

Sermon: Year B, II Lent
Texts: Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

I was reminded earlier this week that heavy snow in March doesn't have quite the same appeal as it does in December. The original freshness of winter slowly grows stale as the months go by. And for as much as a stiff Nor'easter is celebrated in anticipation of Christmas, by Lent it can feel more gray than bright – like too much penance pressed upon us. At least this seemed to be the mood of the people I spoke to on Monday as they were once again shoveling their driveways. At the risk of adding insult to injury, however, in light of the Gospel read this morning, I would like to uproot something that has been firmly planted in the Christmas season and revisit it now, with the hope, of course, that it won't suffer a similar kind of weary reception.

Ebenezer Scrooge deserves more reflection than the Christmas holiday alone allows. For he is more than just a miser. In him, Dickens crafted an enduringly human figure, even for all his severity. In Dickens' own words, he was “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner – hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out a generous fire.” It's a nineteenth century description that seems suddenly to fit too well some of the dimensions of the crisis unfolding now in the counting houses of our own time. Abundantly wealthy, he still didn't have enough. Having more than he could spend, he felt only the burden of securing himself away from the needs of others. When asked for a donation for the destitute, he famously replied, “Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses? Is there no Poor Law? I help to support [these] establishments... they cost enough.” And when informed that many could not go there or would rather die, Scrooge's retort was curt: “If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

In Scrooge, Dickens deftly holds up a mirror to all of us, showing us the evasion we all, in some manner at times, prefer. We are inclined to believe that we are solely responsible for ourselves – each of us, independently. And some simply survive better than others. Richard Dawkins gave this creed its most modern form with his emphatic declaration that we live in “a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, [where] some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice... there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.” Scrooge redux.

In such a world as this, it's logical to want from God, then, exactly what we want for ourselves: the comfort of sufficiency, being able to inhabit a place of relative ease, where all seems well because all is nicely contained for us, and we aren't bothered by the needs of strangers. Institutions see to them.

The transformation of Scrooge, of course, occurs across a whole spectrum of time: past, present, and future. He is shown much of what he has failed to see in life. He is taken to see the warmth of love within the poor and pitiable Cratchet family. Scrooge watches, and is moved by their open expressions of care, how especially they look after Tiny Tim, the smallest and frailest. He asks about the boy's future, and the ghost accompanying him answers blithely: “If these shadows remain unaltered by the future none other of my race will find him here. [But] what then? If he

be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.” Such easy words... But they struck at the core of Scrooge, and before he could reply, the ghost thundered with a passion that blew away all indifference: “Man... if you be man in heart, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered what the surplus is and where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be that, in the sight of heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child. O God!” the ghost exclaimed, in a line often expunged from our modern renditions of the story, “to hear the insect on the leaf pronouncing on too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust.” All the world turns on the hinge of this intense rebuke. It leaves no room for complaint and no room for the tidy smallness of seeing to yourself alone.

I hear the rumble of this retort echoing in Jesus’ denouncement of Peter. It was an equally devastating cry, of an intensity unmatched anywhere else in the Gospels. “Get thou behind me, Satan.” What was at issue here between Peter and Jesus was not a simple difference of opinion or a variation in viewpoint. Jesus was marking where heaven had set its sights, and it wasn’t in the safe direction towards which Peter was leaning. This is one of the key turning points in Mark’s Gospel. The disciples had been following Jesus for quite some time, moving from town to town as witnesses to his ministry. They had watched him long enough to see, finally, who he truly was. When asked, Peter declared that he was, indeed, the long-awaited Christ, which Jesus immediately confirmed. But then he added what no one expected. He announced the unthinkable. As the Christ, he would go to Jerusalem, where the crowds would turn against him and he would be killed.

This, he said, is where the passion of God resides, entangled in the troubles of the world. What had begun in December, at birth, in the descent of God to a manger, in a stable, amid shepherds: this was acceptable – Luke’s account is cozy. But now it’s March, and the same descent – continued all the way into the depths of our inhumanity – can feel deeply disturbing. It’s not what we would naturally expect from God, this turn directly into the grittiness of our world.

Yet Jesus is resolute, as if to awaken us, too, to what we may not see. God’s care is not so select, as if all that it creates is little spaces of sanctity, here and there, safe places for you and me. Jesus’ turn to Jerusalem is rather God’s thunderous rejection of all our quiet indifferences. His grace extends without limit, even in the face of angry execution. This moment today is jarring, not because Peter is so wrong but because Jesus is so amazingly extravagant in love. Peter is chastised because, like Scrooge, his vision is so small. For it may be that, in the sight of heaven, there is no least, no smallest, no single instance within creation that is abandoned, forgotten or dismissed as unredeemable. In Jesus, God has turned his face to all, without exception – even the cruel, the violent, and the conniving, the muck and mire of Jerusalem. He is, in this Lenten exclamation, all the more determinedly, Emmanuel. God with us.

As is well known but rarely fully incorporated in us, in Dickens’ story Scrooge becomes a new person. Dickens described him in this way: “He went to church, and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows; and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk – that anything – could give him so much happiness.” Merely to walk. Merely to see, to break the bonds of our

self-containment: this is what Jesus meant by taking up one's cross and following. It isn't the odious task of sacrifice or satisfying obligations or even periodically doing good. It's determining to meet others, amid all our entanglements, sharing always a mutual word and name: Emmanuel. God is with us, in the sheer gift of our interaction and our witness of and to one another. Whether for a moment, for an hour, for a day, for whatever time is given us, more than all else, life and love is walking together as if indifference were utterly impossible.

And while it may be the case that at the level of physics and genetics the universe appears to be no more than an amalgam of blind forces, at the level of human interaction, blindness is merely an option. God with us means that poverty need not be so crushing, that wealth need not be so self-consuming and, seeing each other face to face, joy can be surprising – in all circumstances, even in March.

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