

**“A Dickens of a Christmas: Future Shock” (4<sup>th</sup> in series)**

**Scriptures: Psalm 80:1-7; Luke 1:39-55**

**December 20, 2009 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)**

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Sometimes we wish for a “crystal ball” that will reveal our future.

For Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, the “crystal ball” is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Other spirits have visited Scrooge, showing him his past and present. Now it is time to look at the future.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come takes Scrooge to the time of his own death. People are happy the old man is gone. People have nothing kind to say about him. No one feels sadness or grief at his passing. It takes Scrooge a while to come to terms with the fact that the dead man is indeed him. He is the one about whom no “man, woman or child says ‘he was kind to me in this or that . . .’” This dead man is none other than Scrooge himself.

At his own gravesite, Scrooge says to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: “Are these shadows of the things that **Will** be, or are they shadows of the things that **May** be only? “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me! Why show me this if I am past all hope?” “Will you not speak to me?”

Gazing at his gravestone there is the date of his birth, a dash, and the date of his death. It's as if Scrooge has some of the same thoughts in that moment as those reflected in a well-known poem called simply "The Dash" by Linda Ellis.

I read of a man who stood to speak  
At the funeral of a friend.  
He referred to the dates on her tombstone  
From the beginning to the end.

He noted that first came the date of her birth  
And spoke of the following date with tears,  
But he said what mattered most of all  
Was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time  
That she spent alive on earth  
And now only those who loved her  
Know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own,  
The cars, the house, the cash,  
What matters is how we live and love  
And how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard;  
Are there things you'd like to change?  
For you never know how much time is left  
That can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough  
To consider what's true and real  
And always try to understand  
The way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger  
And show appreciation more  
And love the people in our lives  
Like we've never loved before.

If we treat each other with respect  
And more often wear a smile,  
Remembering that this special dash  
Might only last a little while.

So when your eulogy is being read  
With your life's actions to rehash  
Would you be proud of the things they say  
About how you spent your dash?

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Scrooge wasn't proud of how he had lived his life – bitter, angry, demanding, disrespectful – especially of the poor. He had lived his life for himself. He was a man in chains. He was ashamed of his “dash” and shocked about what the future held for him.

So Scrooge cries out to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. “Why show me this if I am past all hope?” “. . . .Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life?” “I

will not shut out the lessons that the Past, the Present and the Future teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone.”

It is out of a similar feeling of despair that the writer of Psalm 80 speaks. He and his people have wondered if they are past all hope as punished exiles living in a foreign land. Will God ever speak again? Will God hear them? Will God pay attention? Can their lives be changed for the better? The writer of the Psalm says if God will listen and act on their behalf: “Then we will never turn back from you: give us life and we will call on your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” is echoed throughout the Psalm. We can and should make “alterations” in our lives, but the Psalmist is clear that only God can save. Perhaps it is in realizing the magnitude of our need and our inability to satisfy that need on our own or fix ourselves on our own that we cry out to God for mercy. We seek God’s face and light and blessings and hope. When God shines on us we are set free and healed. We are then empowered to alter our life.

In “Shine, Jesus, Shine” we sing: “As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness; ever changing from glory to glory, mirrored here may our lives tell your story. Shine on me. Shine on me.”

Only God can transform us. Only God can truly change our lives. It is in looking into God’s face that we are changed – through God’s in us we can mirror His story of love in our story.

Still, we must be at a place of readiness and openness for that change to occur and stick. Mary, the mother of Jesus, models for us what it means to be an open vessel in which God can work. She models such

openness in allowing Christ to be born in and through her. We need to be so open as well, if we desire God to change us . . . if we truly desire Christ to be born in us as well.

Scrooge discovers that he is not past all hope. The people on whose behalf the Psalmist wrote and cried out to God were not past all hope. And we are not past all hope. God can and will change us. We do not have to be shocked by or afraid of the future. God is eager to restore us, to let his face shine on us that we may be saved, transformed, healed and set on a new pathway.

“Restore us, O Lord, let your face shine that we may be saved.”