

## **“Needing A Little Joy -- E. Scrooge”**

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East Cobb United Methodist Church  
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Scripture: Philippians 4:4-9

Prayer

(The following is given in character as Ebenezer Scrooge from “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens. The year is 1843. In publishing the work, Dickens said, “I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me) May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.”)

Who, pray, were you expecting? The Ghost of Christmas Present? It’s just me, Ebenezer Scrooge here to share some things I learned the hard way. I appreciate your for allowing me to come by and share with you today. The church is beautiful. We didn’t have Christmas trees yet in 1843, but now I see them everywhere! The beauty of this season brings me much joy. That was not always the case as you might have gathered from that flashback you just witnessed and the sermons for the past two weeks. Joy was once something for which I had contempt, and I was not very pleasant to be around. That’s the reputation I’ve gained, you know, but I’m not here to relive my mistakes but to encourage you not to make the same mistakes I made.

One hundred and sixty-four years ago is when it all started. Marley was dead from the beginning. That’s important. We were partners, Marley and Scrooge, or was it Scrooge and Marley? I like the Scrooge and Marley better! Jacob Marley and I were great businessmen. But then the fool up and died! I have had to work all the harder to keep up. Sure I got all of his money and all of his business, but it was difficult to keep this business going all alone. Oh, yes. I had Bob Cratchit, a good worker and a good man, but I thought him a fool to spend all his money on Christmas. Christmas was to Marley and me simply a poor excuse to pick a man’s pocket every December 25. Cratchit should have to work for his pay, and all this giving to the poor was just a bit of rubbish! Why should I give the money I earned to those with empty pockets and weak minds!?

Old Marley was dead. Did I tell you? Dead as a doornail, mind you. I don’t know what it is about a doornail that makes it dead, but Marley was as dead as dead could be. He had died 7 years before that Christmas. The last thing I expected to see when I returned to my dwelling was old Marley. I have to confess that it gave me quite a start! The food I had eaten was bad but not that bad. Marley, as it were, came to me for the same reason I come to you today – to warn me not to pass up the opportunity for joy in my life before it was too late! Marley did, and I almost did as well.

I was content to be the curmudgeon I had become. Growl at everyone, chase away the carolers, collect excessive amounts from those who were unwilling or unable to stop me. I was making money, and nothing else mattered. My personal life was in my business. I lived for it and little else. My nephew, Fred, was so joyful and full of cheer, I could not bear to be around him and his family. Sure, he invited me to have Christmas with them, but the thoughts of seeing all the waste and excess just for one day of the year was disgusting to me. I was dying inside, and everything I wanted just hastened my demise.

Marley told me that three ghosts would appear to me that Christmas week, and he was dead on! As I heard each one with all the trepidation that accompanies an encounter of the unknown in such a bizarre circumstance, I began to realize that perhaps my life decisions had been flawed. Perhaps there was a better way, but I didn’t yet see it. It was

only when I came face-to-face with my own mortality and my own demise that I knew that the path I had chosen was wrong, and I must turn from these ways at once. In the morning, I made the vow to honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all year. I promised to live in the past, present, and future as the spirits of all three were striving within me.

That, my Friends, was the most important decision of my life, because I decided that life was not all about me and my counting house. It was not about how much money I could make off others or how contemptuous I could be to others. The contempt, I came to realize, was mine. I was behaving contemptibly, and I was about to become the greatest victim of my bad behavior.

Truth is, my soul needed a theology of joy! And I think your world does, too. Will there ever be, I wonder, a Christmas when we do not need to sing loudly about peace and joy in the world in defiance of the embattled circumstances in which we find ourselves? The battle of this season is within you and me. Old Marley almost scared me to death to get me to realize that! But with war, poverty, injustice, and pain, how can we in good conscience allow ourselves to be joyful, for heaven's sake? I am not suggesting that you become hermits or move to the state of denial. There is an answer that I have found to this dilemma. Sharon Welch puts it well when she writes:

*"The wellspring of decency is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes. The wellspring of moral action is not utopia, not a counterfactual vision, not a declaration that the world could and should be otherwise. Rather, it is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is. The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future in the reign of God, or after the revolution. The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is; to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life."*

Friends, we are needing a little joy! The answer to the difficulty of the world is not to harden our hearts and allow them to become cold and frozen. There are families that will not see each other this Christmas out of personal choice. Others will get together at Christmas, but it will be the only time they are together until next December 25. Misunderstandings, long-standing feuds or rivalries, and self-centeredness that we have allowed to drive us apart will keep us apart this Christmas, emotionally if not physically. And those of you who have had a loss will opt to retreat into loneliness, depression, and despair; and joy will elude you. I remember just how miserable I was, but I didn't know that I just needed a little joy!

Fezziwig's party stirred that longing for a little joy in my life. I remembered how I had really enjoyed those parties. All the dancing and the laughter and the love I had shared. I ached to experience that again. And you know, Fezziwig didn't spend that much on those parties. There were no credit card bills to pay on for months; no mortgage on the house or equity line of credit. He just cleared the warehouse and let the festivities begin. Just friends and good times. Not expensive but priceless!

Old Fezziwig once said to me, "Ebenezer, when happiness shows up, always give it a comfortable seat." I didn't always do that, and I suspect you don't either. Oh, how I attempted to rationalize that what the spirit was showing me really didn't happen the way I was revisiting it, but it did. Every detail was there. Every joy. What happened? Where did it go? During those dark "Bah Humbug" years, it was I who changed. The joy was always available. I was just no longer receptive to those things that had brought me joy.

I've learned that you have to be open to joy. If you are, it's yours! If you aren't, it won't be found anywhere.

My mind often drifts back to that Christmas long ago when my heart changed, and, after church, when I walked the streets breathing in pleasure like the crisp air, greeting excited children and talking to beggars and watching people hurry to and fro. I still love all that predictable hurly-burly of the holidays, crowded stores and crowded sidewalks, gaudy decorations, foodstuffs in heaps, childish fantasies fanatically entertained by parents, everything in excess, especially hope.

And yet . . .

There was something, I felt, that had slipped away, some pool of quiet and uncomplicated joy that I had known that first day and then, as I kept Christmas year after year, I had a harder and harder time recovering. I tried deep breathing and a spot of meditation. I tried "being in the moment," or at least I thought I tried it. I don't do well with regrets. And I certainly would not take back a single holiday festivity, a single batch of Christmas cards, a single search for the perfect present, a single turn at the soup kitchen, a single "Nutcracker" or "Messiah" or office party or charity benefit, a single resplendent tree, a single sparkle of wonderment in a child's eyes. No, I treasure them all.

And I have a secret that Dickens didn't share: I didn't do so well after Christmas that year. Sure I got caught up in the festivities. I didn't miss a thing! But that was a huge change for me. When I saw how much money I had spent and how people seemed to be trying to take advantage of me, I really wondered if I had done the right thing. If you allow joy to come into your life, you will experience a drastic change as well. You may have second thoughts just as I did. You may find it difficult to keep those new promises you made to yourself and others. But it is worth it, and you can do it.

Recall the Christmas story from scripture. Did the shepherds linger at the stable before they had to rush back to their flocks? They could not stay there, but as they left they told everyone they met what they had seen and heard. That kind of unbridled joy is sometimes misinterpreted. Scripture says the crowds who heard them "wondered." I think that is a gracious commentary, don't you?

There is an adage in the business world that may have survived to this day. It goes like this: "Smile. People will wonder what you are up to." There really is more to it than that, but true joy does come out. It is a visible manifestation of a spiritual relationship. Regardless of your circumstances, there is always enough joy to go around if you will just look for it.

It took Old Marley and three spirits to shake me to my senses. It wasn't pleasant, but the results are undeniable. What will it require to persuade you to look for joy this year? There is a Spirit that seeks to dwell in your heart this Christmas – the Spirit of Him who came to give us a second chance. The Spirit of the very creator of joy - God himself. Fill your hearts with what you find to be good and beautiful in these holy days. Then there will be no room for an attitude that is not joyful. There will be no room for fear, for joy is stronger than fear. There will be no room for regrets, because if you give joy a comfortable place, it will stay. Friends, find your deepest longing and seek it!

[Taking a deep breath and looking at my watch] On my, it's time to go. I bid you all a Merry Christmas, and may God bless us every one!