

Hearing the Gospel through Charles Dickens's
"A Christmas Carol"

Second Edition

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By

Reverend Cheryl Anne Kincaid

CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my teachers, those who believed in me against all odds.
Mr. Orman, Mrs. Wright, Bobbi Robinson, Ellis Shaw, David Shaw,
Gary & Carolyn Shafer , B. Downs, Mr. Anderson, Sandy & Jim Keith
Corrie Ten Boon.

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INTRODUCTION

Each year at Advent, Christians everywhere revisit a certain old Victorian moral story. The images of snow-covered English cobblestone streets, the sentimentally-portrayed ragged poor, and the ever-more-familiar plot line don't seem to grow tiresome through the years: Charles Dickens's preachy little tale *A Christmas Carol* holds us captive like the returning relative we have come to expect—even yearn—to see every holiday season. We've memorized Tiny Tim's proverbial blessing at the end of the story, and we can anticipate every word of rebuke that the spirits give to begrudging Old Scrooge. Year after year, we sit in front our TVs with big bowls of butter-drenched popcorn, warm and comfortable in the embrace of loved one or favored blanket, and let "the best" of a dozen dramatizations bring Dickens to our living rooms. Others prefer live performances, secretly (and often unconsciously) challenging the director and cast to create a better visual than the one that played out in their minds' eye the first time they held Dickens' treasure in their hands.

The plot is, doubtless, melodramatic and unsophisticated by our modern standards. We could scoff at the corniness of a sick child being named "Tiny Tim." We could easily blame the Cratchits' lack of ambition and poor planning for their poverty. We would assume that our modern welfare system would take care of Bob Cratchit and his family, if he were really in need. Certainly, many modern Christians would vehemently deny any role in the Cratchit family's poverty. We are *not* Scrooge...but how we do enjoy rebuking him alongside the spirits!

As Christians, perhaps we should feel guilty about enjoying this story so much. The spirits and life situations in *A Christmas Carol* seem strangely out of place in any of our modern Evangelical Christian observance of Christmas. We may ask, "Where is the nativity story in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*?" The presence of spirits may seem pagan: We don't believe in Ghosts, of course; so can we really call this story Christian? We may blush at the degree to which we are drawn to the sentimental imagery of this tale.

But perhaps we shouldn't blush *so* much. *A Christmas Carol* may be more Christian than it first appears. Believers may incorporate this tradition into their Advent celebrations because the familiar imagery echoes with ancient, Biblical truths: Most modern Christians are unaware that each of the spirits in *A Christmas Carol* correlates directly to the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer of 1559*, the church's Book of Worship during Charles Dickens's time.

The spirits also correlate to the five traditional lessons of Advent, celebrated with the lighting of the Advent Candles of the Advent Wreath. These Advent lessons are Hope, Faith, Peace, Love and Joy and were used to walk the believer through the nativity story. If we listen carefully to each of the spirits who visit Scrooge, we will hear these ancient lessons of Advent resonating in their voices.

The Ancient Church gave us the Advent lessons to help the church prepare itself for the coming of Christ into the heart of the believer. That is the celebration of Christmas.

Scrooge is woefully unprepared to welcome God (or anyone else) into his life. To him, the idea of Christ is an offense because love and affection are alien concepts; so the spirits come, one by one, to preach the Advent lesson and bring him to repentance.

Where is nativity in the story in *A Christmas Carol*? we may ask. It is in the preaching of the redeemed and changed life of Scrooge through his repentance. The spirits do not alarm us as Ghosts because we intuitively know that they are not intended to be interpreted as actual Ghosts but representative of the ancient lessons of Advent. The Advent season teaches us that God is not willing to let us rest contentedly in our sins and destructive behavior. Christmas teaches us about a God who loves us too much to leave us alone. God's Spirit interferes, prods, pokes and harasses us in the Advent's lessons just as the spirits do to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.

At Christmas time, God intercedes in our world, upsetting our rest and contentment and changing the courses of our lives through the coming of Christ. Our conversion in Christ leads us to the recognition of our sin—and consequently, to repentance—as we turn toward God. In this story, Scrooge is struggling to recognize his own sin and is counting the cost of

living a life of repentance as greater than that of staying on his current path, ruled by his own sin.

