

Repent and Rejoice Luke 3:7-18

Just a few days ago Greg and I were surfing the TV, when we came across a program presenting the top 50 Christmas specials. 50! Not 50 total, the best 50. That is a feature of our American Christmases –a boatload of TV specials. We have newer shows like ‘the Polar Express’ and “Shrek the Halls.” And we have older ones like “Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer” and “White Christmas.”

And even before TV there were a lot of Christmas stories. One of those stories, a classic, is Charles Dickens' “A Christmas Carol.” The story is so familiar to us that being a ‘scrooge’ has become a term nobody wants to be identified with. Why? Because the character of Ebenezer Scrooge presents a person who is absolutely selfish, self-centered, unforgiving and unloving. Charles Dickens nailed the character of Scrooge, as the perfect embodiment of sin. And his story mirrors each one of us in our own small spirits and cold-hearted ways.

But that is not what brings us back to the story, year after year. It is not the shame and guilt that we find attractive, but the hope the story holds out for each of us. Scrooge went to bed on Christmas Eve a sour old man, and work up with joy. That is what we love. Messengers came in the night to reveal to him the truth of his life, and the future that was in store for him. It also gave him the opportunity to turn his life around, if he so chose. And he did. Scrooge became a new man. He repented, and his repentance led to joy and gratitude . It led him from selfishness to compassion and from miserliness to generosity.

This, Charles Dickens’ classic, is classic because it is good news. It is a tale that marks the journey from the burden of sin, through the trial of repentance, to the reward of joy. And we love that story, not for the crotchety Ebenezer, but for the transformation of his life, and for the warning and hope it offers our lives. It’s as if Charles Dickens took the message of John the Baptist to heart, and created a character who lived into God’s call to repent and rejoice.

Those are the words we heard so clearly today. In our first reading, the prophet Zephaniah invites us to "rejoice and exult with all your heart." But he is not the only prophet to call us to jubilation. Isaiah says to us “With joy draw water from the well of your salvation”, the Psalmists call us over and over again to ‘rejoice in the Lord,’ and Zechariah tells us to “Sing for joy and be glad, ... because I (the Lord) am coming, and I will live among you,” (Zach 2:10)

But then, then we come to John the Baptist. And we may think ‘oh man, what a Scrooge.’ After all his words do not ring of ‘have a cup of good cheer.’ No, John comes storming into the desert crying ‘repent.’ Gee, maybe he is Scrooge, or one of the tale’s ghostly

messengers. He doesn't hold back, that's for sure. People are flocking to him, and he calls them a bunch of slimy snakes. He shames their deeply religious family roots. He threatens them with being cut down and burned with hell-fire. He warns them of one who is coming as judge, jury and executioner, and that they had better shape up before it's too late.

You would think that the people would run in the opposite direction, that they would dismiss him and his threatening rant. But guess what?! The people hear him gladly. They respond with repentance, with an eagerness to do right. They even ask for his guidance. And he is not afraid to give it either. He tells them bluntly to share their clothing and their food, to end graft and bribery and violence.

And then Luke reports that “with many other words of encouragement he preached Good News.” Hear that, Good News! What's so good about axes and fires and winnowing forks? Not much, unless you can hear his reason why. Behind his Scrooge-like exhortation is the reality that one is coming far greater than John, One promised long ago. And when he arrives, he will do more than give good, practical advice, he will baptize the repentant with the Holy Spirit and with fire! He will empower those eager to live for God with the power of God. And that is good news! There is one coming who will meet our deepest need and fulfill our greatest hope. That is the joy at the heart of repentance.

For all his ranting and raving, John was a messenger of Joy. Repentance, certainly, but repentance in the hope of a new world, a world of justice and peace, righteousness and mercy. Genuine repentance, a transformed life, leads to rejoicing. It leads us away from the burden of self-centeredness and into the joy of the new life, grace-filled life, for ourselves and others. Genuine repentance leads us not simply to rejoice in a new, better world, but to live out the vision of that world, in simple acts of caring, integrity and respect. And through that way of life to discover the joy that comes as we see the reign of God take form among us.

Now, if for some reason you are not yet in the Christmas spirit, or you feel like Scrooge before his transformation, then let yourself be reminded as John the Baptist reminds us, the season of Advent is for this very thing, to call us to repentance— to turn from all that is destructive and broken, and to turn us to the One who offers us wholeness and life. Advent calls us to repent, so that we can rejoice this Christmas season. Advent calls us to ‘bear fruit worthy of repentance’ by clearing away all that hinders the full life of God's holy ways. Then, like the inhabitants of Zion, the people of Israel, we will know that God is with us, that God is among us, and that God is mighty to save. And we will be glad and rejoice with all our hearts, for our Savior comes.

May this advent be, for each of us, a season to repent and rejoice. Amen.

Rev. Rosemary Dawson