

## **“A Dickens of a Christmas: Regrets and Resets”**

**Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6**

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Back in March of 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva. Symbolic of the reason for their meeting, Secretary of State Clinton presented Foreign Minister Lavrov a “reset button.” The hope of the meeting was to reset U.S./Russian relations. Regrettably and perhaps ironically, the button read *peregruzka* rather than *perezagruzka*. Instead of saying “reset” it said “overload” or “overcharged.” Both dignitaries had a good laugh and Clinton staffers fixed the mistranslation on the reset button. Foreign Minister Lavrov said he intended to keep the reset button on his desk. (CNN News)

Perhaps there is more of a relationship between “**reset**” and “**overload**” than we might realize. It’s hard for nations to hit the “reset” button of foreign relations when they are overloaded with memories of past actions or inactions.

In our personal lives it’s much the same. We can become overloaded with our past actions or inactions as well as the actions or inactions of others. We then find it hard to press the reset button.

**Sometimes regrets preclude resets.**

Sometimes we regret the wrong things and miss the things we should truly regret. Sometimes we are simply resistant to resetting because the reset button is not an “easy button.” It means taking a hard look at ourselves. It means being willing to change. It means being open to transformation. It means being open to pain.

John the Baptist called people to push the reset button in their lives. He said they needed to do this in order to be ready for the coming Messiah. “Repent,” he said. Look squarely at your regrets – your sins.

Dr. Ralph Wilson says this about repentance: “Repentance is much more than a sense of guilt. . . Unremedied, guilt can beat a person down. Guilt can be explained away . . . Repentance is more than sorrow

for getting caught or for doing something wrong. Repentance is an actual change of mind, an action, a step away from a sinful pattern or habit or act. It is change. God's call isn't to guilt or to sorrow, but to change." ("Jesus Walk: Disciple Lessons from Luke's Gospel, January 1, 2000). I would add, it is not simply to regret. It is to change.

John the Baptist was telling the people he had come to help them get ready for the Messiah – the king. In the first century when John preached, making preparations for the arrival of a king involved creating a long, smooth straight road for the king to enter on. John understood his job to be that of helping people prepare such a road in their hearts for the King to enter their lives. People couldn't be overloaded with unconfessed and unacknowledged sin and have their hearts truly open to receive the coming king. They couldn't be stuck in the past. John said repentance and forgiveness create the long, smooth straight road in human hearts – a road fit for a king.

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is visited by the **Ghost of Christmas Past**. This ghost, along with Marley and the other two ghosts who visit Scrooge, comes to help Scrooge hit the reset button in his life. But first, Scrooge has to look at his regrets and his sins. He has to feel the pain. The journey toward reset is not easy. I am reminded of Malachi's words which were read earlier. The process of change is likened to a "refiner's fire" which purifies silver or "fuller's soap" used to clean filthy, stained laundry. Both purify or cleanse; neither is gentle.

Scrooge's pain began in his childhood. He was a lonely child. This was not a result of any wrongdoing on his part. Yet, he allowed this loneliness and those who caused it to begin his journey toward a life of isolation, bitterness and disregard for others. It's very hard not to be overloaded by our past, isn't it? It's very hard to embrace healing instead of closing ourselves off in our closets of pain. Scrooge rightly wept when he saw himself as a lonely child. Others wronged him. Life wronged him. And he couldn't or wouldn't get past it. **Sometimes regrets get in the way of resets.** After watching the scene from his childhood, Scrooge regretted how he had treated the child who earlier in the day stopped at his door to sing a Christmas Carol. Pain, refining fire, a stinging soap. **Sometimes regrets can move us toward resets.**

**The Ghost of Christmas Past** showed Scrooge a scene from his young adult life when he was an apprentice for a generous and fun-loving employer named Fezziwig. Scrooge had been treated kindly by him. He saw love, openness and generosity modeled by Fezziwig. This scene caused Scrooge to remember how he had treated his own clerk earlier that day— begrudging him Christmas Day off from work with pay, no less. Pain, refining fire, a stinging soap. **Sometimes regrets lead us toward resets.**

Then **the Ghost of Christmas Past** also showed Scrooge his true love, Belle. He took him to that time when Belle confronted Scrooge with the choice he had made in their relationship. He had chosen the Idol of Gain over their relationship. She says this: “I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master passion, Gain, engrosses you.” (Stave 2) She breaks off their relationship, because Gain has become Scrooge’s “one guiding principle” in life. Again, Scrooge is anguished by this vision of his past. Pain, refining fire, a stinging soap.

When asked by Scrooge why he had come to visit him, the Ghost of Christmas past replied: “Your welfare” and “your reclamation.” (Stave 2) The Ghost of Christmas Past had come to reclaim Scrooge **from** his selfish, lonely, bitter life. He came to reclaim him **for** a life of generosity, relationships and hope.

John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness for the people to repent in order to reclaim them **from** a life of sin. He cried out in order to reclaim them **for** the coming Messiah.

During this holiday season, we will face our own Ghosts of Christmas past. It is that time of year when we are faced with our regrets. Some of our regrets are like those of Scrooge – our childhoods, our past relationships have not been good. We are reminded of that pain when everyone else’s family seems to be sane or at least intact. We are reminded of this when everyone else’s Christmas letters reflect their seemingly perfect lives. It is painful. But we, like Scrooge, have the choice between healing and treating others as we wished we had been treated, or living embittered, closed lives. Pain, refining fire, stinging soap. **Sometimes regrets can move us toward resets.**

During this Advent Season, we are urged to look at our idols – anything that has become a “master passion” or “guiding principle” other than God. Some of us, like Scrooge, have become consumed with Gain – financial gain, prestige gain, success gain, popularity gain. All of these idols can rob us of our relationships and they cause us to be less ready or even unable to welcome Christ into our lives. These idols are the potholes and detours in the road we are to be preparing for Christ, our King. “God is seeking to prepare you and me. To cut through the mountains of our pride, to fill up the valleys of our despair, to straighten our crooked moral rationalizations, and make us fit for the King himself to travel upon” (Dr. Ralph Wilson). Pain, refining fire, stinging soap.

God longs to reclaim us from our pain, our regrets, our sin and our idols. God longs to reclaim us for an abundant life of hope, joy, peace and purpose. **Don't let regrets preclude resets.**

Today, we have the great joy of coming to the Lord's Table. This is a table of grace and forgiveness. It is a table to which we can bring our pain and confess our sin. At this table we offer up our regrets and allow God to reset our lives. Let us lay down our pain, our bitterness, our regrets, our idols, our sins so that we will not be too overloaded . . . so that we can be re-set and reclaimed by our merciful God. Come to the table. Hit the reset button, knowing that through Christ's death and resurrection the reset button is always available; knowing that through Christ's death and resurrection the button has already been reset for you.