

“A ‘DICKENS’ OF A CHRISTMAS (#1): THE CHAINS WE FORGE”
(Isaiah 61:1-3; Galatians 5:1)

**[PROPS NEEDED: #1) “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” Video-Clip; #2) Paper Chains at altar;
#3) Person up front “knitting” a paper chain during entire sermon]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-2-07]

--I--

1. Read Texts: Isaiah 61:1-3; Galatians 5:1 and Pray.

2. **[SHOW “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” VIDEO-CLIP (Marley with Scrooge-Time: 2:06)]**

A–In 1843, author Charles Dickens wrote the classic holiday tale “*A Christmas Carol*” about a business-man named Ebenezer Scrooge who loved nothing but money and profits, and had little use for the intangibles of Christmas.

B–Well, over the next four weeks, I want to invite us all on a journey to rediscover the true meaning of the holiday by relating this familiar story to the biblical Christmas story.

3. I want to start by calling attention to the fact that as an author, Charles Dickens was a master at using stories to help readers examine their *own* lives.

A–And so, it’s not surprising that one purpose of this scene between Scrooge and the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley is to challenge *us* to look inside ourselves – ...

B–...To consider what chains *we* might be bound by today, and in what ways Scrooge is merely a caricature of our *own* human condition.

4. Moving forward in the story, remember that it was 1:00 a.m. when the “Ghost of Christmas Past” visits Scrooge and beckons him to come on a journey.

A–Most of us know that Scrooge is taken back in time, where he re-experiences the pain and rejection he felt as a lonely little boy who’d been sent away to boarding school by his demanding and abusive father. ¹

B–The scene changes, and we see Scrooge as a youth several years later perking up at the visit of the *one* person who seems to truly care about and love him, his sister Fran – but a sister who (we later learn) dies at a young age.

C–So, we have an abusive, rejecting father; a lonely childhood; the death of someone he loved dearly.

D–Now, from these *painful life-experiences*, Scrooge could have enlarged his heart and cared and shown empathy for abused children like himself, or he could have reached out to offer comfort to people in mourning.

1–But instead, several scenes later we find him making *small decisions* with his fiancé which lead him down a path that ultimately leave his heart cold, hard, and without love.

2–And as he watches the scenes unfold, Scrooge slowly begins to understand that the heavy chains he now wears have been forged by two things: ...the painful experiences and small decisions of his own past.

–II–

5. Now, as I said earlier, this is not only a story about Ebenezer Scrooge, but also about our *own* lives, as well – how we, like him, often find ourselves bound with chains forged by these same two forces:

A–As with Scrooge, there are the **PAINFUL EXPERIENCES** of our past.

- 1–If we think back over our own life, probably every one of us here can name some.
- (a) Maybe it was the loss of someone we loved dearly.
 - (b) Or perhaps we had a childhood similar to Scrooge: a parent who abused us emotionally or physically, or who rejected us, or who simply failed to love or accept us as we felt they should.
 - (c) Maybe our home life was good, but somewhere along the way someone broke our heart – they ripped it out and stomped it into the ground... and it hurt!

2–Whatever it was: for better or worse, we are who we are today in part because of the painful experiences of our past.

B–But in addition, our chains are also forged by the **SMALL DECISIONS** that we make.

- 1–Remember, Scrooge didn't *set out* to be a miserable old man, enslaved by money.
- (a) No. Somewhere along the way he made a very small decision to put money first.
 - (b) But that decision, followed by another, and another, slowly led him down a path where he was completely enslaved by his addiction to wealth. ²

2–And you know, in *our* lives, we make small decisions every day, too; and the sum total of those – like the “chain” that’s being knit link by link behind me today – result in the character and the person that we become.

3–Now, they may start out as *small* things, but the more we do them, the more they begin to control and master us, and by the time we discover their power, we’re often trapped. ³

C–I have a Pastor friend who, like many people today, struggled as a child – though he had good parents, it seemed to him that nothing he achieved or did was quite good enough to please or satisfy them.

