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The Visions of Zechariah

II. The New Jerusalem

Zechariah 2:1-5

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I have to admit I was very slow to warm up to the charms of the Charles Dickens' classic, A Christmas Carol. Maybe it was because I first encountered Dickens in ninth grade through A Tale of Two Cities – and I don't remember that encounter as an especially happy one! Or maybe it was because all I knew of Dickens' story was from the movie and television versions – which, quite frankly, only induced in me a fear of ghosts. Or maybe it was simply because the story is such a downer in this season of joy—or at least it is until you finally get to the happy ending.

In any case, it wasn't until I determined to read Dickens' actual text for myself a few years ago that I really came to see the merits of his classic Christmas tale – and I'm not just talking about that happy ending. What fascinated me the most is how that happy ending comes about – Dickens had some true insight into our human character! Let me explain. When the Ghost of Christmas Past visits grumpy old Ebenezer Scrooge, what that ghost awakens in Scrooge is a mixture of nostalgia for happy moments past, as well as regret, perhaps, for paths not taken in the past that might have led him to a happier present. But that alone is not enough to bring Scrooge to his great conversion. Nor is the Ghost of Christmas Present enough to bring about the needed change in Ebenezer's hardened heart. The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge the sort of happiness he has excluded himself from, as well as showing him what others really think about him. God bless Scrooge's nephew, who seems to be the only one who can manage to say anything even slightly positive about his uncle. But again, it's not enough to bring Scrooge to his great change.

That great change in Scrooge's heart occurs only when the Ghost of Christmas Future arrives to show him what lies ahead, should he not change his ways. You remember the scene. Among other places, the last place this most terrifying of all the ghosts leads Ebenezer is to a cemetery in a churchyard, overgrown with weeds. And he points Scrooge towards one particular gravestone. Dickens writes: “. . . *the Ghost pointed downward toward the grave by which it stood . . . Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, **Ebenezer Scrooge** . . . The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.*”¹ And that is when, at last, Scrooge's resistant heart relents. He cries out:

“Spirit! . . . hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? . . . Good Spirit,” he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it. “Your nature intercedes for me,

and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”²

That is the moment when it happens, when Ebenezer Scrooge becomes a new man, with a new and different future. While the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present play their part, it is the Ghost of Christmas Future which truly alters Scrooge’s heart.

And that, to me, is the great insight of Dickens’ masterpiece – which, also, helps us understand what this season of Advent is all about. The Christmas season evokes all sorts of nostalgia for Christmases past – happy memories from childhood perhaps, or happy memories for when our own children were young. And the Christmas season also almost overwhelms us every year with all the details and demands of Christmas present – getting done with the shopping and decorating, attending the parties and making plans with family. I find just trying to drive safely along 123 during the month of December to be a very overwhelming experience of Christmas present! But neither the nostalgia of Christmas past, nor the demands of Christmas present, are really what this season is most about for Christians – for truly believing, deeply committed followers of Christ. Let me say that again – this season of Christmas, for Christians, is not really about the nostalgia of Christmases Past, nor even really about the glorious and exhausting rush of Christmas Present. What this season is most about – again, for Christians, not so much for all the folks out there celebrating Xmas or Happy Holidays or whatever else it – what this season is most about for Christians is Christmas Future. Because it is the promises of Christmas Future which has the power, as with our friend Ebenezer, truly to change us, to redirect our own wayward hearts and lives, and to place before us the great promise that has been given to us by Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Let me say it another way. It is good and truly right that at this time of year we remember the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem long, long ago. God’s extraordinary gift to us of a Savior lying in a manger. We can never celebrate that gift too much, or ever feel too much of either joy or thanksgiving in response to that gift. And it is good and truly right for us to be excited about this Christmastide present – the gifts to wrap, the stockings to hang, the lights that shine in the darkness, and the joy of family and friends gathered. All the richness that fills our hearts at this time of year.

But – and let’s be completely honest with ourselves here – but, if that’s all we have of Christmas, this memory of a gift given long, long ago, and the stress and joy of our present celebration of that gift – well, that’s really not enough, is it? Because – and again, be honest – our celebration of that Christmas past and of this Christmas present, all alone, don’t really change things very much. They don’t really change us very much. Christmas comes and goes. We take down the tree, put away the presents, and then January arrives and life goes on pretty much as it had before. We wake up from our eggnog induced stupor to realize that the world also has not changed much. All the bad stuff is still out there, even if for a little while we paid it little attention. I don’t know about you, but it’s going to be very hard to read and sing of peace on earth and good will toward men when the world right now is so busy waging war in Israel and Gaza, in Ukraine and Russia, and in regions we don’t even think about, like the Sahel in Africa where the horrors of ethnic violence have been raging for year and year. If all we know is the nostalgia of Christmas Past and the fun of Christmas Present, then there is no reason to think that peace will ever come –

that anything is ever going to be different. That what has been is just going to keep on being. The tree is down, the magic is endeth – and back we go to the same as it ever was, to the same as we ever have been.

