

Wilderness Stories: Advent 2 Reflection for 6 December 2020—Peace Sunday

Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

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How are you getting ready for Christmas? We have had a few lights outside since the beginning of Diwali.ⁱ I have ordered a pre-cooked Christmas dinner for two from Farm Boy, to be picked up on the 23rd, and have most of my gifts ordered online. And I will likely make a few gluten-free Christmas cookies, and we will have a couple Christmas Day Zoom gatherings with family. As you can see if you join us on Zoom on Sunday morning, our tree is up with lights. Whether it is decorated by then remains to be seen.

This pandemic Christmas will be pretty simple. Nevertheless, we all at some point start to “Prepare the way for Christmas.” But how do we prepare the way for the Coming of Jesus in our lives? John the Baptist was calling out to the people of his time and to us to prepare the way for the Promised One.

Did you notice in the scripture reading where he was calling from? The Wilderness. The desert. In order for us to prepare the way for Jesus, Advent is often described as a wilderness time, a time of reflection and repentance to prepare for his coming.

About this time of year, among the traditional Christmas specials, you can probably find at least one version of Dickens’ classic, “A Christmas Carol” playing on late night TV. Scrooge’s whole life is a desert—depleted, barren of joy because of his greed and stinginess. And then came the nightmares that turned around his life.

Do you remember how Scrooge begged the first spirit that visits him, the Ghost of Christmas Past, to put the cap over its very bright head?ⁱⁱ

"What!" exclaimed the Ghost, "Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? ...I am here," said the Ghost, "for your welfare, your reclamation." So, we get a clue that it is a story about redemption. As it happens, the redemption is through his repentance.

And so begins a journey into the past, and we get a glimpse of what made Scrooge the stingy, hard man he had become. A small boy, sitting alone in a school room, while all his classmates leave for Christmas at home. The small boy’s mother had died giving birth to him, and his father rejected him. Sent away to a boarding school, a little bit of this young boy hardens up and closes him off from others.

The scene changes. A little girl comes in. "I have come to bring you home, dear brother!" she says. "Home, for good. Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home's like Heaven! He spoke so gently to me one night when I was going to bed, that

I was not afraid to ask him once more if you might come home; and he said Yes, you should; and sent me in a coach to bring you. And you're never to come back here."

The scene changes again. Scrooge is older now, a man in the prime of life. His face already wears signs of greed and obsession. He is sitting with a fair young woman, in whose eyes there are tears.

"It matters little," she said, softly. "To you, very little. Another idol has displaced me; and if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve."

"What idol has displaced you?" he asks. "A golden one," responds the young woman.

"Spirit!" says the watching, old Scrooge, in agony again, "show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me? No more, I don't wish to see it! Show me no more!"

The story describes a progression in Scrooge's life, from a small and lonely boy, cut off from family, left alone at Christmas—a child whose father blamed him for the death of his mother in childbirth. Scrooge learns that the response to pain is to shut himself off. The movie version added this twist. The book gave no reason for his mother's death.

We learn that the little girl who comes to fetch him home later is Scrooge's younger sister Fanny, probably by a second marriage, and that he loved her dearly. She was his connection. Scrooge's sister, Fanny, was based on Dickens' own sister Fanny whom he also adored. Many of young Scrooge's memories are those of Dickens and his sister.ⁱⁱⁱ

But Fan also died, giving birth to Fred, Scrooge's nephew. Just like his father blamed him for his mother's death and isolated him by sending him to boarding school; Scrooge blames his nephew Fred for Fan's death, and isolates himself even further.

Then we see him as his engagement ends, becoming harder, and the idol of money becoming his first love, instead of his fiancée. He doesn't go after the young woman. He lets her go.

In the first part of this story, before his Ghost-filled dreams, Scrooge is unwilling to be open or interact with those around him. He works in a dark place, with little light other than one candle. He lives in a dark house, huddled away by himself. He keeps his spirit in the dark, blocking out everything. Christmas, with all its joy and goodness, intrudes on his darkness. He has been given a talent, but instead of using his talent for the common good, as Paul says, he uses it just for the purpose of making money—but not even for himself. He just hoards the wealth he makes.

For all his comments about his employee Bob Cratchit, and his nephew Fred both being poor, Scrooge himself lives in a poverty of spirit, as well as physical austerity. In

his encounter with the Spirit of Christmas Past, he cannot bear the light that emanates from the ghost, and wants it covered.

