

A few weeks ago Connie mentioned in her message the Christmas classic, *A Christmas Carol*. I'm going to revisit that today. In that classic story, Charles Dickens describes to us a most notorious and beloved character, a character known the world over, due to the portrayal of him in film and on stage.

“Oh! But he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone. Scrooge!! A wheezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire, secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days, and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent on its purpose. Foul weather didn't know where to have him.”

Why do we continue to watch *A Christmas Carol* this season on our viewing devices or on the local stage? Why do we get a little gushy-hearted when Scrooge, utterly remorseful, stands at the door of his nephew's and niece's house and pleads with these words:

“Can you ever forgive an old fool who hasn’t had eyes to see and ears to hear all these years?”

Why?? Maybe the story has truth to it all—
Maybe because it signals to us all some of the themes mentioned in the lighting of our Advent candles. The candles remind us to wait, to prepare, and to witness to Christ. As we prepare for Christmas we yearn to be blessed with God’s unexpected interruptions—that God might interrupt our lives to do something wonderfully new—to give us all Holy Wholeness and Authenticity.

This Third Sunday in Advent, the lectionary delivers us to John the Baptist with his challenging words from the wilderness. There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger WITHOUT first hearing from the rough prophet in the wilderness who calls us to repentance, to Holy Interruptions, to wholeness. This is a prophet who smells of poverty and revolution. This is one who refuses to hobnob with the well-off and prefers instead the isolation of desert discipline.

The scripture tells us that 3 groups presented themselves in regard to what was involved in getting baptized and John shaped an answer to that appropriate to the unique temptations found within each particular group. As harsh as his words were, John was not simply screaming out evangelical warnings—trying to beat down a crowd of folks into submission. His answers reflect his

knowledge of the vocations and values of those asking the question, and his answers all involve acts of mercy and justice. It was a message of social responsibility.

“Whoever has 2 coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

He said to tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

He said to soldiers, “Do not extort from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages.”

John the Baptist took dead aim in his preaching—as would Jesus after him—at the injustices and inequalities of society. Those who had too much were to share what they had with those who didn’t have enough. Taxes were not to be calculated according to greed, but fairness. Folks with political and military power should not let it go to their heads, lest it lead to victimization or intimidation of others. It also makes one stop and wonder...doesn’t seem like times have changed all that much, have they? There was corruption in the world of John the Baptist and there is corruption in our world today. Repentance is still in order. (I know...even if it is kind of a scary word!)

John knew his audience, his congregation, and he read the signs of the times as well. Along with using grand anticipation and dramatic warning, he gives us a fairly simple instruction. Something so down to earth...so

DOABLE. He doesn't tell the people to overthrow the Romans or to transform the world in some sort of sudden, dramatic revolution.

Nope, he tells them probably the very same thing that parents and extended family tell our kids:

“Share with one another. Be kind to one another. Don't fight. Be fair. Don't hoard, or lord it over one another.”

The painful thing is that we are all somewhat entrapped within our own out-of-whack, misaligned, upside-down structures and systems that we've become accustomed to. Those structures and systems have become sort of normalized...so that they seem as though “just the way things are.”

Just imagine and think of our own selves within that crowd that John the Baptist is preaching to. We can't depend fully on our own insight to lead us to redirection. As Wesley Avram puts it: “We are as needy as anyone in that crowd—hoarding coats and food when others are in need. We are as the tax collectors—sometimes dependent upon unjust structures for our livelihood. We are as the occupying army—caught in a culture of exploitation and violence.”

And yet, as depressing as that may sound, the message is clear.

The One who chose to come into the world as a little baby in a humble manner, mothered by a young girl perplexed

by, but cooperating with the Spirit at work in her life, calls all of us to those same basic goodnesses and justices and holy interruptions that John exhorts the folks in the crowd to exercise in their everyday and authentic lives.

John the Baptist and his message was, AND IS, a moment of truth and a challenge to us all. Elizabeth Myer Boulton persuades us that “this message is exactly what we—and the world—need and ought to hear, and then, in turn proclaim. In Advent, the church needs to recover its prophetic voice, and then go out into the wilderness, like John, and prepare the world for the new thing God is about to do.”

We might well remember the real life story of Charles Dickens. When he was about 12 years old his father was sent to a debtor’s prison in London. Charles, who had been earlier removed from school so that he could work to support his parents, was sent to Warren’s Blacking factory where boys his age and under were forced to paste labels on bottles of black goo, to work in filthy and dangerous conditions for little more than their bed and board.

Dickens never forgot that experience and continued all of his life to rally to the small and the wronged, to rage with his anger at their plight and those who caused it. He was never more sympathetic than in his portrayal of Tiny Tim and the Cratchit family.

The point of *A Christmas Carol* was not to create a happy ending but to challenge the greedy and complacent among us to experience a change of heart, a holy interruption. Scrooge is a man whose heart is dead not just because it is broken, but because it is turned inward, refusing to sympathize with the plight of those who surround him—including those who suffer because of his actions. The point is not HOW he becomes a new man, but that he DOES, and that he changes as the story says: “into as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any good old city, town, or borough in the good old world.”

Part of the good news is that none of us is expected to change the whole world on our own. We ARE called to change ourselves. “What then should we do?” What do we do when faced with the enormity of the problems of the world and even our own communities?
We do what we can!

John the Baptist hardly fits the role of a successful PR person in our own day! I mean, he had clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. I should have preached today in a John the Baptist costume perhaps! John was extraordinary, but yet authentic. He was on the fringe, but yet bigger than life. His prophetic message is one we still need to hear, and then, in turn, to proclaim to a suffering

world, calling for an end to the violence and injustice that appear to rule the day.

As the writings of the Talmud tell us, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”