

4th Sunday of Advent 2009 – December 20

Psalm 80

Let's talk about Ebenezer Scrooge. Maybe the thought of the Grinch was too much for you. Maybe the idea of you being anything like a green, furry mean looking creature from a Dr. Seuss book was just bizarre. I mean, come on, The Grinch. Who-ville? You're kidding right? Okay, I get it, but What about a real person? Would it make any difference if it was a human behaving like that?

Show Clip #1 from *A Christmas Carol: The Musical*:

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Is there any bit of Ebenezer Scrooge in you this Christmas? He is really mean and grumpy, isn't he? You look at a guy like that and you think, wow, he is practically insane. It's Christmas for goodness sake, Scrooge! Lighten up, be joyful, generous, right? How many people would actually have a payment due date on Christmas and expect people to make the payment? How could someone be so mean?

But the reality is that even in a time of great rejoicing and gift-giving; many of us can get that way too, can't we? I will never forget one Christmas morning a few years ago, when I woke up with a little bit of Scrooge in me. I don't remember how it started, but Michelle and I were still lying in bed, and I started getting upset about our finances. Maybe we had bounced a check. Maybe the bills were piling up. I don't know. But I started in with the Scrooge stuff. On Christmas morning. Right before we were about to go downstairs and exchange Christmas gifts. Is there a bit of Scrooge in you?

As we hear our next Advent Psalm, Psalm 80, keep that question in mind. Is there a bit of Scrooge in you? Have you missed the importance of Christmas? Are you focusing on the wrong things?

Turn with me to Psalm 80. If you are using one of the Bibles in the rack in front of you just turn to page 439. And if you need a Bible, just take that one home with you. No Scrooges here! Psalm 80, page 439. What you'll notice is that Psalm 80 has a very unique feature. See if you can pick up on as you hear it read. I haven't done a count, but off the top of my head, it seems this feature is quite rare in the book of Psalms. Take a listen:

Read Psalm 80

This Psalm is a Christmas Carol. All of our Advent psalms have been, in a sense, but this one really looks structurally like a song doesn't it? Did you notice? The unique feature is that it has three verses, with a repeating refrain that is used after each verse: "Restore us, O God! Make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved!" And so today we look at a song, a Christmas Carol.

A Christmas carol does what? Attempts to talk about how in the coming of Jesus, there is salvation for the world. There is hope, and joy and peace.

So Psalm 80 is a Christmas Carol. But it doesn't look that way at times. How many of you would feel good about singing it? The first verse is nice, and the refrain is nice, but it doesn't have the Silent Night, Away In a Manger, Joy To the World feel, does it? But today we'll see that Psalm 80 is very much a Christmas carol.

The story of Ebenezer Scrooge is also called "A Christmas Carol." And it doesn't look like it either. There are problems to be dealt with before salvation comes.

We've met Ebenezer, and old Scrooge is a mess.

In Psalm 80 we see another mess. For Israel in Psalm 80, the mess was their land, their nation, a people who had turned their backs on God. In this we also see ourselves. Have we Christians turned our backs on God? Just like when comparing yourself to Scrooge it may be very easy to say, "No, absolutely not, I have not turned my back on God." But don't let yourself off the hook so easy. As we look at Psalm 80, at this Christmas Carol, perhaps we'll see aspects of ourselves as well. Most of us don't have lives in absolute ruins. But maybe there is something small, some bit of the Scrooge in us.

Scrooge, and Israel, and we are in need of some help. For Scrooge, it is visitors, ghosts that come to his rescue. The Ghost of Christmas past, present and future. I don't think we need to worry about any ghosts visiting us. But Psalm 80 for Israel has a very similar effect. Let's take a look:

First Stanza - Verses 1-3 Call out to God – praising him.

- Here we see them call God their Shepherd, which is the first of three metaphors in the psalm that Jesus would later use about himself. Jesus is the Great Shepherd. (John 10)
- What they do is start by praising God their Shepherd, asking him to shine forth, awaken his might, come and save them. Then the first use of refrain, which also includes "shine". In the refrain, God is Elohim (a generic word for God, even used of idols).
- Perhaps the question in the back of their minds is, if God really is their shepherd, if he really has this might, why did he let the sheep and the pasture get in such disarray? Isn't a shepherd supposed to prevent this? To ward off attackers, etc. It is a question we ask too at times about our lives, about our Good Shepherd, Jesus:
 - If Jesus is really a good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), why would he take his disciples to this place, where they would lose him and perhaps their own lives as well?
 - Anyone who has come to Jesus as personal savior has walked into another world, like Narnia through the wardrobe. In this new world we have forgiveness of sins, the power of God to defeat demons, the gift of new life.

- But the world, unlike Narnia, is absolutely real, and you have to go through the cross to get there. The kingdom of God is not fiction or an abstraction. It just can't be seen, though one day it will be seen.
- As we do ministry, we are showing people the way to this new kingdom. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life." The way of the Kingdom is through the cross.
- We are not caretakers of a library of 66 books, or a museum of old things that people shouldn't touch. We are ministers of a very living Kingdom, with real struggles, real problems.
- Isn't it amazing to know that we have a savior like that who has given us a responsibility and privilege to serve him? And he starts it off with such great love for us! Jesus is the shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. If you're in need of restoration, if you, too, want to call out and ask God's face to shine on you, if you feel God is far from you, first remember that he is the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. He loves you.