It is this lesson of repentance that draws Christians to observe Advent. We are not merely celebrating a child's birth; we are celebrating Christ coming in the flesh to be our Savior.

The Church's celebration of Advent was never intended to celebrate the date on which Christ was born—in fact, the Scriptures give us no exact date. During Christmas and Advent, we celebrate the *reason* Christ came. Historically, Christmas has never been about *when* Jesus was born, but *why* he was born.

The early Church began celebrating Advent around the fourth century. Advent means "coming," and the fourth-century church took a more a holistic and Biblical approach to celebrating Christ's coming than we do. The early church's intention was to set aside a season for quiet reflection—a season that did not merely meditate on Christ's birth in history. This church celebrated something called the *Paraousia*, which means "coming." It focused on how Christ came in the *past* through through the predictions and cries of the prophets; how He comes in the *present* in the heart of the believer; and how He will come in the *future* for His final reign. This sentiment of Christ transcending time in His coming is reflected in Revelations 4:8, which teaches us that Christ's coming is eternal. **He is the Christ who was, the Christ who is, and the Christ who is to come.**

In ancient Rome, there was a celebration called Winter Solstice where the people worshiped the "Physical Sun of the Cosmos," also known as "Sun of Righteousness" (Nasatlis Solis Invoct). Winter Solstice took place in the dead of winter, when the sun is furthest away from the equator; it had a direct connection with the fear of economical fallout from a long winter. In an agrarian culture, the unseasonably long winters could be devastating. Long winters meant failed crops, resulting in loss of family income and, in severe cases, even famine. As a result, the celebration of Winter Solstice consisted of people making incantations in pagan ceremonies, beseeching the sun to return to earth so that the people could experience a shortened winter, a longer planting season, and more plentiful crops. These festivities often included drunken feasting and reveling.

This was the world into which Christianity was born. In the Roman world, people were at the mercy of the gods and the fates. To avoid tragedy, appeasing these gods was very important. The first Christians were common laborers and likely felt that they, too, were at the mercy of the elements. As a minority, Christians were also at the mercy of their culture, which, as a whole, was quite leery of this new faith. Yet despite their unfavored status, these early believers refused to conform to worldly standards: Taking a page from the book of the first professed Christian Emperor, Constantine, they substituted the phrase "Son of God" for the standard "sun of the cosmos" in their winter celebrations. The early church developed Advent as a response to the pagan Winter Solstice.

Advent is a time the church sets aside to prepare the Christians' heart for the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. As our church ancestors said,

“For this reason, for which the church doesn't number her days or measure her seasons so much by the motions of the sun as by the course of our Savior. Who, being the true Sun of righteousness, began now to rise in our world.”¹

What a beautiful statement! The Christian worships the one, true God, not circumstance. We cannot measure our days by flexible seasons, astrology charts, the stock market, job security, or governmental power. Our faith is built on a firm foundation of a changeless God.

It's interesting to note that the early church did not just celebrate the one day of Christ's physical birth: Instead, they had an extended celebration so they could allow time for preparation. As they put it,

“Even as you would prepare for celebrating the birthday of great lord by putting your house in order, so you should put your house in order for the Great Lord.”²

While the Romans had feasts and revelries, the Christian celebration was intended to be pensive and full of self-reflection and prayer. The season began with Advent on November 11 and continued until December 25. Advent was a time Christians set aside to prepare themselves for Christ's second coming by observing the characters and events of the first coming.

Originally during this time, three masses (worship services with communion) were celebrated. One mass celebrated Christ's eternal birth of

God before the world began; this was called "The Mass of the Incarnation." The second mass celebrated Christ's birth of a human woman; this was called "The Virgin Mass." The third celebrated Christ's "mystical birth in the believer's life" and this last mass was known as "The Christ Mass."³

This is why Christians celebrate Christmas. Our most sacred, practical and cherished teaching is that Christ can be born into the believer's life. This is the most important of all the lessons of Christianity. We do not merely celebrate a historical person who was born in an ancient city somewhere in Judea. We do not merely become sentimental about the beauty of the human birth in the midst of poverty. We do not merely celebrate an abstract idea of the theology that this Child taught in promoting human love for one's neighbor. We celebrate the living Christ who is born in the heart of the believer. We celebrate the believers' transformations in Christ through their faith in Christ. This belief is the foundation of all Christianity.

Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in the shadow of Parliament's decision to reform the English Poor Laws in 1834. The Poor Laws have a rich and complex history that go back to the Tudor Era. These will be elaborated upon later in this book; for now, suffice it to say that at different times in history, these laws raised the standard of living for the destitute but also oppressed the poor by entrapping them in hopeless working situations. By Charles Dickens' time, the "New Poor Law" largely consisted of a system of orphanages, workhouses and debtors' prisons. These institutions were often presided over by "churchwardens" and ecclesiastical boards elected by local parishes. Instead of ensuring that these institutions abided by the spirit of the law (compassion and charity), these boards often preferred to punish the poor rather than show them kindness and mercy. Charles Dickens has a word of rebuke for these poor stewards in *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens' travels to America in 1843 inspired him to write *A Christmas Carol*. While in America, he was impressed with some Christian abolitionists. He admired the American Church's advocacy for child education and prison reform, but was appalled and amazed at the open Christian religiosity in the face of the sinful oppression of slavery; but he was appalled at some openly Christian, pious slave owners. He could not reconcile the Christian ethic with the oppression of slavery.

He wrote that slavery created an atmosphere of “decay and gloom.”⁴ He even soured on abolitionists whom he found hypocritical by their arrogant attitude. He later illustrates this view of American in Abolitionists who patronizingly viewed the African race as “an absurd and inferior part of creation,”⁵ in his book *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

In a letter to his friend, John Foster, Charles Dickens rebutted the American idea that slavery was sanctioned by Scripture. He found it ridiculously naive for anyone to believe ; he felt God could and would protect slaves if their masters were benevolent and obedient to the Scriptures. When a Christian defended the belief system of the day by citing Ephesians 6:5-9, Dickens’ rebuke was,

“All human beings knew that there were bad masters, cruel masters and masters who disgraced the form they bore, (these) were matters of history, whose existence were undisputed as slaves themselves.”⁶

His clear point was that not all masters would behave toward their slaves as though they were answerable to God, so it was cruel and absurd to expect slaves to obey their masters "as they would to Christ" while claiming Scripture to defend that stand. Dickens believed that oppression of the weak was the great sin of Christian society. Christians "disgraced the form they bore," the image of God who is full of grace and love, when they exploited and oppressed people who were created in the image of God.

Dickens’ convictions are found in Scripture. Jesus himself told us:

“What you've done to the least of these, you've done unto me.” Matthew 25:45

We dishonor God’s image when we dishonor people created in His image. The simple instinct of kindness that God gives us tells us that exploiting people is wrong.

It enraged Charles Dickens that Christians could be involved in the calloused materialism of slavery. This is reflected in his book *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but few have taken notice that it was at this time, he wrote the moral tale *A Christmas Carol* that encouraged the miserly Scrooge to look outside his locked bedroom door to care for the needs of others.

The title *A Christmas Carol* was intentional. Carols have a rich history of using imagery and metaphor to communicate God’s redemptive work in

the Incarnation. The name *A Christmas Carol* is pregnant with meanings from Church history.

Carols have always been more of songs of the people than songs of the Orthodox Church. They arose out of Catholic "passion plays" which were performed to illustrate the Scripture, but they quickly took on a life of their own, as common people took ownership of and embellished them with pagan imagery from the Winter Solstice. In spite of this, the songs were distinctly Christian and celebrated the redemptive quality of the Incarnation.

In the Middle Ages, Christmas carols were sung by traveling troops or peasants at lords' and ladies' homes during their family's festivities. The carols were little moral tales created by lay people who sang them. These moral tales tended to embellish the biblical Christmas story, and caroling became associated with the reveling of the family festivities that resembled Winter Solstice more than the pensive observance of Advent. Because of this, the Church started to discourage the singing of carols outside of formal worship services. In spite of this probation, however, the carols remained a part of Christian culture. While they often did not directly tell the nativity story, they often used holiday symbolism to speak of God's redemptive work in humanity.