1–Consequently, he struggled with issues of rejection and insecurity, and without realizing why, as a teenager began medicating and numbing the emotional pain caused by those by getting & viewing ...pornography – it was his “drug of choice.”

2–It seemed harmless, at first -- after all, nobody else knew or was affected, right?

3–But little by little, step by step, small decision by small decision, the grasp of the “chains” of pornography began to tighten.

(a) He got married, but the struggle continued, and began to consume and change him into someone he detested.

(b) Now, on the outside, he had it “all together”; but on the inside he felt empty and alone.

4–In the end, his addiction was discovered, and he soon found himself on the verge of losing his marriage, his family, his ministry, and his very soul... all to “chains” forged by small decisions he’d made in response to a painful childhood.

–III--

6. Now, of course, my friend’s addiction is just *one* kind of chain that we can wear – there are many others. We can be “chained” by a love for alcohol, drugs, gambling, smoking, gossip, overeating, and yes, even shopping!

A–And the sad truth is that there is absolutely *nothing* *WE* can do on our *own* to achieve lasting freedom and escape from these “chains.”⁴

B–But, the message and power of Christmas is that God knows and understands all of this.

1–He knows how our past can shape our present and our future; how we can become enslaved by past painful experiences and bad small decisions. And God resolved to do something about it!

2–In Dickens’ story, the chance at redemption that Marley offers Scrooge comes in the form of the visitation of three “ghosts” of Christmas Past, Present, & Future.

3–For us today, *our* chance at redemption comes in the form of another visitation – the visitation of God’s own Son on that first Christmas Eve over 2000 years ago.

C–Listen again to the words of today’s first scripture from the prophet Isaiah – words that were fulfilled by Christ’s birth (Chapter 61:1-3):

[NRSV] “*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because [He] has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;... to comfort all who mourn; ... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*”⁵

[MSG] *“The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me because God anointed me. He sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners; ...to comfort all who mourn; ...give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes, messages of joy instead of news of doom, a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.”*

D–Today’s second scripture in Galatians puts it this way (Chapter 5:1),...

[NRSV] *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*

[MSG] *“Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.”*

7. You see, the good news of Advent and Christmas is that God sent Jesus into our world so that WE would not have to be *tomorrow* what we were *yesterday*.⁶

A–God sent Jesus to heal the broken places of our pasts, and to set us free from the things that enslave us – as Methodist hymnwriter Charles Wesley once wrote, *“He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free...”*⁷

B–Remember my Pastor friend caught in the subtle web of pornography?

1–Well, I know many people who *do* end up losing everything as the result of an addiction like his (and also of others).

2–But in his case, by God’s grace, the outcome was different: ...with the help of Christians who confronted him in love and helped him to appropriate the power of Christ through counseling and group support and accountability, my friend is now increasingly walking free from that ponderous chain that he once wore.

8. You see, Jesus came to say, *“It doesn’t matter what happened in your childhood; it doesn’t matter what your parents or anyone else said or did to you, or how you were hurt by the painful experiences of your life,... because I can change all of that. I can set you free from the chains forged by your past. I can help you live a free life!”*⁸

A–Friends, what chains are *you* bound by this holiday season?

1–Is it wealth? power? material things?

2–Anger? bitterness? frustration? pride?

3–Is it an addiction of some sort? to sex, alcohol, drugs, smoking, gambling, gossip?

4–Are you, like so many people, bound by the desperate need to be liked by others; for others to think that you’re “okay”? to be accepted and “liked”?

B–As we close today, I want everyone here to think of one “chain” that often “binds” you.

1–And following a prayer, I want to invite us forward to the paper chains up front.

2–Find a link, and then ...tear it as a symbol of God’s power in your life to set you free from the “chains” that bind you.

C–You see, whatever chains we wear, today’s stories remind us that Jesus came to earth that *first* Christmas to set us free from the *“The Chains We Forge”* in life *today*.