But for some of us, we forget that. We forget what God has done. And so the crying out continues. And in the Psalm 80 Christmas Carol, the crying out continues in the...

Second Stanza - Verses 4-7 Crying out to God for relief

- They cry out to God for relief from his judgment on them. Done in the form of questioning. Interesting that it is devoid of their involvement. As if God did it to them randomly and they're wondering why? But it is completely not true. It only happened because they turned their backs on God. We might question it, but it smacks of real life. It is so reflective of human response to suffering and adversity. How often we hear the same thing coming from those who are struggling. "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?" So often we wonder "why?", too. We, like the Israelites, can wrongly blame God too.
- Still vital how this section finishes. Not anger with God. But a calling out to him, in the refrain, to make his face shine upon them.
- Are you crying out to God? Have you noticed yourself praying like this lately? Maybe for a job. Maybe for relief from pain. Maybe to heal a relationship. It's so tempting to get angry with God, impatient. As the refrain comes a second time, the emotion is starting to build.
- Did you notice the minute difference from the first refrain to the second? God's name is a little bit longer. The emotion is building. God is now God Almighty. (Elohim Sabaoth) No longer using a generic name. But adding "Almighty" or "God of Armies." The image of fighting for us, setting us free from the armies that occupy our land and enslave us.
- The people are desperate. Their crying is getting stronger. And so the crying out continues in the....

Third Stanza – Verses 8-19 – More crying out. But the third stanza is the strongest plea yet.

- Verses 8-11 **Review of history of nation – Exodus, Conquest, Prominence – God had saved the people, taken them to the Promised Land and made them prosper.**

- This history is told using the vine metaphor – the second one that Jesus used. Jesus said “I am the vine” – (John 15)
- Verse 12-15
 - More questions about why God would allow the suffering
 - Call for return
 - Use of vine, but also use of “son” – Third metaphor used by Jesus
- Verses 16-19
 - Vine cut down (Israel in ruins)
 - Hand on son of man who God raised up
 - Final repetition of Refrain. But this time God is YHWH Elohim Sabaoth. Not just God, not just God Almighty but YHWH God Almighty. His personal name. The emotion has reached its heights. They are not holding back, they are crying out with the most desperate passion. They are using God’s personal name! It’s personal now.

Have you noticed the repetitious calling? It is an ongoing process and it gets stronger and stronger. The people are feeling desperate. They want God to intervene.

What I found important to note in this psalm is the movement of the salvation. Last week the people talked about what they would do in order to bring the salvation of the Lord. If you’re into order, it was their repentance first, God’s salvation to follow. Cause and effect.

But in Psalm 80 it is the other way around. It is God’s salvation first, then the people will obey.

The nation calling for salvation from the Lord.

When there are problems in your life, do you call for salvation from the Lord?

At Christmas time, our carols proclaim the salvation of the Lord, salvation that came in the form of a little baby in an animal feeding trough in a lonely, insignificant outpost of the Roman empire. The greatest gift of all.

We all need that gift. We are people struggling with difficulties in our lives. Some of it, like Scrooge, is our own doing. The people of Israel are no different. All those problems they called out to God for were their own doing. I know in the Psalm they make it sound like the Good Shepherd wasn’t being a very good shepherd. They make it sound like the gardener wasn’t doing a good job tending to his vine. But in reality, it was they who had turned their backs. Metaphors break down at certain points. The good shepherd gives his sheep freedom to turn from his voice. He gives them the freedom to wander off where they shouldn’t be. And the people of Israel did that, and they turned away boldly.

We can be like that too. Maybe our turning from God isn’t bold. But if we let it go, for weeks, then months, then years, we can become like Scrooge. You think to yourself, how did it get like

that? How did he get so nasty? One little turning away from love leads to another. Then another. This is the devastating deception of sin. One view of a pornographic photo doesn't seem that bad. One flirtatious interaction with a co-worker. One unkind remark. One short little bad attitude. One little white lie here and there. One isn't so bad. Except that it leads to two and three, and before we know it we have a major problem. Like Scrooge.

And the one little slip-up has turned into a deeply ingrained bad habit. And it is so hard to break. We need to call out. We need to keep calling out.

Jesus is our salvation.

Perhaps, like Israel, we need a major disruption in our lives to shake us to the core and help us refocus, like losing the land, being carted off to Assyria or Babylon. Maybe like Scrooge we need a major reshifting of focus.

We need the Lord to shine his face upon us. If you are struggling with a serious problem, sin, behavior, relationship in your life, will you make this your prayer: "Restore us Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us that we may be saved?" Will you? Will you print it out and put it on your mirror. Your fridge? Your walls. Is this the cry of your heart?

If it is, look for the greatest gift all, God's salvation. It came in a baby, that son of man who would give his life for us, die, rise again so we could be saved from this sin. There is new life, abundant life.

Scrooge found this out. *Show clip #2*

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Scrooge's behavior at end of story reflects the experience of salvation, of new life, abundant life.

Do you want that?

Make it a regular habit to call on God for restoration. Take the refrain of this Psalm and make it your daily or even hourly calling out to God.