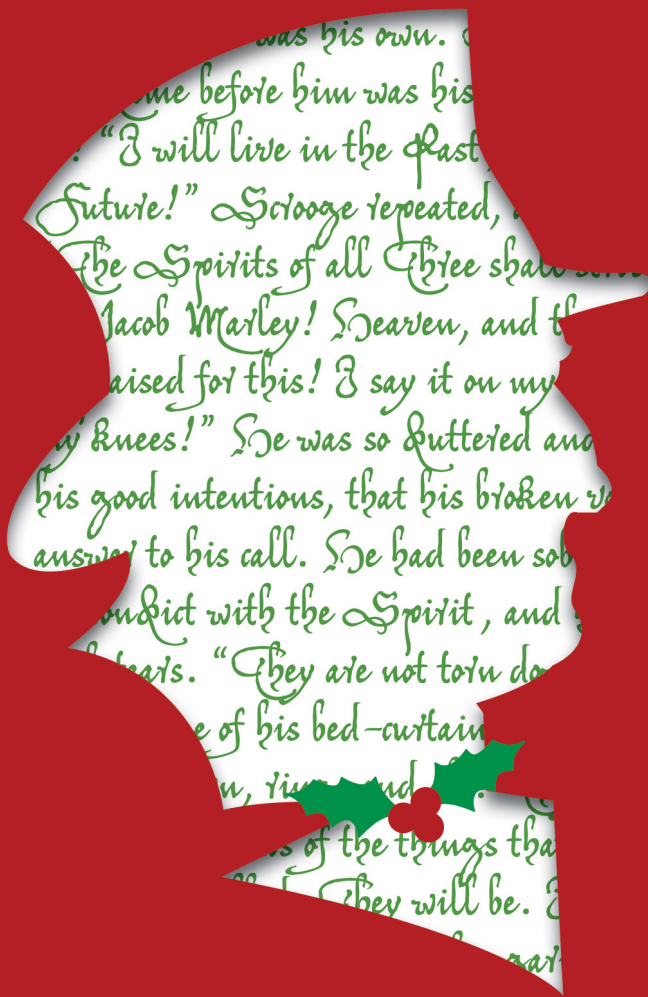


MATT RAWLE



The Redemption of
Scrooge

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The Redemption of Scrooge

By Matt Rawle

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CHAPTER 1

Bah! Humbug!

But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! (Stave One)

The dismissive response, "Bah! Humbug!" perfectly expresses the worldview of Ebenezer Scrooge, the tragic main character of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge is a sad man, and Christmas is not a

happy time for him; but to be fair, no time during the year seems to bring Scrooge much joy. Since its original publication in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* has been presented often and in many very different ways. For example, this classic ghost story has been a mainstay in movie theaters, ranging from the 1901 *Scrooge, or, Marley's Ghost* silent film to *Mickey's Christmas Carol* (1983), to Disney's latest 2009 film adaptation starring Jim Carrey. Even though these versions of Scrooge's story are quite different, Scrooge the character remains consistent. In a way, Scrooge has taken on a life of his own, independent of Dickens's original story.

Scrooge is an iconic figure who represents stinginess, greed, and generally being in a terrible mood. Testament to the negative image his name implies, there were only twelve children in England named Ebenezer in 2013. Interestingly, though, "Ebenezer" is a Hebrew word meaning, "stone of help" (see 1 Samuel 7:12). Maybe you remember singing about it in the second stanza of "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing": "Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come." Even though by the end of the story Ebenezer Scrooge is a changed person, the character remains a strong caricature of everything our Christmas celebrations shouldn't be. It seems that we can't accept that he has been redeemed. But maybe there's still hope. Maybe over the course of this study, even Ebenezer Scrooge's name might come to mean something different to you. After all, if Scrooge can be redeemed, then so can we.

* * *

Marley Was Dead

*Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.
(Stave One)*

"Marley was dead" seems like an unusual beginning for a Christmas story, but then again, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is not your typical Christmas story — it is an unconventional hero's tale.

An anonymous narrator offers us a window into the world of the miser Ebenezer Scrooge — a name that has become synonymous with being grumpy, bitter, angry, or less-than-enthused about the holiday season. Through the tale of Scrooge, an old man whom Dickens describes as "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner," we are taken on an unlikely adventure (Stave One). On a cold Christmas Eve night, Scrooge encounters three spirits who reveal his past, his present, and his future in the hope of transforming a covetous old sinner's heart.

But before we embark on a supernatural noel, Dickens wants to make sure we know the facts. Marley, Scrooge's longtime business partner, is dead. The story must begin with the fact that Marley is dead; otherwise the rest of the story makes little sense.

In order to understand the story, it's important to know the facts. Several years ago my family was having dinner with some friends, and my oldest daughter discovered that she quite enjoyed the candy corn our hosts were serving in the candy dishes. After noticing she had consumed several handfuls, we picked up the candy and told her she had had enough. Moments later, while the grown-ups were finishing our meal, we heard a crash in the living room. I ran in and saw an overturned, lit candle surrounded by shards of glass from a broken vase. Pieces of candy corn were everywhere, and the only soul in the room was my daughter. I looked at her with pursed lips, brow furrowed and arms crossed.

"What happened?!" she said, eyes wide.

"What do you mean, 'what happened?'" I snapped. "It looks like someone wanted to get some extra candy corn!"

"Well, who did that?" my daughter had the gall to ask.

"Seriously?"

Then she started to weep melodramatically. "But father ... I just love candy corn so much."

It didn't take Sherlock to understand the facts of the situation, but had we not heard the glass vase crashing to the floor, we wouldn't have caught her red-handed. If it had happened silently, our host would probably have discovered the mess later, wondering what in the world had happened.

Like I said, it's important to have all the pertinent facts in order to understand the story, and so Dickens wants us to know this important fact — *Marley was dead* — right from the very beginning. This statement sets the tone for the story and foreshadows what's to come. This setup makes me think very much about the Advent season. Advent, from the Latin word *ad venire*, means "to come." The four Sundays before Christmas Day, the church gathers to wait for the Christ Child's birth. During this time we read stories from the Old Testament, in which God laid out the plan to send a Messiah to save God's people. The prophet Isaiah proclaims:

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.
He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be vast authority and endless peace
for David's throne and for his kingdom,
establishing and sustaining it
with justice and righteousness
now and forever.

(Isaiah 9:6-7)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

(Isaiah 11:1-2 NRSV)

During Advent, Christians sing songs such as, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus." These songs anticipate the hope that God's people felt as they waited for this Savior. Congregations light candles of hope, peace, love, and joy, like an emblazoned clock counting down to God's intervention. My family has an Advent calendar with hand-sewn Nativity story characters, which travel daily from numbered pocket to numbered pocket on a red and green felt background.

Waiting for something that has already happened is a curious practice. Explaining the season of Advent was quite difficult for me until my wife and I were pregnant with our first child. When a child is in the womb, the child is certainly real even though you can't hold the baby in your arms. A mother's body changes, subtle flutters soon become kicks, and ultrasounds reveal a profile, leading someone to say, "She looks just like you!" or "Are you sure you aren't having an alien?" The child is certainly real, but not yet born. It's kind of like recording kick counts as the baby's due date approaches. Ask any mother — the baby is already here, but not yet born.

The Advent season plays with our notion of time. The church gathers in the present to ponder the past for a future hope. *A Christmas Carol* is a beautiful story for the Advent season because it is a tale in which the past, present, and future all come together in one transformative night. Certainly this story is about Scrooge's love of money and his altruistic failures, but it is also a story about how Scrooge cannot let go of his past. Early in the story, after establishing that Marley had been dead for some time, Dickens writes, "Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley" (Stave One). Scrooge seems to cling to the past because his (only?) friend Marley represented the only things in which Scrooge trusts: hard work, frugality, unwavering discipline, and action that can be weighed, measured, and counted.

One of the reasons I love the song "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" is because it's difficult to count. The time signature is common time (four beats per measure and the quarter note gets the beat), but each measure

seems to flow into the next without a structured beat or meter. Rarely does a phrase in the song begin with beat one, and words are extended past measure breaks. The song also talks about the promises of the past coming into fruition. The words and music together suggest that the past and future unite in an ambiguous but blessed present. Scrooge is stuck in the past, and he can't move forward because one can only count what one's already been given. If your world is only what can be weighed and measured, Advent's "here, but not yet" mantra makes too little sense for a merry investment.

Jesus came to save us from counting our past as our only reality. It's like when Moses led God's people out of Egyptian slavery into the wilderness. Before they reached the Promised Land, the Book of Exodus says, "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt ... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'" (Exodus 16:2-3 NRSV). Because living in the wilderness was difficult and they were caught wandering between where they were and where they were heading, the people complained and wished they had died as slaves. The people became stubborn and bitter (see Exodus 32:9), almost "Scroogelike" in their relationship with God and one another. Instead of moving forward in faith, trusting that God was with them, the people kept looking over their shoulders, hopelessly lamenting over the way things were.

