

## Surprised by Salvation: *Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13*

Norwalk Christian Church, December 13, 2015, Advent 3, Year C, Narrative Lectionary Year 2, WDS Series

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“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it... Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail...This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins Charles Dickens’ classic Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*. Adapted a thousand times over, this story tells of Ebenezer Scrooge, who, in the words of Dickens, “was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!” Scrooge gets awoken from his life’s slumber and indifference to the poor by four different ghosts.

The first of the four spirits was Old Jacob Marley, already dead 7 years, Scrooge’s former business partner who, in life, was just as tight-fisted as Scrooge. Marley’s ghost tells Scrooge of his fate: the afterlife isn’t pleasant for a greedy, dead man like Marley. Marley has seen the error of his life’s ways, and wants Scrooge to learn from his mistakes.

Dickens writes: “‘But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,’ faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself. ‘Business!’ cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. ‘Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!...Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode! Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me!’”<sup>2</sup>

“I am here to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.”

How will his salvation come? “‘You will be haunted by Three Spirits.... Without their visits,’ said the Ghost, ‘you cannot hope to shun the path I tread.’”

And you remember the rest of the story. The Ghosts of Christmas past, present and future visit Scrooge haunt him. Scrooge is given a second chance, and he repents, and becomes the embodiment of the Christmas spirit.

It’s a happy ending. But it’s an ending that takes some pain to get to, an unlikely journey where the things Scrooge fears the most becomes the surprising source of his Salvation.

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That’s how it often is, isn’t it? The things we fear...the pains of life...unlikely visitors becoming beacons that point our way to our salvation.

<sup>1</sup> Dickens, Charles (2012-05-17). *A Christmas Carol* (p. 5-6). . Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pg. 25

That's how it was for Israel. If you remember from last week, the people of Judah had been invaded by Babylon, the ancient empire from the land that today we call Iraq. They destroyed the temple, and forced the Jews into captivity, where they lived as exiles for almost 70 years. They had given up hope of ever being saved. Many who were taken had already died of old age, and most of the captives were born after exile, captivity being the only home they had ever known.

But then, from the most unlikely place, salvation comes. The book of Ezra begins with the story: "In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the *spirit* of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom."

The Lord stirred up the "*spirit*" of King Cyrus. More spirit visitors, like Marley, heralding good news to the Jewish captives. And like dead as a door-nail Marley, Cyrus isn't the kind of visitor you'd expect. Who is this savior? Cyrus the Great was the king of Persia, the empire that eventually led to what we now call Iran.

Cyrus feared the god Marduk, yet when he conquered your land, he treated the people with dignity, respecting local religions and customs. This foreign, false-god worshipping king said to the Jewish captives, "May your God be with you! — You are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel."

Because of this, ancient Judaism held King Cyrus in high esteem. He was their savior--surprising as that was, and without this foreign king, there never would've been a rebuilt temple, and probably no longer an Israel. The writer of Isaiah 45 calls Cyrus "the Messiah", which means "God's anointed one," making him the only Gentile to ever be called such a thing. A messiah, sent by God to bring the people of God home.

You may not know this, but the Jewish ordering of the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, is a bit different. Our Old Testament ends with Malachai, but Jewish Scripture ends with 2 Chronicles, and the last passage of 2 Chronicles, which comes right before Ezra in our Bibles, is an almost direct quotation from the verses of Ezra chapter 1 we read this morning. Meaning, Jewish scripture ends with Cyrus setting the Jewish people free to return to their home and rebuild the house of the Lord.

It's no surprise, then, that in the days of Jesus' birth, when the Jews are looking for another messiah to come and free the people from the rule of Rome, they look for another king like Cyrus.

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This may be more than you ever wanted to know about ancient history, but the lesson is an important one for us today. In a day when we are terrified of anything foreign...when fear of the other is stirred up, whether that other is from another country or another religion--it does us well to remember that there was a time when the people of God were saved by a false-god-worshipping king from Iran.

But really, this isn't that surprising, is it? Isn't this how salvation always comes? From the least expected people and places, when we know we don't deserve it and are ready to give up hope. In the most unlikely times and ways, salvation comes.

It's a lot like what is described in the poem from the 13th century, called "The Guesthouse."

*This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and attend them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.*

This 800 year-old poem was originally written in Persian, the language of King Cyrus, by the Iranian Sufi Muslim poet Rumi. Rumi's words have touched many people from many faiths, and everytime I hear his words, I am surprised again at how clearly this ancient, unlikely voice saw the world.

*Welcome all of life's unexpected visitors*, Rumi says. For they may be clearing you out for some new delight. Or, in other words, never close yourself off. For you never know who will be the vehicle of your salvation.

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Such a message should ring true to us this time of year. It's a season of great familiarity, steeped in old customs and traditions. We sing the same songs. String the same lights. Tell the same stories. And yet, each year, something new happens. Something unexpected.

Each year, we rehearse again, in many different ways, the surprising story of a God who chose, not the likely candidates, but a young, unwed virgin, and a scared fiancé. A God, who decided to enter the world unexpectedly as a baby, born in a barn, attended by confused shepherds, and visited by mystics from the East, foreigners who practiced magic and worshipped other gods.

Is this how the Lord came? In Advent, we sing, "Come, O Come, Emmanuel", asking God to come again, and yet we go about our lives acting as if God will come, this time, through expected, orthodox and invited means.

Behold, salvation is coming--that's the message of Advent. But the heralders of this message are as unexpected as the message itself. A foreign king. A ghost of Christmas past. A 13th century muslim poet. A chorus of angels, appearing in a night sky.

“A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness.” Unexpected visitors--heralds sent by God to proclaim, “Do not be afraid. For behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

For the people in Ezra’s day, the good news is more than they can bear, and they weep. Partly because this is not the way they thought their salvation would come. Partly because they remember the way things were, and can’t believe that their joy could ever return to what it once was.

But it’s not all weeping. There are always those who cry out in joy, those with eyes open, awaiting whatever new thing God is doing.

Most of us are caught somewhere in the middle, right in the midst of the cacophony of weeping and joyful shouting, and we really can’t tell the difference between the two, their sounds are so great.

And we find ourselves, at times, joining both choruses, weeping for all that we have lost, and shouting for joy for all that is to come. Somewhere in the midst of the two, we begin to find our salvation, as the new begins to be rebuilt on the ruins of the old, and our weeping gives birth to shouts of joy.

Just when we least expected it, when we were ready to give up hope and make a broken life in the midst of exile, an unlikely visitor comes. The visitor always goes by different names, but we always end up calling it “salvation.”

It’s never what we expected--that’s for sure!

“What Child is this?” What salvation is this?

*This*, this is Christ the king. Unlikely. Unexpected. Surprising.

This, *this* is God entering the world. And it’s not what we were looking for, but this is how it happened. This is how it happens. Every time.

Unlikely.

Unexpected.

Surprising.

Amen.