

## **“All in One Night”**

*Series: A Christmas Carol: From Bah Humbug to Hope*

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Ok I admit it. I had a Bah Humbug moment this Christmas. It had to do with the Christmas lights. Now Lisa and I have a difference of opinion about Christmas lights. It's one of those things that comes from melding together two opposing family traditions. In her family they always put up large colored lights. In my family we did it the right way and hung elegant white lights. Well this year, as a Christmas gift for my beloved, I offered to put up large colored lights (mainly because the old white lights were all shorted out). So I went to Home Depot and fought for the last spool of 100 large colored lights. I strung them around the evergreen outside our house and plugged them in. I have to admit, they dazzled us with Christmas joy.

A few nights later I plugged them in. When I stepped back to admire the glorious scene I was shocked to discover all my new large colored lights were out. I grumbled as I climbed the ladder and changed the fuses. Still no lights! They are brand new. This shouldn't happen. I carefully felt my way around the string of lights until I discovered the source of this Christmas black out. There is only one thing my wife Lisa likes more than large colored lights – squirrels. Her squirrel friends were excited to see a tree full of large colorful glow-in-the-dark acorns. They gnawed them right off the wires. The only satisfaction I get is knowing there is a squirrel out there with a 120 volt hairdo.

Christmas is a time for colored lights, glowing candles and starry skies. On one of the darkest days of the year we celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the Light of the world. There is a lot that brings joy to our world at Christmas. Here's a survey of what people like most about the Christmas season:

- 68 percent said spending time with family and friends
- 11 percent mentioned religious services or religious reflection
- 11 percent look forward to the Christmas "spirit" of joy and good will
- 5 percent said music, decorations, and shopping
- 4 percent look forward to the end of the Christmas season

That last group is probably pastors. The survey also asked what they dislike about Christmas:

- 33 percent—the commercialism and materialism
- 22 percent—the money and expense
- 10 percent—the shopping and crowds
- 5 percent—the hectic pace and bad moods of people
- 2 percent—the pressure to go to church<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, "Celebrating Christmas, Then and Now," (12-18-13).

Hopefully that last group is not the pastors. Did you notice that many items on the nice list (family and friends) are also on the naughty list (bad moods of people)? Sooner or later, almost any feature of the Christmas season can cause you to belt out a “Bah humbug!”

This time of year, as the darkness descends, you may feel your difficulties are rising. Like a strike-force of squirrels, your challenges and troubles begin to gnaw away at your carefully constructed plans. This night you may feel you are:

- Tangled up in the crossed wires of a trying relationship.
- Burned out by the unending workload at school or the job.
- Blowing your fuse at your parent, your child, or your teen.
- Shocked by the news that your spouse had an affair or is planning to leave you.
- Powerless to stop a habit or an addiction.
- Sitting in the dark of debt, depression, disease or death.

When problems surround you, they can snap your power source and plunge you into darkness.

Ebenezer Scrooge was bound up in a cocoon of darkness. On the surface he is a cranky, crotchety curmudgeon. Yet on this one night, the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future will put Scrooge through a spiritual triathlon. They will reveal the hurts and heartaches that sank their teeth into his soul. He will see how his reactions to these problems turned him into the cold, lonely, miser that nobody misses or mourns. On this one night he will discover there is still a chance for him to break out of his dark cocoon into the light. Scrooge takes the crucial step: he accepts the ghosts’ help, puts his faith in heaven and steps from darkness into the light. When he throws open the windows and sticks his head into the glorious sunlight of Christmas morn, Scrooge cries,

“I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! I don’t know anything. I’m quite a baby. Never mind. I don’t care. I’d rather be a baby. It’s Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven’t missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night.”<sup>2</sup>

You might say on that one night, Ebenezer Scrooge was born anew.

You are probably not as cold and crabby as Scrooge. Yet, like him, you may feel trapped in some darkness. Permit me to tell you another squirrel tale. On one Christmas Eve Clark Cothern discovered a squirrel fell down his chimney into the wood burner stove in the basement of their Michigan home. Cothern tried to get it out.

I thought if it knew we were there to help, I could just reach in and gently lift it out. Nothing doing. As I reached in...it began scratching about like a squirrel overdosed on espresso. We finally made a cardboard box complete with a large hole cut into one side, into which the squirrel waltzed when we placed the box against the wood burner’s door. We let it out into the safety of our backyard.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,p. 101-102.