The carols we sing at Christmas teach us the Advent lessons. In many Christmas carols, Christ is represented in the past through prophecy, in the present in our lives, and in His future coming.

By the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, caroling had fallen out of fashion. To the Victorian reader, *A Christmas Carol* would have simply meant *A Christmas Song* or *A Christmas Greeting*. But if this story is a Christmas greeting, it is a Christmas greeting with a bite. By using the lessons of Advent in the voices of the spirits, Dickens conceals scriptural rebuke for the church. Christians, let us take heed before we take offense at such rebukes so that we may be good stewards of the Gospel message we bear.

Charles Dickens uses the name Ebenezer with a purpose as well. In the Old Testament, when biblical prophets and the patriarchs passed through a trial, they would set up an altar or a stone of remembrance, to remind themselves how God had led and sustained them through their trials. These stones were called Ebenezer (1 Samuel 7:12) which Scripture define as "the Lord is my help". These stones were a witness of God's sustaining

power in a believer's past and His promise in how He would lead them in the future. They were used as a tangible sign of intangible truth that these believers had learned about God's leading, providence and care.

Charles Dickens's primary religious training came from a school he attended which was run by William Guiles, a Baptist minister in Chatham. As an adult he became a Unitarian. But Dickens frequently visited churches of all denominations. As a literate British citizen, Charles Dickens knew the Advent lessons of the Church of England's Common Book of Prayer. The Church of England was England's governmentally sanctioned Church and was the most common church of the day. Dickens was taking a swipe at English culture by placing the Church of England Advent lectionary in the mouths of his rebuking spirits.

Charles Dickens played the prophet in his own story, proclaiming the ancient truths of charity, compassion and justice which are cloaked in the lessons of Advent. He was preaching to the Christians of his day who had shut out the poor, and he was neither subtle nor apologetic about his intent to make the English Christian world uncomfortable by haunting them with the Advent lessons. He prefaced his book by writing:

"I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book to raise the Ghost of an idea, which shall not put my readers out of humor with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it."⁷

As believers were encouraged to examine their lives through the Advent lessons to prepare themselves for the coming of Christ into their lives, so Scrooge is being prepared to welcome the lessons of Christianity into his life through the coming of spirits.

In this family devotion, may we, too, be haunted a little by the Advent lessons of Christmas, that we may be reminded of Christ's divine admonition: "That what we do to least of these we have done unto him."

In this devotion, we will look at the Advent lessons through Scrooge's eyes. We will learn the traditional Advent lessons of Hope, Faith, Peace and Joy and the scriptural lessons from the Elizabethan Book of Prayer. As we travel through the lessons of Advent in the Elizabethan Prayer Book, it will become clear how these lessons are preached through as illustrated in Nativity story. We will also notice how Dickens is teaching us in showing how Ebenezer needs the lessons of Advent in his life.

Each week's Devotion consists of a scriptural lesson from the Church of England's Common Book of Prayer and a section from Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol* which illustrates the passage.

We should think of the early church's celebration of the coming of Christ in Advent and remember that they celebrated the Christ who was born in the voice of prophets, the Christ who was born in the virgin womb, and the Christ who is born in our hearts today. This is still our celebration today, brothers and sisters! For the Christian, when Christ comes into our lives and is born in our hearts, He becomes the Lord of our past, present and future. Keeping this thought in mind, Charles Dickens' spirits of Christmas past, Christmas present and Christmas future take on a whole new meaning in our lives.

CHAPTER ONE

PART I

FIRST LESSON OF ADVENT, THE LESSON OF THE PROPHETS: WHERE WE MEET ISOLATED, UNREPENTANT SCROOGE

“We light this candle to remember all the prophets of old that God sent us to tell us of Christ’s coming. We light this candle to remind ourselves that many people are still waiting for the coming of Christ in their lives. We light this candle to remind ourselves that as Christ was foretold to come in the past so He is foretold to come in the future and, we, the church await His Second Coming.”

