

“A Dickens of a Christmas: What Are the Chains That Bind Us?”

November 29, 2009 (First Sunday of Advent – Year C)

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

Rev. Deborah Dail

Denbigh Presbyterian Church

Advent is about wake-up calls. We would rather Advent be a more sentimental season, but it's really about wake-up calls. For the four weeks of Advent every year, we hear the clarion call to wake up, to look within and to look beyond ourselves -- to repent and to change.

Some of us have had wake-up calls in the past year.

- The heart attack that didn't kill or debilitate you. Now you're exercising, cutting down on the bad food, watching your weight.
- The near-miss accident when you saw your life flash before your eyes. You've re-evaluated your priorities.
- The friend who died young. You've begun to appreciate every day of life and live it to the fullest.
- The marriage that teetered on the edge of divorce. You've started listening to your spouse and making the relationship a priority.
- The friend or loved one who committed suicide. You've decided to pay attention to your own depression and get the help you need.

Wake-up calls.

Today's wake-up call from the Gospel of Luke was written to remind the first listeners and us that Jesus will return. During Advent each year, we remember that Jesus has come, Jesus comes to us even now and Jesus will come again.

The wake-up call in Luke urges us to be prepared for the coming of Jesus. We are reminded: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap . . . Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

It’s interesting that Jesus warns against being weighed down with drunkenness and the “anxieties of life” in the same sentence. Both can “dull our senses” and weigh us down so that we are unaware of Christ coming to us even now in our everyday lives, much less in the future (JesusWalk.com, Disciple Lessons from Luke’s Gospel). Certainly the anxieties of life have a way of distracting us from Christ’s work in and around us and Christ’s call to us to live as He lived, to give as He gave.

This year at our church members and community artists will be presenting “A Southern Christmas Carol.” This musical takes Charles Dickens’ classic book *A Christmas Carol* and sets it in south Georgia during the Great Depression. Having the musical here at DPC has prompted me to go back and read *A Christmas Carol*.

Talk about wake-up calls. You may recall that in the story – really an allegory -- Ebenezer Scrooge is encountered by the ghost of his deceased business partner Jacob Marley as well as three other spirits. Marley and Scrooge were well-known misers. They turned away those in need without a thought. They despised the poor. Scrooge is described by Dickens as “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” (Stave 1).

Marley appears to Scrooge on the 7th anniversary of his death. He is a tormented, weighed-down ghost in chains. His chain is made of “cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought of

steel.” He is “doomed to wander through the world and witness what he cannot share, but might have shared on earth.”

Marley blames no one else for his plight. He says: “I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link and yard by yard. I girded it on of my own free will and of my own free will I wore it.”

When Marley grieves about the opportunities he missed in this life, Scrooge says: “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob.” To which Jacob Marley replies: “Business! 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.”

Marley comes with a wake-up call to Scrooge. He says that Scrooge is essentially a walking dead man, equally bound by the same chains that weigh him down. But, Marley says, Scrooge has time to change. “You have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate.”

What were the links in Marley’s chains? Some would simply describe them as sins; some, missed opportunities to do good; some, the “cares and anxieties of this life” that caused him to sin, to miss the opportunities to do good, that distracted him from the true business of this life.

What are our chains? To some degree we can all identify with Marley and Scrooge. We have chains that weigh us down. We have sins we lug along with us everywhere we go. We have link upon link of missed opportunities. We are weighed down with cares and anxieties. We have resentments and grudges. We have prejudices and pain. We have greed and pride. We have jealousy and anger, perfectionism and piety. We have selfishness and snobbiness. And, we have addictions and secrets. We carry these around with us and live weighed-down lives.

Advent is a wake-up call for us to take a look at those chains – link by link. It’s a wake-up call for us to examine our lives and to change our ways. It’s time to repent. Advent is a wake-up call. Jesus has come, Jesus comes to us even now and Jesus is coming yet again.

As Marley speaks of Scrooge’s life and his life to come, Scrooge says to Marley “Speak comfort to me.” Marley replies: “I have none to give.”

When we take an honest look at our chains, we can despair. And, if it were just up to us to make the needed changes in our lives of our own strength, there would be no comfort for us either. If it were just up to us and our own strength to be prepared for the coming of Jesus, there would be no comfort for us either.

But that is not the case for us. While we must take personal responsibility for the chains we have forged, preserved and carried around, we do not have to nor can we free ourselves from these chains. While we are called to be watchful and prayerful in anticipation of Christ’s coming, we can never be watchful or prayerful enough by ourselves. We cannot of our own strength, or will or works “stand before the Son of Man.”

There is comfort for us. Our comfort is found in Christ. He came into this world to deliver us, to set us free from bondage – from the chains that bind us. He came to forgive, heal and release us from all that weighs us down, from all that distracts us from the abundant life he offers us. He came and he continues to come to set us free each and every day. He came, died and rose again so that we could stand faultless before his throne of grace without fear. Our “chance and hope of escaping” the chains of death in this life and the life to come is through the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

This Advent, let us wake up and look at ourselves and the chains that weigh us down. This Advent, let us wake up and look at Jesus for He is the one who can release us and set us free today and for evermore.

Resources: *Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol With a Four-Week Bible Study for Advent* by Travis J. Scholl; *A Christmas Carol Special Edition with Christian Insights & Discussion Questions for Groups and Families* by Stephen Skelton

“Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone) sung by Chris Tomlin

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed

Chorus: My chains are gone
I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, Amazing grace

The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow
The sun forbear to shine
But God, Who called me here below
Will be forever mine
Will be forever mine
You are forever mine