Before its redemption, our little visitor frantically tried to bash its way out of its dark prison. It seemed the harder it struggled in its own strength to get free, the more pain it caused itself. In the end, he simply had to wait patiently until one who was much bigger—one who could peer into his world—could carry him safely to that larger world where he really belonged.

What are you bashing your head against this Christmas? Divorce, the loss of a loved one, an illness, a tense relationship, a lay-off, a huge debt, an addiction? God's gift is Jesus – the One who is with you. He comes from outside to show you the way out. When He reached in His hand to us, we clawed and scratched and pierced and nailed it to the Cross. But still, He rose up and overcame all our sin. He laid down His life so that He can be the Way out. Your Way out. That is God's gift to you. And all you need to do, on this one night, is accept it and, like Scrooge, you can have a fresh start, a new birth.

Why do we refuse God's gift? Perhaps you are still **haunted by ghosts in your past**. The Ghost of Christmas Past showed Scrooge the rejection, abandonment, abuse, loss and grief in his past. Scrooge also saw how he reacted to these hurts with selfishness, self-pity and greed. Your life is the product of your past. In your past there may be things you've done and things that were done to you which were hurtful, even horrendous. You may be holding on to these. Perhaps you are stuck living in the past.

When Jesus was born the Chief priests and religious leaders were living in the past. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written." (Matthew 2:1-3, 5)

These religious leaders loved to study old prophecies from the past. Yet when the prophecies came true just ten miles away, they didn't leave their ancient scrolls to find God's great gift.

God doesn't want you to be a prisoner of your past. He sent Jesus to set you free. **Jesus Gives Pardon for the Past**. He came to forgive all your sins and set you free from guilt and shame. He came to help you forgive those who sinned against you and set you free from anger, resentment and bitterness.

Let me tell you the story of a real person whose past was like Scrooge's. When he was four years old his dog Jacksie was hit and killed by a car. For the rest of his life he wanted to be called Jack. At the age of nine his dear mother died and he was sent away to an extremely cruel boarding school – so cruel it eventually closed and the headmaster was sent to an asylum. Though Jack was brilliant, he suffered from respiratory illness and had to be moved from one school to another, many of which also practiced severe corporal punishment. Despite being raised in a Christian home with a grandfather who was a pastor, he gave up Christianity as a teenager and declared himself an atheist. It's not surprising he would doubt God's existence when it seemed the Lord failed him so many times. Then things got worse.

At the age of 19 he went off to fight for his country. He saw his dearest friends ripped apart in the carnage and was himself wounded three times. His father never came to visit while he recovered in the hospital. Jack finished college and graduate school and became a professor. He still did not believe in God but he wanted God to exist. In fact he was "very angry with God for not existing." Then, through the influence of two Christian friends he felt God was actually chasing him. One night, he knelt in prayer and reluctantly admitted God must exist. But it wasn't until two years later, in 1931, that Jack or as we know him, C.S. Lewis, became a follower of Jesus. The book that describes how Jesus saved him from all the pain in his past has a simple title: *Surprised by Joy*. Jesus came to give you pardon in your past.

Now maybe you are **haunted by ghosts in the present**. There's too much on your plate and not enough time, money, and energy to deal with it. Problems keep piling up. People and circumstances are not following your plan. On the first Christmas King Herod felt that way. When the Magi asked,

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." (Matthew 2:2-3,7-8)

Herod does not welcome this as good news of great joy. *He* is the king of the Jews. He fought, deceived and killed others to get there. He continues to kill others, even his wife and sons, to keep his kingdom. He sees assassins around every corner. He doesn't care about prophecies or God's plan. No baby born in Bethlehem is going to knock him off the throne. He'll see to that.

You and I are nowhere near as maniacal and power hungry as Herod. Yet in our own way we attempt to assert power over others. We fight for control of our own kingdoms. We sit on the throne of our hearts and resent anyone who tries to take it away. Most of the conflicts in your life right now can be traced back to people and circumstances that don't do your will. Yet Herod and Scrooge both found it painful and lonely to sit on the throne.