“Oh he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office during the dog days and didn’t thaw it one degree at Christmas.”⁸

Our first glimpse of Scrooge finds him white knuckling his way through life. He is alone in the world and self-reliant. How hard it is for a solitary being to huddle in the cold. Scrooge trusts no one, neither God nor man. Because Scrooge does not trust the gentle hand of God’s providence, his hands are clinched tightly around, for survival’s sake, his own resources. He thinks that he is his only provider. Because he has to grasp so tightly, he can not open his hand in fellowship to God or man. However, as we follow Scrooge to his home, we discover that Scrooge is not just a greedy, selfish man; he is a lost soul who is hiding from his world:

"He lived in chambers which had once belonged to his deceased partner. They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard, where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help but fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and forgotten the way out again."⁹

What a sad metaphor! Here is a picture of a child who willingly hides in a game of "hide and seek" with the anticipation that someone will look for him, but nobody does and he is forgotten. And when the child wishes the game to end and seeks to be found, he realizes that he is no longer hiding, he is lost!!

This metaphor of an abandoned child will appear later in this story, and is an important picture that we ought not to miss. Scrooge is alone later in life because he was abandoned in his early life by the adults that were called by God to protect and guide him.

Dickens gives us this metaphor for a reason; before we are given a chance to become lost in distancing ourselves from unchristian, grimacing, greedy old Scrooge, we are shown a picture of a lost and vulnerable child. Through this illustration we are reminded that wicked old Scrooge is not so far removed from his childhood, and that, according to Scripture, we all begin our faith journey as one of the lost.

However, this story does not end here, because our God is in the business of saving the lost. Scrooge locks his doors, but redemption cannot be barred out of his life. No locked doors can keep the lessons of the Scriptures out. While he does not seek redemption, redemption seeks out Scrooge.

"Quite satisfied, he closed his door, and locked himself in which was now his custom. Thus secured against surprise, he took off his cravat; put on his dressing gown and slippers, and his nightcap; and sat down before the fire to take his gruel."

"It was a very low fire indeed; nothing on such a bitter night: He was obliged to sit close to it, and brood over it, before he could extract the least sensation of warmth for such a handful of fuel. The fireplace was an old one, built by some Dutch merchants long ago, and paved all around with quaint Dutch tiles, designed to illustrate the Scriptures. There were Cains and Abels, Pharaoh's daughters, Queens of Sheba, Angelic messengers descending through the air on cloud like feather beds, Abrahams, Belshazars, Apostles putting off to sea in boats, hundreds of figures to

attract his thoughts; and yet that face of Marley, seven years dead, came like the ancient prophet's rod, and swallowed the whole."¹⁰

Notice the biblical imagery that Charles Dickens uses to assist in describing Scrooge's fireplace. The painted figures are telling of the Scriptures and the faith journeys of those within the Scriptures. It is in this setting that Marley's face appears to Scrooge through the prophet's rod. Who are these prophets? These are the people who.....

"Those wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth." Hebrews 11:37-38

These are the voices of the scriptural prophets and patriarchs who are crying out to the impoverished Scrooge in the midst of his own wealth.

All images are swallowed up in the prophet's rod. Do you recognize the term "prophet's rod" from the book of Jeremiah? In the Old Testament there is little distinction between the Hebrew word for staff and rod. We know about the shepherd's rod. What does a shepherd use his rod for?

"Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me." Psalm 23:3

A shepherd uses his rod to comfort and protect his sheep. But the prophet Jeremiah's rod is a harsher rod, because he is leading the people into a harsh place for righteousness' sake. The prophet portrayed on Scrooge's fireplace mantle is tasked to speak forth the word of God for the sake of correction. The fireplace tile which illustrates the prophet's rod conjures up for us images of the rod that Jeremiah saw in a vision in an almond tree. This rod was given to Jeremiah as a sign of God's authority that God would use his prophecy:

"To pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:11

Jeremiah used his prophetic voice not only to build up God's people, but also to destroy them. God's people had served false gods and were now being given over to be slaves of the people who served these false gods. God's people would now experience firsthand how false and cruel these gods were by being forced to live in servitude in their culture. God wants to build complete loyalty and zeal in His people, but He will not build on a cracked and shaky foundation.

