

The Message

The Rev. Canon Robert Hayman
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Marley was dead to begin with. Old Marley was as dead as a door nail!

What a beginning for a Christmas message! But it is the beginning of Charles Dickens' universally loved *A Christmas Carol*.

Marley was dead to begin with.

Unless you have been asleep for decades like Rip Van Winkle, you know *A Christmas Carol*. You have seen one of the various movie or television versions, attended the production at ACT, heard it read on radio, or read it yourself, as I did recently.

We all know the characters:

- Scrooge, whose name has become a noun in the English language
- Bob Cratchit, the prototypical put-upon humble worker
- Tiny Tim, innocent and afflicted

And we all know "Bah, humbug," a pair of words that has proven useful for more than a century and a half.

Let me refresh your memory...

The tale opens in Scrooge's cold and dim Counting House, where the clerk, Bob Cratchit, is allowed but one lump of coal. Scrooge's nephew comes to wish him a Merry Christmas and an invitation to Christmas dinner.

Bah. Humbug.

When businessmen come asking for charitable gifts, Scrooge asks, "Are there no prisons? Are the workhouses still in operation? The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor, then?" Upon receiving an affirmative answer, he sends the gentlemen empty away. Begrudgingly, he gives Cratchit Christmas Day off and goes to his cold and dim chambers.

There he experiences three dreams ... or, better put, nightmares.

The first, Christmas Past, is introduced by the ghost of his dead partner, Marley.

In it, Scrooge sees himself as a lonely and unhappy boy and relives the desolation which came to him as he was rejected by the love of his life because of his avarice and self-centeredness.

In the second dream, Christmas Present, Scrooge sees a jolly party at his nephew's home, hears himself toasted as the "Founder of the Feast" by the long-suffering Bob Cratchit, and observes one of his business colleagues celebrating Christmas by feasting and dancing with his employees.

Then comes the final dream: Christmas Future, in which the ghost allows Scrooge to see himself dead and unmourned. He is shown the scene at Bob Cratchit's home, where the pale body of Tiny Tim lies on his bed awaiting burial.

Before the last apparition leaves, Scrooge cries, "Good spirit, assure me that I may yet change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life." Scrooge offers his vow: "I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

And then, Scrooge wakes up to sunlight, not darkness, exclaiming, "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A Merry Christmas to everybody!" Going out into the street, he orders a huge turkey for the Cratchits, promises gifts to charity, goes to church, and accepts the hospitality of his nephew.

The next day he raises Cratchit's salary, orders more coal, and promises a financial plan to aid Tiny Tim and his family.

What we see is a changed life. What we see is a response to the message of Christmas.

We discover that the message of Christmas can lead to the service of others, personal joy, and generosity of spirit. It can lead, in fact, to a changed life.

Now, what we have heard is not the story of Christmas. We have not heard about Mary and Joseph and the manger in Bethlehem or the shepherds or the angels.

We have heard the message which proceeds from that story.

So, also, for the gospel which was read this morning, which is the message that proceeds from the Christmas story.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

Not the Christmas story ... rather, the Christmas message.

And so, as Tiny Tim observed: God bless us, every one!