**Jesus Gives Peace in the Present.** Though they are not kings, the wise men are wealthy and powerful. Yet unlike Herod, they travel a thousand miles to give their gifts and their lives to the baby born in the manger.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9-11)

They weren't even Jewish. They were probably Persians who worshiped other gods. Yet they gave up everything to kneel before God's Son. And in return they receive His peace.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is one of the oldest churches in the world. Bethlehem is in the West Bank surrounded by walls and barbed wire. It is at the center of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict. The Church is controlled by four different denominations that fight over it. The last time I was there in 2014, the crowds were so great we had to slowly inch our way in line to reach the manger. There was one woman who pushed her way through the crowd. I had to stop Dave Outcalt from knocking her down (not really). Yet despite all the human conflict which swirls around the birthplace of Jesus, when you finally reach the manger it feels like the peaceful eye of the storm. In that ancient cave we knelt and prayed, we read the Christmas story and sang Silent Night. Pilgrims from every nation under heaven have bowed their heads to enter the church and bent their knees to worship the King of kings and the humble Prince of Peace. Jesus can give you peace in the present if you let Him rule in your life and relationships. That's why on the night of His birth the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14)

One way to find more peace in the present is to give up trying to control others. That's what the *Boundaries* series is all about. I hope you will join us in the New Year for these sermons and Group studies to learn God's practical ways to find peace in all your relationships.

Finally, you might be **haunted by ghosts of the future**. 2015 was a year of natural disasters, economic upheavals, acts of terrorism, racial violence, tragic shootings, and political fighting. 2016 doesn't look any better. Every one of these problems can cause us to retreat in fear about the future. On this night long ago, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds had every reason to fear. Herod was on the throne, Roman soldiers roamed the land, taxes were through the roof. Society shunned the shepherds and they really rejected Mary's questionable pregnancy.

In the face of fear **Jesus Gives Promise for the Future**. On this night long ago, Mary and Joseph, the wise men and shepherds received God's promised gift and made room in their lives for God's Son. They chose faith instead of fear. They believed the message of the angel:

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)

God kept His promise. He sent His One and Only Son to save us from sin, defeat our fears, and open the door to an eternity with Him. The little baby born in one cave, died on a Cross and was buried in another cave. Yet He rose from the grave to prove to you and me that the tomb is empty but God's promise is not. Jesus descended to earth and went to hell for you because He didn't want to go to heaven without you. This is why the angel said to Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and you and me, "Do not be afraid."

Tonight, you can let the pain of the past, the problems in the present or perils of the future crowd Jesus out of your heart. Or, on this night, you can let God's Son be born in the manger of your heart. Tonight you can receive the greatest gifts of all: pardon for the past, peace in the present, promise for the future. He can do it all in one night.

Pastor Jess Moody led a Bible study once that was attended by Rose Kennedy, the famous Matriarch of the Kennedy clan and the mother of President Kennedy. After the class, Mrs. Kennedy came up to Moody and privately shared her story. Rose whispered in his ear,

I was a spoiled young bride of a strong-willed man, a socialite who attended every function possible. We were expecting a child and were quite elated at the prospect. The day came when our child should come. She was a beautiful child. We were ecstatic. It wasn't long until we realized that there was something terribly wrong with her. We took her to the doctor, who confirmed our fears. She (had developmental problems) and nothing could be done. Some anger grew within my heart. How could God do such a thing to this child—and especially to me? I turned my back on God, my husband, my closest friends—and became a recluse.

My husband and I seemed to shun the child. One evening a major event was happening in the city. I wanted to go, but I was so filled with wrath that I thought I might create a scene. My husband feared it, so we decided to just stay home that evening. I was boiling over with resentment. There was a lovely woman who was one of our maids. She sensed my boiling soul. 'Please excuse me, Mrs. Kennedy; but I've been watching you the last few weeks. I love you very much, and I hate to see this destroy your life. I say this as gently as I know how: Mrs. Kennedy, you'll never be happy until you make your heart a manger where the Christ child may be born.'

I fired her on the spot! You have no idea how filled with anger, how isolated, how focused on doubt I became. That night, my mind ruminated relentlessly, keeping me awake until the late hours. I could not forget that lovely face, the sweetness of her countenance, the sub-surface joy that seemed to boil up continually in her spirit ... and especially those deathless words: 'Mrs. Kennedy, you'll never be happy until you make your heart a manger where the Christ may be born.'

I have loved Christ all my life, and tried to be a good Catholic girl all my years; but this was one of those joyous moments of real contact with God and his Son. So I knelt beside my bed and prayed, 'Dear God, make my heart a manger where the Christ child may be born.' I felt a fresh new divine entry into my life, and there was born in me a passion, a love for special children. Oh, by the way, I rehired the lovely maid.<sup>3</sup>

Let the Christ child be born in the manger of your heart. He can do it all in one night.

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<sup>3</sup> Jess Moody, *Club Sandwich* (Broadman & Holman, 1999), pp.31-34.