Sometimes for God to build something new, He must tear down and destroy old patterns and loyalties. Scrooge is being sent a prophet to help Him tear down old attitudes so something new can be born.

Did you ever wonder why in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, God sends John the Baptist before Jesus? If Jesus is really all we need for salvation, why was there a need to send someone to prepare the way for Him?

God sends John the Baptist and prophets like him to prepare us for God's salvation. John the Baptist's job was to make crooked paths straight. Much like Jeremiah, John was going to "pluck up and break down" so God could "build and plant." For God to build new roads in our lives and create new patterns of behavior, He must tear down the old ways of thinking and the false gods we worship. John called people to repentance which means "to turn from sin to God."

The prophet who speaks to Scrooge is an old business partner. Like Scrooge, he had "white knuckled" himself through life by hanging on too tightly to the resources that God had given him. It wasn't that Marley didn't see the human need around him; he was too frightened to share what he had with others. Like Scrooge, he saw himself as his only provider and therefore felt he had no safe way to open up his hands and share with others. Marley's prophecy to Scrooge is therefore one of regret and of lost opportunities and chances to be useful in the lives of others. Listen to Marley's regretful prophecy of his lost opportunities:

"Oh captive, bound and double ironed," cried the phantom, "Not to know that any Christian Spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for life's opportunity misused! Yet such was I! Oh! Such was I."

"Why did I walk through the 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 not poor homes to which its light would have conducted me."¹¹

Ah, here is the "Nativity Story" in A Christmas Carol!

Perhaps no portion of Scripture has been as embellished as much as Luke 2:7

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”

In Christmas lore, we have added a warm stable to this scene with friendly animals that have maternal human characteristics. We now tell our young children that a friendly innkeeper, after gently turning Mary and Joseph away, cleaned out his stable so Mary and Joseph would not have to spend the night in the cold out of doors. It makes a nicer picture than Mary giving birth in the middle of a field or in a manger in a public family room or town square. But Scripture gives us no picture of a private indoor stable. We’ve added that shelter. We don’t like the picture of the holy family being homeless.

But the reality is that Mary, Joseph and Jesus must have looked like an abandoned young family at Jesus’ birth. There must have been some surprise among the shepherds, to see the child that angels praised living in this seemingly abandoned state. But God did not abandon His only son. He provided, but not in the way that we would have expected Him to provide. Worshipping the Christ child born in a manger allows us to look differently at the children born in low estate in our world.

Christian, it is right that we contemplate the tortured children of the world during Christmastime. A visit to the stable in Bethlehem naturally leads us to the outcast of the world. The star that would have led Marley to Christ would have also led him to other homes of poverty. Our encounter with Christ often causes us to encounter ministry.

In the story *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge has to prepare himself for Christ’s coming into his life. For Scrooge to let anything into his life means he must open his tightly clenched hands. This will be no easy task, because in order for Scrooge to open his hands, he must first trust another power to hang on when he cannot.

In Scrooge’s case, to prepare himself for Christ’s coming he must get rid of his old gods of stinginess. This may mean that Scrooge will have to face his fear of poverty and abandonment. He must learn to look up and to focus his concern on others, instead of simply on himself. Like many people, Scrooge has gaping wounds that have been left unattended. His wounds have embittered him and it is painful for Scrooge to look at the world around him, because he has not dealt with his own pain. Now a

screaming Ghost from his past will not let him rest but torments him to look at his past.

In the middle of Marley's grief over his sin, Scrooge tries to legitimize it for him. He attempts to comfort Marley by telling him that he was always a good businessman, but Marley rebukes him by telling him, "Human kind was my business."

What kept Scrooge so closed up, barricaded in his office and bedroom and separated from humanity? Perhaps it was fear of rejection or abandonment. He clearly needed a healing touch in his broken and hurting past. But whatever the cause, Scrooge's isolation made him a poorer man, who lacked the basic human compassion that is taught by Christianity.

