

December 6, 2020  
Advent Sunday 2  
Holy Communion

## **Week 2**

### **The Remembrance of Christmas Past**

#### **Scripture: Galatians 1:13-24 - NIV**

13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

15 But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.

19 I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.

20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

21 Then I went to Syria and Cilicia.

22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

23 They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

24 And they praised God because of me.

Galatians 1:13-24 - NIV

**Sermon: "Jesus, the Redeemer of Our Past"**

Our Advent sermon series is based on the 19th century novel by Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol". Last week we were introduced to the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge. Mr. Scrooge was described as a mean, stingy, unlikable man who's only love was gaining more money. By the end of the story we discover Ebenezer Scrooge has been transformed into a generous, kind man.

Our series is called, "The Redemption of Scrooge." Today we will begin to explore how Mr. Scrooge's life was redeemed by a visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past. As Christians, redemption of our souls by Jesus is fundamental to what we believe and how we live because it allows us to live so that our past no longer haunts us.

We all have a past. Some parts we remember, many are forgotten. We remember significant events most vividly, some fondly because of a good experience; some we don't like to recall because it hurts to remember.

Your past is part of you even if you don't like it. Some of you may have a past of violent anger toward others; maybe you are a victim of abuse; maybe you suffered from an addiction to gambling or alcohol, drugs, pornography; maybe you have entered into bad relationships; or indulged in sinful pleasures.

Your painful past could be the loss of a job, a serious car accident, dealing with cancer or other health problem, or the loss of a house due to fire or flood.

Maybe Christmas is a particularly difficult time for you because of grief over a loss or other unpleasant memories associated with this time of year.

God allows us to have experiences that generate memories, good and bad, for our benefit.

Memories of our afflictions can temper our happiness during good times, lest we sin in our desire or love of good things.

Memories of our blessings can bring hope and joy during our times of afflictions so that we do not sin by blaming God or coveting the life of others.

Think of this like the length of daylight as we are approaching the day of shortest light and longest night. We endure these times of extended darkness because we know the days will soon be getting longer. In the summer, we enjoy the days of extended daylight while we can because we know darker days are coming.

As church people, we have many memories of good days. Some of those memories are recorded in pictures I have seen around this church. Some have been shared in stories you have told me.

In the little country church where I grew up I have many fond memories. Memories of a full church, multiple Sunday School classes for all ages from toddlers to adults, Vacation Bible School the week after the last day of school each year, and the children's Christmas program held on Sunday evening before Christmas.

The Christmas program was a special memory. For several weeks before the program, children would gather on Saturdays to practice their skits, speeches, and songs. On the night of the program, the youngest children were usually the most entertaining. Some would almost whisper, others would yell their speech, and some would embarrass their parents.

One year when my wife, Marcy, was the program director, we had a gross incident that has become a humorous memory. We had built a stable as the background set for our nativity skit. It had a wooden manger in the middle. Mary and Joseph were kneeling by the manger. Other children played the parts of shepherds, angels, and sheep. They were all in place in the stable but suddenly the kids all hurried to get out of the stable and stood outside. The narrator concluded the skit according to the script. Later, we found out one of the little boys who played the part of a sheep was kneeling down in position when he got sick and threw up. Now we laugh about the unplanned rapid exit from the stable!

Every year on the night of the Christmas program, the church was full of regular church attenders plus parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents of the children. People laughed, sang, listened to scripture verses, or were quiet in anticipation of the next act. The story of the birth of Jesus took center stage for that hour. We always concluded with a candlelight service and singing Silent Night. After the program we would share punch and cookies and each child received a small gift to take home.

I remember years when after the program our big family would load up in the station wagon then drive into Blairsville to take in the many outdoor Christmas light decorations.

Some of our good memories get embellished and only the good parts are shared. The bad parts - arguments, snide comments, cold looks, or disrespectful actions are left out. Embarrassing moments become jovial stories in which we even laugh at ourselves.

On the other hand, our bad memories can haunt us. Remember the brothers of Joseph who sold him as a slave to a caravan headed to Egypt. They lied to their father, Jacob, letting him think Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The guilt bothered them in the years that followed. They worried about each other, that one of them would eventually tell Jacob out of guilt or to hurt the rest of them. When they went to Egypt to buy food, (before Joseph revealed himself to them,) they assumed the troubling demands of Joseph were the result of their sin catching up with them. The memory of what they had done to their brother continued to haunt them. They couldn't go back and change the past. They couldn't get rid of the guilt.

Ebenezer Scrooge was set in his ways. Charles Dickens introduced him as a miserable, miserly, mean human being. He saw everyone and everything through his own worldview. He didn't see what he had become or any value in what others around him found worthwhile. Gaining more money had become his god. Everything he looked at, he judged based on its potential to gain more money, whether by not spending it or by taking it from others. If there was no gain, he saw it as worthless.

