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**Dickens and John the Baptist**

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After hearing it, one person wrote of this 19<sup>th</sup> century work; “There never was a more beautiful sermon,” even though it was not written nor preached by a minister, pastor, priest, monk, nun, preacher, biblical scholar, or theologian. Instead this so-called “sermon” that inspired hearts and is credited with bringing about changes in individual lives and the culture of the time, was actually written by the popular novelist Charles Dickens; and some 174 years later, *A Christmas Carol* remains a timeless tale of hope of repentance and joy.

Before the classic characters of Ebenezer Scrooge and company were brought to life by actors on stage and screen, Charles Dickens himself gave public readings of his little Christmas story, and it was said by those who were in the audience of these readings that the powerful message of *A Christmas Carol* was even more evident than in the written word. After hearing it several audience members said they experienced a Scrooge-like change themselves as was evidenced by purchasing turkeys for their employees for Christmas, or giving Christmas as a paid day off, or giving generously to charities. Accounts like these, along with the change in the culture of the time to embracing the celebration of Christmas that had fallen away many years before, have led to writers like Les Standiford giving Charles Dickens credit for creating or inventing Christmas as we know it today. In his book and the movie with the same title, *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, Standiford offers us a look at the story behind the story of *A Christmas Carol*, and shows us a Charles Dickens who was struggling with debt and the ghosts of his own tragic past as he endeavored to maintain his status as one of if not the most popular writers of his time.

In the movie and the book, we find Charles Dickens dealing with a couple of failed novels, mounting debt that stemmed from his own expenses and those of his father who never could manage money, and the announcement from his wife that she was pregnant with their fifth child. In the midst of these challenges, Dickens got the idea to write a Christmas story. Perhaps because, as Standiford explained in his book, Charles Dickens had enjoyed Christmas and found it to be an inspiring and creative time. Standiford also explained that Dickens was very conscientious of the problems of poverty, debt and inequality of his time. This awareness originated from his days of forced labor in a boot black factory to help pay his father’s debts. In his book more so than in the movie, Standiford claims that one of Dickens’ beliefs was that these

problems of society might be helped or improved at least in part by the revival of the Christmas holiday. All of this came together in the story of *A Christmas Carol*, said to be written by Dickens in just 6 weeks, and today it is hard to find a person who has not heard of the powerful story of Ebenezer Scrooge's Christmas transformation from miser to generous soul.

Dickens' story is populated with rituals like family gatherings, turkey dinners, giving employees the day off, and gifts which are indeed a part of many Christmas celebrations today, and is why he is credited by Standiford as being the inventor of Christmas. But many a historian and scholar remind us Charles Dickens was not the only person exploring a revival of Christmas traditions during the Victorian era. Thanks in part to the Oxford Movement of the 1830s and 1840s, other writers and thinkers of the time were exploring bringing back the rituals of Christmas. This was also the time when the royal family was said to have had its first Christmas tree, and soon Christmas trees became a popular Christmas tradition for many households. Which means that perhaps if Dickens himself could be questioned as to whether or not he believes he is responsible for the expression of Christmas as we know it, I wonder if he would respond more like John the Baptist in our Gospel lesson today. Dickens may admit to shining the light of the Spirit of Christmas onto the world he lived in, a world he judged as in need of repentance, of change, but he is not the originator of Christmas itself. Instead he was a voice crying for a transforming change, by giving us a powerful story of the possibility of change, one that we can almost see ourselves in, which gives us hope and may be why this story is as relevant today as it ever was. Even G.K. Chesterton has written, the conversion of Scrooge is ours as well.

This is not just a Christmas message, it is the heart and soul of Advent, and it is the message of John the Baptist. That may be why we hear from John the Baptist quite a lot during the season of Advent. Most years John the Baptist and his message is featured two out of the four Sundays in Advent; that is half of the season. Considering he is given so much air time during a season when we might want to hear more from angels, Mary and Joseph, there must be something of great importance in John the Baptist's message.

Scholars and historians inform us today's section from John's Gospel had the distinct purpose of reassuring John's community that John the Baptist was not the Messiah. It is believed John the Baptist was such an influential figure of his time that he had his own following of believers who saw him as the Messiah they had been waiting for. But the author of John's Gospel wanted to be sure people knew that John the Baptists' role was simply to help prepare people for the arrival of Jesus by preaching the hopeful message that transformation, that repentance, that change is possible. That is the powerful message that tells us why the Messiah came: so that we might change.

That we all might see there is another way to be, to live, than the way of Rome or whatever government is presently in power. We don't have to live in a dog-eat-dog world where winners are clearly defined as the ones who destroy all others and strength is defined as beating up or beating down the weak. John the Baptist preached the possibility of repentance, a word that simply means to turn, to turn from one way and turn toward another way. To change from the way of Rome to the way of God, where strength is about lifting up and there is enough to go around. Which is the same message in our reading from Isaiah and is the same message put a bit differently in *A Christmas Carol*.

That makes John the Baptist the messenger, not the Messiah, and Charles Dickens another messenger and not the originator of Christmas.

Dickens' story may show us what is easy to miss in the Gospel stories of John the Baptist; that the message of repentance is not necessarily a gloomy or burdensome message, but one that results in joy. For at the end of *A Christmas Carol* we see Scrooge a man rejoicing at his change, as does everyone else who knows him. Changing from miser to generous soul, from gloomy to glad, from uncaring to concern for his fellow human is not a cause for despair, it is a source of joy.

Which is why the message of John the Baptist is so appropriate on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent when the theme of the day is rejoicing. The candle we lit at the start of the service is pink, to symbolize rejoicing and the refreshment such rejoicing brings. The music and other readings for the day also reflect the theme of rejoicing that comes from repentance, from turning toward God and God's ways. When considering changes, it can be easy to forget some changes can bring about rejoicing. Especially when we get distracted thinking the changes will only take from us that which we think we know or we are comfortable with. I know there are changes that do not bring rejoicing, but perhaps that is one of the valuable aspects of John the Baptist's message, it can help us discern if a change is a form of repentance, of turning from our own self interest toward loving God and loving our neighbor or not.

As we enter this third week in Advent, and find ourselves moving closer toward our celebrations of Christmas, perhaps it is good to rejoice. To lift up the many ways we are given the message to turn toward God and the ways we endeavor to show the light of Christ to a world still hungry for the message that there is another way to be, another way to live, where repentance doesn't have to be a heavy message of pain but instead tells of the joy living for God can bring. That this joyful change is truly possible for all of us, because of the One who came and is coming again, which is why the angels told the shepherds on that hillside we'll hear about again on Christmas Eve that they brought good news of great joy to all people. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Instead let's take full advantage of this Advent season and look for the wonder in transformations, in our own and those of others, and consider how we shine the light of Christ and show the joy following Christ can bring. As James Keller has said, "A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle."