



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Christmas at the Movies: A Christmas Carol

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Isaiah 11:1-5

John 1:6-9

Over 200 versions of Charles Dickens' classic story have been produced: TV, radio, opera, plays, readings, and all the movies...from my favorite with Alistair Sims in 1951 to George C. Scott to the Muppets to adaptations with Bill Murray and many others.

And a few years ago, there was the movie titled "The Man Who Invented Christmas." It's an imaginative story about Charles Dickens and the writing of "*A Christmas Carol*."

Now, I daresay that God might have had a bit more to do with the invention of Christmas than Charles Dickens; in fact, John says as much, "In the beginning was the Word..."

But if we're talking about traditions and rituals and what we know as the spirit of Christmas, then yes, Charles Dickens can make a claim to that.

Because an important aspect of *A Christmas Carol* is its distinctly modern view of Christmas, less concerned with solemn religious ceremony and defined by more joyous traditions: the sharing of gifts, festive celebrations, goodwill and generosity.

Now the book is divided into five sections, labeled as Staves in reference to the musical notation. A Christmas carol, after all, is a song.

But have you ever asked yourself, "Just what are the words to this Christmas Carol?"

It helps to understand the story to know that Dickens was a Christian and all of his writings deliver a powerful and vivid social commentary from that perspective.

When *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843 the industrial revolution was in full swing.

The cities were growing with unemployed refugees from the farms. Large landowners had bought or seized their small, rural communal fields, and these displaced families had immigrated to the cities.

That was made to order for the factories which required large numbers of workers concentrated into small geographic areas. On top of that, machine made products were replacing products which had for centuries had been homemade by craftspeople working in small shops. Technology in place of people, sound familiar?

Traditional ways of doing business were being left behind in favor of the more competitive methods of the new age. Scrooge's first employer, Mr. Fezziwig, was unable to adjust to these changes and went out of business. Scrooge, however, quickly and richly, adapted to the new environment but lost his soul in the process.

Making money superseded any other motive in his personality. He focused solely on his corporate profits, regardless of the human and social cost. Scrooge says, "I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry. Bah, humbug!" As someone has noted, "When morality comes up against profit, it is seldom that profit loses."

Christmas at the Movies: A Christmas Carol

Locking himself in his room, hiding under the bedcovers is symbolic of how he walled himself off from other people. No friends, his nephew's wife doesn't want him at their Christmas party.

Look at his lack of concern for his employee, Bob Cratchit, who exists for Scrooge only as a means to an end, going so far as to save a few pennies on coal while Cratchit shivers and freezes in the next room.

Cratchit's financial dependence on Scrooge makes him and his family vulnerable to abuse, including the use of terror with Scrooge's threats of "You're fired!" on the slightest whim.

Scrooge has no concern for anybody else, the world of the poor and the destitute, 'the least of these' as the Bible says. In an encounter with two gentlemen asking for donations to a charitable cause, Scrooge suggests that the poor belong either in prison or in the workhouse.

When told that many would rather die than go to either place, he replies, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

There was little help for the poor in Dickens' time. People who couldn't pay their debts were thrown into debtor's prison or abandoned on the streets to starve or put into "poor houses".

Many prominent politicians and economic theorists attempted to justify these conditions with arguments designed to de-legitimize the rights of the poor, to devalue them as people...a move to restrict their ability to find health care, food, and housing.

Education was denied to them because even a little learning would make the ‘poor’ discontented with their condition and they might begin to question it. Note that in the American South of the same time period, it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write, for the same reason.

Remember the scene where the Ghost of Christmas Present spreads open his robe and exposes two children named “Want” and “Ignorance”.

Those children symbolize the harsh reality, the living result of the prejudicial neglect of Ebenezer Scrooge’s “Bah, humbug” life: a disconnected Victorian wealthy upper class that is shown to be abusive, heartless, and fundamentally inhuman.

Into that dark world; and be sure to note that it is in the darkness, Ebenezer Scrooge receives his messengers, the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come.

The gospel writer John gives us a messenger, too: John, the son of Zechariah the priest. It had been 300 years since Israel had heard from a prophet of God, and then John shows up.

This was John the Baptist, and this messenger preached that whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, you were as sinful as the next guy, and you better repent or you would be cut down at the roots like a tree, and thrown into the eternal fire.

And when people asked John how they should live this repentance and forgiveness, he gave them a word that would shine in their darkness and mean life for the world.

Christmas at the Movies: A Christmas Carol

He told people to share their clothing and food with the poor. He insisted tax collectors should stop cheating people by overcharging them. He demanded that soldiers stop bullying people and extorting money from those who were vulnerable, a new old message of justice and love, an offering pleasing to the Lord.

People began to think John was the Messiah they'd been hearing about, but John quickly pointed out that he was just the messenger called by God to prepare the world for the light coming into the world.

So it was that the messengers had come to Scrooge, to prepare him as the light came into Scrooge's world on that Christmas morning.

Remember that Charles Dickens was Christian, and he knows he is a messenger to his world, to our world, to see by the light of Christ, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “[Christ] comes in the form of a beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbor.”

Would Scrooge look at himself, take stock of his life, and would he feel grateful, able to repent as the painful truths of his life became evident, how he had walled his neighbors, and as such Christ, out of his life?

The message that Scrooge had to learn from his nighttime visitors, the word that would give his humanity back to him, bring light to his world, restore his soul as a member of the human race was expressed early in the story by his nephew.

The spirit of Christmas, says the nephew, teaches men and women "to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."

It is the "everyone" of Tiny Tim's benediction as the story ends: God bless us, everyone!

These are the words that fill Scrooges' heart as he flings open the window to the light of Christmas morning! He has literally seen the light of a new day!

During Advent, we do not hide from the harsh realities of our dark sinful world, the hungry and the wandering, the victims of hate and war, those who face the debilitating fear of not being needed or wanted, those who have no songs to sing or strength for singing.

No, we do not hide...we move toward the light of Christmas morning knowing the word of Christmas good news that in spite of the part we have played in a 'bah humbug world', it doesn't have to stay that way.

We can make something good happen, that our gratitude can spill over into other lives to sing a new song, to set the fresh beauty of life to music, to find words in this day and age to remind ourselves that God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus into our darkness to give us the light for living a new day.

In Jesus, we have the living word of the original Christmas carol:

- God has sent divine light into a dark world.

Christmas at the Movies: A Christmas Carol

- God has sent divine healing into a hurting world.
- God has sent divine love into a hateful world.
- God has sent self-sacrificial generosity into a self-indulgent and greedy world.
- God has sent divine truth into a world hooked on lies.
- And God has sent divine hope into a world overwhelmed by despair.

So, we sing a Christmas carol, “God bless us, everyone!”

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org