Advent is like living in the wilderness between what was and what will be. Living into this tension, remembering God's promises, and depending on faith become spiritual disciplines that keep us from becoming Scrooges ourselves. Even though the Promised Land may seem far off, we hold tightly to the promises of our God, for "he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23 NIV).

How have your Christmas traditions changed over time? What was it like when you first began a new tradition?

How does your community of faith celebrate Advent?

Read the lyrics from "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus." How might this hymn guide your worship during Advent?

* * *

Sing We Now of Christmas

"I wish to be left alone." (Stave One)

Long ago, when I first opened the book *A Christmas Carol*, I was surprised to find that it wasn't a songbook because the word *carol* usually refers to a religious folk song or Christmas hymn. Dickens's *Carol* is no songbook, but it was certainly intended to invoke a reader's familiarity with Christmas songs since the story is organized into five staves, or stanzas, like a piece of music without musical notes. Why might that be?

Hymns and other religious songs are meant to communicate theology, tradition, and an experience of God. And, in large part, music is the vehicle through which theology and tradition and story is learned. Think back to preschool when you were learning your ABCs. Do you remember reciting the alphabet to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"? The only reason I can recite the Preamble of the Constitution is because of *Schoolhouse Rock!*, and I have to thank the *Animaniacs* for helping me memorize the state capitals ("Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Indianapolis, Indiana, and Columbus is the capital of Ohio ..."). Even if one is relatively unfamiliar with the Christian tradition, he or she can probably still finish the lyric: "Hark! the herald angels sing, glory to _____" or "Silent night, _____ night." Much like songs help us remember important information, stories aid us in understanding meaning. Fables like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and the *Three Little Pigs* teach us important moral lessons in a memorable way. This is one of the reasons why Jesus spent so much time teaching through stories called parables. The "Prodigal Son" reminds us of

God's grace, the "Good Samaritan" urges us to offer compassion, and "The Sheep and the Goats" cautions us against forgetting the sick, the hungry, and imprisoned. And though Dickens's "carol" is longer than a parable and isn't set to music, he uses the power of story to remind us that there is no soul too gruff, too cold, or too cantankerous for God's redeeming power.

An appropriate title for *A Christmas Carol* could be "In the Bleak Midwinter." This Christmas carol, based on Christina Rossetti's late-nineteenth-century poem, begins with a cold and barren landscape and ends with a heart offered to the Christ Child. Like the carol, Dickens's opening stave describes Scrooge with a desolate, apathetic slant — "No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he" (Stave One). Scrooge isn't completely unfeeling — he certainly cares about money. When you stare at a spreadsheet all day, making sure there is a zero balance at the end of the day, it gives you a peculiar view of life. For Scrooge, everything seems quantifiable. Scrooge's philosophy is grounded in "You reap what you sow," a manageable, balanced, and cultural mantra that takes one Scripture — Galatians 6:7 — too far and out of context.

If "Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant" (Galatians 6:7) is the sole foundation for our understanding of God, we run the risk of understanding salvation as a reward for ending life "in the black." First, "sin" isn't quantifiable. It is not the case that if you sin five times, you simply ask for forgiveness five times and you're covered. Instead, Scripture says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23 NRSV), and "When you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands" (Colossians 2:13-14 NRSV). Taken out of context, this can make salvation sound like a gift card that simply covers the amount of sinful debt accrued. Salvation is not a savings account; rather salvation is a healing process that transforms who we are and conforms us into the image of Christ. In other words, salvation happens in a hospital, not a bank.

It's easy to see how salvation can be seen as a transaction. Every day we go to work, buy groceries, follow the stock market, give birthday presents,

buy school supplies, and sell products. To say that Jesus "paid the debt" is not an altogether bad analogy, but when taken too far the gospel becomes a simple means of prosperity. When prosperity becomes the only measure of a godly life, the poor are vilified, the less fortunate are assumed to be lazy, greedy, and apathetic. Pastors only appoint big givers to church leadership, and mission work becomes something done for the poor rather than an invitation for the voiceless to speak. When asked if Scrooge would offer alms for the poor, he replied, "Are there no prisons? ... I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned — they cost enough; and those who are badly off must to there" (Stave One).

Jesus' parable of the vineyard is shocking to our modern economic ears:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ... But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

(Matthew 20:1, 13-16 NRSV)

(Continues...)

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