So, like Ebenezer Scrooge, if we are to depart this Christmas season changed for the better, if we are to enter the new year entertaining a glorious hope that things really could be different – in us and between us and in all the world – then what we need is not merely Christmas Past – Jesus born in Bethlehem; nor merely Christmas Present – rockin’ around the Christmas tree. What we need is a vision of a Christmas future that will captivate our hearts and invigorate our spirits and redirect our minds and our mentality. What we need is for God to show us, to convince and to convict us, not just of what has been and what is now – but to show us, to convince and to convict us, of what is yet to be because Jesus has come.

And that is what this season of Advent, leading up to Christmas, is all about. Advent reminds us that the great meaning of Christmas is found not merely in what Christ has done, but far more so in what Christ has promised us that He will do yet. We hold off singing all our favorite Christmas hymns in Advent, not because Robert and I are Scrooges, but because we need this time to get ready for the new hope and glorious vision of the future which Christmas brings. We take time to light the four Advent candles, not just because they are pretty and a seasonal standard, but because each candle points us to a specific part of that promised future Christ sets before us at Christmas, that vision of what is yet to come – peace, hope, love, and joy. We hold off on reading the Christmas story so that we might use this time to lift up our eyes to see that as glorious as Christmas Past may have been, and as wonderful as Christmas Present may be – the best, the most glorious, the most wonderful Christmas of all is still yet to come. We lift up our eyes in order to glimpse it, to envision it, even to scan for signs that it may already be springing forth in our midst – that glorious, wonderful future that Jesus Christ has promised us by His first coming that He will one day bring when He comes again.

And that is what our passage from Zechariah is all about, and why it is such an appropriate reading for our Advent consideration. *“And I lifted my eyes and saw,”* says the prophet. And what does he see? Well, this period in Israel’s life was a pretty rough one. Zechariah was prophesying during the time in Israel’s life when they had recently come home from their decades-long exile in Babylon, and were just starting to rebuild their city – specifically to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem, and the Temple of God within those walls, all of which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Which helps us understand the meaning of Zechariah’s vision here. What he sees in this vision is an engineer going forth to measure the rubble, to measure the ruins where the walls and the Temple once stood. To measure them – so that Jerusalem can be built back exactly the way that it was before the Babylonians destroyed it. The Ghost of Israel Past, one might say, dictating terms to the Ghost of Israel Present.

But as Zechariah lifts up his eyes and watches, in his vision he sees the Lord God sending an angel to stop our man from making his measurements of what Jerusalem has been, that it might be rebuilt in the present just as it was. The angel stops the man and tells him that his measurements are not needed. That God is working from an entirely different blueprint for how Jerusalem shall be rebuilt. *“Run, say to that young man, ‘Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around,*

declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.’’ There shall be a new Jerusalem, one far greater than what was before. A new Jerusalem in which all the nations, all the multitudes of the peoples shall dwell together in peace. In fact, no walls will be needed in the new Jerusalem, for there will no longer be any enemies to keep walled out. All humankind shall be at peace in the Lord. A new Jerusalem in which all the multitudes of the people of God shall live without fear, live without the sorrow and sin and suffering that have long marked the human condition. A new Jerusalem, a new city of God, in which the glory of the Lord will shine forth and bathe all in its healing light. The Israel of Christmas future – or, shall we say, the promise of God’s great forever in the Kingdom of our Christ.

And this, this is the vision that has the power to change us, to change how we see this world and all who dwell therein. This is the vision that can lay hold of our lives and leave us altered once Christmas is past – altered by this promise of a happily ever after when all is said and God is done. This vision of a world at peace and God in the midst of all His children enables us, like Scrooge, to find new meaning, new direction in life, a new reason for how and for why and for Whom we live our lives. This, this promise of God’s Peaceable Kingdom, of a new City of God, is the reason why Jesus Christ came to Bethlehem in the first place, the vision behind why His birth still is celebrated today – this vision which promises us that Jesus, in the future, will come again and make everything right, make everything good again, make all of humankind one great family united by love again.

And, on that day when He comes – on that glorious, glorious day – at long last all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Or, as the Bible itself puts it, through the vision of Christmas Future revealed to the apostle John:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new” . . .

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun,

for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.³

“Run, say to that young man, ‘Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.’” That is what Christmas is really all about – not just that He came, but that He is coming again in glory to bring to us into that new Jerusalem. Not just that He came once to save us from our sins, but that He is coming again that sin and sorrow and suffering shall be no more. Not just that we should hear the angels sing of “*peace on earth and good will toward men*”⁴ – but that the day is really coming when there really will be peace and good will in all God’s creation. That day when we will, in endless rejoicing, join in that eternal song of a peace, and of a joy, and of a world made new – a song which shall never end.

And if we will this year truly behold and receive that gift of Christmas Future – let it enrapture our hearts in the midst of this Christmas Present in which we celebrate that Christmas Past – then, like Ebenezer Scrooge, we truly shall be changed.

*For lo, the days are hastening on,
by prophets seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold,
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world give back the song
which now the angels sing.⁵*

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: The Folio Society, 2015), pp. 158-159.

² Dickens, p. 159.

³ Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-5.

⁴ Luke 2:14.

⁵ The concluding stanza from Edmund Hamilton Sears beloved carol, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” which is hymn #123 in our Glory to God hymnal.