9. [PRAYER: “*O God, we confess that we have knowingly and unknowingly forged chains in our lives through our past experiences and small decisions that have led us into bondage. We’ve been taken prisoner by our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds; held captive by our own selfish desires; oppressed by the pain of the past. And many of us lost hope of ever breaking free. But today we’ve been reminded that you came to bring release those who are oppressed; to set the captives free; that your deepest desire for us is that we be truly free from the painful experiences and destructive decisions and habits that enslave us, so that we could love life fully and completely as your people of faith. We thank you that you have plans for us to prosper us and bless us and to help us be ‘oaks of righteousness’ for you. So help us in this Advent season to prepare our hearts; to invite you to forgive our sins, to break our chains, and to be made new by you. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who broke the chains of death and all other chains. Amen.*”]
10. [CLOSING SONGS: #196 “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” or “Amazing Grace/My Chains Are Gone”]

ENDNOTES:

1. In several film versions, we learn the interpretation that perhaps he was sent away because Scrooge’s mother died giving birth to him, and his father could never forgive Scrooge for him being responsible for the death of his wife.
2. For him, the words of Galatians 6:7-8 came true: “*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.*”
3. What’s more is that our small decisions are not always decisions to do *bad* things – sometimes we *fail* to make decisions to do *good* things. For example, we skip worship one Sunday because someone at church didn’t treat in a “Christian” manner; then the next week we skip because we have a conflict; the next we skip because we just “don’t feel like it.” And before long, it’s just easier to sleep in on Sundays --and we wake up one day and wonder *why* we feel burned-out, and why the joy of our salvation seems gone.
Well, as author Lloyd Cory puts it, “*The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken*” (Cory, cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B42). Remember, too, that Jesus said that all of us will be mastered by / slaves to something. In Matthew 6:24 he said “*You cannot serve two masters. You can only serve one in your life. You’ll either serve God or something else.*” Unfortunately, even we Christians too often don’t heed the words and power promised in today’s Galatians 5:1 scripture...“*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” Instead we’ve gotten so used to our chains that we’d rather wear them than have them removed by Christ.
4. We might achieve some TEMPORARY victories, but LASTING freedom from our habits, sins, additions, and the pain of our past can ONLY come from OUTSIDE of ourselves. Romans 7:24-25, “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” In other words, the ability to break free of the chains that we wear from our past is not found in our own actions or deeds. Instead, the real power is found in what God has done for us: God sent Jesus Christ into the world to break the bonds that hold us.
5. This scripture had an immediate fulfillment in the time of Isaiah as the Jews were released from their captivity in Babylon and allowed to go back home to Jerusalem. However, it also had a subsequent fulfillment in the life of Jesus, for in Luke 4:16-21, we find Jesus reading this same passage and then saying “*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*” (Vs. 21).

6. Pastor and author Dr. Douglas J. Rumford says that, “*We are not doomed to wear the chain forged in life! Our painful past and bad choices need not lock us into a hopeless future. God reveals our need so that He can provide our deliverance; he forces us to acknowledge our sin so that we can receive our salvation. His greatest gift in Jesus Christ is the power to change. The hope of Christ’s coming is the hope of change*” (Douglas J. Rumford, cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B35).

7. Lyrics from Charles Wesley’s hymn “O For A Thousand Tongues” (in our United Methodist Hymnal #57), explaining the purpose of Christ’s coming.

8. “*Lord, the poor choices I’ve forged over a lifetime of Christmases have become a ball and chain
In season after season of Silent Nights, the joy has leaked out of my world.
I hate wants that have incarcerated my over-stimulated soul.
Goals I once aimed for have been replaced by less noble ones.
I’m tired of being held prisoner to a jailer known as greed.
I’ve come to see that what I need is not nearly as much as I’ve let on.
And before my life is gone, I want to find the freedom I once knew
Back when I understood what I since have long forgotten.
In short, that Christmas is all about you.*”

[Greg Asimakoupoulos, “Freedom for the Prisoner,” cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B43].