For a Christian to follow Christ means that we cannot be self-sufficient and completely dependent upon ourselves for our success and happiness. The gift of dependence on God, rather than ourselves, is the realization that our resources are not our own: that they belong to God. We are not the ones solely responsible for our survival! God is ultimately responsible for our care! When we realize this truth it is easier to open up our hands and let go of the resources that God has given us in order to share them with others. Christmas cannot just be about rewarding our loved ones and ourselves with presents. Christ came to create a greater purpose and we must live for a greater purpose. Just like Scrooge, we cannot truly join or minister to others until we feel safe to do so by having Christ touch our hurting past.

As we light this next candle, let us give anew to Christ our unanswered questions and ask Him to touch us with His light. This is the Prophet's candle. It calls us to listen to the word of prophets who call for repentance and healing so that we might prepare a way for Christ's coming.

PART II

THE FIRST LESSON OF BOOK OF PRAYER, THE PROPHET'S CANDLE OF HOPE: MORNING PRAYER ISAIAH ONE: THE RAGING PROPHET

The first chapter of Isaiah is a harsh beginning to our Advent contemplation because it presents us with a raging prophet. This is not the nice God that we put on greeting cards and speak of in sentimental sayings. This is the impolite God, the one we want to hide from our overly educated, exotic coffee-drinking, suffocated friends. This is the God who has expectations of His people and here He is telling His people that if those expectations are not met there will be consequences that they will have to bear. In this passage, God is not pleased with His people. In fact, He says they don't even know Him anymore.

"The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him." Isaiah 1:3-4

Imagine worshipping a God that you can no longer recognize. These people can no longer recognize God because they have skewed perceptions and values. The Scripture diagnoses this problem as: "The whole head is sick. And the whole heart is faint."

"Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted." Isaiah 1:5

They have a sickness in their heads that has made their hearts calloused. Yes, poor thinking can lead to a weak heart. And in this passage, God's peoples' calloused behaviors were directed, as many cruel actions are, toward the most helpless in their society. These people have

not protected the orphans, nor do they hear the cry of pity from the widow's mouth.

"Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them." Isaiah 1:23

Christian Judean faith demands from its follower's human compassion. "Love for your neighbor" was not born in the New Testament; it resounds in the Old Testament as well. Throughout Scripture God reminds us that He will hold us accountable for how we treat the poor and if we do not speak up for the poor and helpless, God will.

But in the middle of this prophet's rage, there is an invitation for repentance if they will only hear the reason for God's voice of repentance and compassion.

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Isaiah 1:18

"I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness." Isaiah 1:26-27

God's call for the people "to reason with Him" is a call for His people to be in conversation with Him. As love was not invented in the New Testament, neither was a personal relationship with God a completely new idea. In the Scripture, we watched the faith's prophets, the Psalmist and mothers and fathers struggle with knowing and serving God by behaving responsibly toward God's people.

PART III

EVENING PRAYERS ISAIAH TWO: WHEN GOD REIGNS IN OUR REPENTANCE

Isaiah Chapter Two is about God's final, ultimate reign over all the earth. But this Scripture is more than just a mere prediction of the future: this Scripture has lessons for us today. As the passage begins, God proclaims the day of His sovereign reign. God's reign is witnessed by humans worshipping the one, true God and yearning to know His ways.

"Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths" Isaiah 2:3

If you wish to make a change in this world, don't start with committees, elaborate plans or fundraising. Start in prayerful thought and worship. Scrooge's repentance doesn't begin with sudden change in his views toward the poor, but first with a thoughtful look inside himself.

God is more interested in a changed life than a life full of actions. But by the same token, a changed life will lead to compassionate actions. God works to transform our lives by first transforming our minds.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will." Romans 12:2

In Isaiah, God's people had thought wrongly; therefore they behaved wrongly. Their calloused minds led to cruel hearts. Time with their Maker would soften hard thoughts and create compassionate hearts.

If you want to change this world, begin with prayer. It was out of Quaker prayer meetings that slavery was challenged and eventually brought down through the abolitionist movement. The second great