesh in you whenever you receive God’s Word in faith.

And it happens every time we meet for worship. This is why Isaiah says in today’s Old Testament lesson, “I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord ... according to all that the Lord has granted us and his great goodness to the house of Israel.” What the prophet is saying is he is going to speak again and again what God has done. He’s going to repeat the Bible’s many stories of salvation and redemption, because in the retelling of them the One who saved and blessed his people in the past enters into and saves and blesses those who hear and believe.

And it’s worthwhile mentioning *where* he comes to us: not to our bright shiny places, not to our rooms swept clean and kept tidy to receive him properly; but rather to our dark, stinking stables. He comes to where he meets with hostility – where the king Herod in each of us wants to remain in charge. He comes where the sin is and the suffering. He comes to where we are afflicted because that’s why he comes: to take our afflictions and sins upon himself, and to suffer their awful consequences in his bloody crucifixion and death. And then, having been raised up to life, he comes to lift us up from our lives of sin through his forgiveness and to carry us along his righteous path of life.

Great. Now if you’re with me still, then let me give you this final thought. Thinking about keeping Christmas as we did before, what with a little extra effort being exerted for a few weeks, we saw that a changed way of life was something of a blip on the screen. It was going along as normal, a sudden jump at Christmas time to some higher level of kindness and charity, and then back to the status quo. But that’s not the

way we're thinking about it now. Now we understand the miracle of Christmas comes to us every week – or more often if we are in the Word on other occasions. Either way, we're seeing it differently. The Word is taking flesh in us over time. And so, let me suggest that just as the baby Jesus grew to maturity, so also Christ our Savior in us grows up as we receive and assimilate more of his Word, or indeed, as we receive his body and blood for our forgiveness and the strengthening of our faith in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And as the Word in us grows instead of seeing a seasonal blip on the screen, what we should hope to see is a steady increase of Christ-like behavior as Jesus lifts us higher and higher; an inclined plane as the baseline standard is being raised over time—not that we will be aware of it necessarily, since the closer we are to Christ the more we see our sin; but rather that others will more readily see Jesus living in us.

My friends, this is my New Year's prayer for you and for each and every member of the body of Christ who worships here. May our gracious God and Father grant it to us for Jesus' sake. And so may it be said of us that we keep Christmas well. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!