“Would you put out the light I give,” asks the ghost, “especially since you are one of the people responsible for forcing me to wear it year in and year out?” At the end of this visit, Scrooge grabs the hat and pushes it down over the Spirit, but even that cannot shut out the blinding light. The light causes him pain, because it shines into the darkest places of his soul. This spirit has come to help him bring his gifts into the light, but the effort of looking at himself is unbearable, and he goes back into the darkness. The rough places remain rough, the highway remains crooked.

Scrooge did have gifts at one time. As we look back, he was a sensitive child who cared deeply for his sister, who wanted desperately to be loved by his father. The boy had a gift of joy, love and intelligence. His father was a similar man, but when life brought grief, he blamed a child, and lost the ability to love as well.

As a young man, Scrooge is treated justly and kindly by his employer—like a son, and he and Marley are successful enough to go out on their own. A beautiful young woman comes into his life, and they have plans for their future. He is able to employ his gifts and his intelligence and he has the opportunity to use those “for the common good,” yet he doesn’t.

Remember Marley’s ghost, dragging chains and money boxes, wailing into the dark night in an agony of the soul, “Mankind was my business, the common welfare was my business.” Marley tells Scrooge that he has one chance to avoid the same fate: he will be visited by three spirits and he must listen to them or be cursed to carry chains of his own, much longer than Marley’s chains. Scrooge just doesn’t see it. YET.

But the story does have an underlying theme of repentance, which makes it a good one to reflect on for this Sunday when we read Mark’s gospel account introducing John the Baptist, who calls people to repent and be baptized.

What does it mean to repent? Nowadays we seem to think repent means to say we are sorry for something and promise not to do it again. That’s part of it—but not all! To repent literally means to turn our lives around, to go in a different direction altogether. To repent means to look at the crooked paths of our lives, shine the light of the Spirit into those dark corners, take out all the things we have hidden away and hoarded there, and throw them out.

The Ghost of Christmas Past forces Scrooge to let its light shine into the very darkest recesses of his own heart. Only by going back into his past, and the places where the road became crooked and bent, can he understand where he got away from the Spirit of Life. It’s the beginning of making the rough places smooth again, for abundant living.

What chains do we carry around from our past? What do we have in our hearts that needs to be illuminated, so that we can truly prepare for God's love to enter? What do we push down? What has shaped us, in such a way that our gifts are misused, or not used at all? Are we aware of the messengers who bring the gospel of peace?

While Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of Jesus, it is also one of the two times of the year when we are called to take time for introspection and reflection. Turning our lives around does not just happen, as Scrooge found out. It takes work. To turn our lives around, to step out on a new road, can only happen if we understand ourselves.

There's also another aspect to repentance here, and the theme keeps coming back—not only in Scrooge's story, but the Christmas story, and in our story. It's that repentance and turning around offers the possibility to become whole. To live in God's Kin-dom now.

God is reaching out for each of us, wanting us to become whole people in every way. God wants to reach us, to help us, to comfort us, to show us what love is, and who we can be as children of love and peace. Love makes the rough places plain, and the road straight, so we can live in hope and help bring peace into our lives and into our world.

As part of this Advent 2 reflection on Peace, I would also like to share another story, a true-life story that happened to a friend of mine twenty years ago. It connects with the Wilderness background of John the Baptist's preaching. I'll let her tell her story, which is shared with permission.^{iv}

“Sometimes... to be in the wilderness, is to be in a time in your life where you feel alone, where you feel abandoned by family, friends, church or God.

A wilderness time in our lives might be waiting for test results from the doctor's office, to know whether you have cancer or not.

A wilderness time for some, might be waiting to see if you are pregnant, or not!

A wilderness time might be when your spouse asks for a divorce or your parent or spouse is in palliative care, or a child moves away to go to university, or to find employment in another town or province.

A wilderness time in our lives is a time when we desperately need God.

I'd like to share with you a time in my life, in Mike and Riley's life too, when we were preparing the way... and found ourselves in the middle of the wilderness!

It was December of the year 2000....

As always I had started my Christmas shopping early. Being a minister you never know what might come up unexpectedly during the Christmas season.

So I had most of my shopping finished and had only a few more errands to run.