He despised Christmas most of all, or anybody who enjoyed Christmas. People giving out of charity, spending money on gifts, buying extra food, drink, or entertainment were all a frivolous waste to Ebenezer.

We learn in the story that Ebenezer Scrooge wasn't always miserable. He was given the gift of a visit from the ghost of Christmas past. This ghost took Ebenezer on a journey back in time to help him remember the good times that he had forgotten. This made him sad. At first he found happiness in the good memories, but sadness set in when the ghost interrupted the memory and he realized what he was missing. Those events were over and gone, except in his memory.

Some of Ebenezer's memories reminded him of the challenges life throws at us. As children, we are impacted by the adults in our lives. They can make life hard or enjoyable. Ebenezer saw himself as a child in boarding school. He was alone at Christmas while the other boys happily headed home to spend good times with their families. The characters in his fiction books about adventure in far off lands were his only company in that lonely, empty building.

As we grow into adulthood, we are able to make our own decisions, some good, some bad. We don't always know the long term effect of our decisions. What seems like a good decision at the time can result in negative consequences later on.

The ghost took Ebenezer to a Christmas season when his fiancée, the woman he was engaged to marry, broke their engagement. She had come to realize that Ebenezer loved money more than her. She wanted him - not the things he could buy her. He was more interested in Gain, and it became his loss.

In our scripture lesson, the Apostle Paul recalls his past as a Pharisee. He was gifted, talented, and progressing quickly through Judaism. He showed much potential, learning the scriptures, the lessons, the laws, and disciplines to become a leader and teacher. He had much to be proud of in his accomplishments and much to look forward to. He explains it better In

Philippians chapter 3 where he writes: “4 If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

Even though he was working hard to please God, he was in fact persecuting God. Saul very likely would have been a tremendous success as a Pharisee, but God intervened.

Notice how humbly Paul recalls his previous life, before the road to Damascus.

“13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.”

As Paul is writing this, it is certainly not out of selfish pride. He makes no excuses, does not soften the truth. He could have written, “I hurt the church.”

Instead, he writes “how *intensely* I persecuted...”;

“[I] tried to *destroy* it. “;

he did not hold back in truthfully calling his thoughts and actions *persecution*”;

and he admitted he was persecuting the church of *God*. Not just any church, the church that God had established on earth (through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit); the same God he had been trying to please through his works.

Like Saul, we also must fully acknowledge our sins against God. This is difficult to admit without knowledge of our redemption; without knowing our sin is forgiven. When we try to soften our guilt, we are not holding ourselves accountable; we are trying to justify our actions, making excuses based on our personal desires. It is hard to admit when you are wrong. It is hard to admit when you have made a mistake. It is even harder to change on your own.

That is why believing in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on the cross is important. When you know you have been forgiven, that your sin is not held against you, you can let go of your false reasoning, your false worldview that justifies your life for you. Your redemption is no longer in your hands. It has been completed by Jesus.

God redeems your soul through Jesus Christ, but he can also redeem your past. What Joseph's brothers intended for evil, God intended for good. God can take things from our past and use them for something good. This is hard for the world to believe or accept.

It can be a life and family torn apart by abuse, addiction, or criminal activity, that is transformed by Jesus from brokenness to wholeness. A testimony that provides a life-changing witness for others to God's path of forgiveness and healing.

In Ebenezer Scrooge, his former miserly ways resulted in a supply of money that could be used to do much good for others after he was transformed. Scrooge had hoarded it for himself. After his redemption, spending his wealth became a joy for him and a help for others.

The apostle Paul's sin was his self-righteous pride based on his heritage, training, and zealousness. After God introduced Saul to the living, resurrected Jesus, he realized his past was nothing. Then God was able to use his knowledge, skills of logic and writing, and his zealousness to spread the Gospel message throughout the Mediterranean area and record much of the teaching which the church today has used for doctrine, theology, and practical application to life in the Christian church.

Out of our imperfections, God can create a blessing. He can transform our imperfection into perfect service to him.

Maybe this type of transformation is true in your life. You have recognized the sins of your past and given them over for God to redeem. You have come to lean on him for peace and comfort during times of trial and less on

the ways of the world. You have learned to let him use you for his purpose instead of asking him to serve your worldly purpose.

Maybe you see yourself as the former Ebenezer Scrooge? As one hurt by the world, a life of decisions gone wrong, living only for worldly gain and living day to day struggling to get through on your own narrow perspective which is skewed by your past.

Praise be to God for his gift of redemption. Through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit the redeemed in Jesus Christ can echo the words of Paul:

23... They only heard about me: "The (one) who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

24 And they praised God because of me.

Praise be to God, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.