I popped by the pharmacy to see how Mike was doing, Riley had fallen asleep in his car seat, so we tucked him in the quiet back area of the store. Mike said, "Why don't you leave Riley sleeping here and go finish up what you need to get done. It started to snow and I really wasn't feeling up to heading out into the over-crowded stores at 6pm. So I told Mike that we should order a pizza and eat together and then, after, I will decide whether or not to go back out and finish my Christmas preparations.

Just as I went to call the pizza palour, the front door of the store flew open!!! In ran two people with their heads and faces covered, one with a gun in his hand and the other with a bag. They started to yell at us to get the narcotics and the cash, I tried to run to Riley, and the man with the gun pointed it at me and told me to "Get on the floor."

I said "I can't, I need to get to my baby. He's around the corner." I could hear Riley stir and wake up with the commotion. I walked straight up to the man and said, "Please, my little boy is just around the corner." The man held the gun to my head and again I said, "My son, is around the corner, I don't want him to startle you."

The man stepped back and while holding the gun said, "Yeah, there is a little guy back here." He then pointed the gun at Riley and said while waving the gun.... "Go, go to your mommy" and he let Riley run into my arms.

As I held Riley, the man then told Mike to give him the cash. The other person had taken the narcotics from the safe. Mike told him that there was no cash in the dispensary area, it was up front in the till. He didn't believe Mike so he again yelled "give me the cash!"

I looked up at the man and calmly said "He's telling you the truth, I didn't lie to you before and I'm not lying to you now, the money is in the front till." So the man and the other person ran to the front as our friend's teenage daughter ran to the till to give them the money.

Then they left us as fast as they came in. There was a deep silence in the pharmacy, broken only by Mike telling 911 that we had just been held up at gun point. Before we knew it the silence ended by sounds of sirens coming closer and closer to the store, then bright red and blue lights flashed all around us. As we looked up, a police dog ran towards us and then flew out of the store, hot onto the scent of the robbers.

The police started questioning us and Hattie cried as she called her parents to tell them she was okay. My parents came for Riley, as Mike and I had to go to the OPP station on highway three to give a report. Afterwards Mike and I drove to my parents in silence. We picked up Riley and headed to our home.

As we came through the door the Christmas tree lights welcomed us. Riley was asleep, so we headed up to bed and put Riley in between us. We didn't sleep much that night but we did an awful lot of praying, prayers of thanksgiving.

We prayed for the robbers, that the money they took would buy toys for their children's Christmas, that the drugs they took would not harm anyone, but perhaps take away the pains of the world, if only for a little while. We told God thank you, thank you for life and love and family, and for the PEACE that Christ offered us on that Wilderness of a night in the middle of the Christmas season.

The next day we went back to the pharmacy to do all the things you need to do with the insurance company and the investigation officers. People off Main Street came to the door to tell us they were glad we were alright and that if we needed anything we could call them, they were there for us.

But I wandered up the road to Ann's flower shop. She held me for awhile and she cried with and for me. And then I asked her for a white ribbon and some gold letters, I wanted to put up a banner across the door of the pharmacy.

"What do you want to say on the ribbon?" Ann asked. "PEACE ON EARTH..... That's all...JUST PEACE ON EARTH..."

And that's what my friend Sheena did, because that's the way she lives. Like John the Baptist, she called from the wilderness experience she and her family had just gone through, to invite others to open the way for the Prince of Peace to enter our lives. Amen

ⁱ The Festival of Lights celebrated by Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs. In 2020, it began on 14 November.

ⁱⁱ My inspiration to focus on Scrooge's story today came from a friend who did an Advent series on movies several years ago, so many of these ideas are hers in a Sermon from Advent 2 Year B, by Rev. Fran Ota, Humber United Church, Corner Brook, NFL, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Five Little Known Facts About "A Christmas Carol," December 8, 2014, by Carlo Devito, author of *A Mark Twain Christmas and Inventing Scrooge* Cider Mill Press, a division of sister company Simon & Schuster. Article accessed on 4 December 2020 at <https://sacramento.cbslocal.com/top-lists/five-little-known-facts-about-a-christmas-carol/#:~:text=Scrooge's%20sister%2C%20Fanny%2C%20was%20based,of%20Dickens%20and%20his%20sister>.

^{iv} From a sermon shared on FaceBook by Rev. Sheena Riley-Marini on Advent 2, 3 December 2011, and re-shared on FB on 3 December 2020.