

Bah! Humbug!
Sunday December 1, 2019

“Marley was dead: to begin with,” Dickens opens *A Christmas Carol*. “Dead these seven years,” Scrooge says a little later. Seven times he says that in the first stave of this carol in prose, seven years dead exactly this Christmas Eve - but seven is a magic number and Marley is not as dead as he seems. His name is still on the sign at the finance office he ran with Scrooge, and gentlemen who stop by soliciting a charitable donation for the poor, ask if they are speaking with Mr. Marley or Mr. Scrooge. Later that evening when Scrooge returns home to apartment he inherited from Marley, he “saw in the knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change: not a knocker but Marley’s face.” So we know that, as in any proper ghost story, things are not quite what they seem. Marley is dead but not dead. Something is stirring in the house and in Scrooge’s life. And a little later, as Scrooge warms himself by his fire, all the bells in the house ring out loudly, and Marley walks into the room, looking as he did in life, except with the added accessory of a chain around his middle, clanking with “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel.” Oh – and his body is transparent, “so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind.” And Dickens adds with the wry humor which gives us hope for Scrooge, “Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now,” punning on the organ believed to be the seat of human compassion and the practice of disemboweling corpses before burial.

“Dreadful apparition,” Scrooge begs, “why do you trouble me?... Why do spirits walk the earth, and why do they come to me?” And Marley begins his famous speech:

“It is required of every man ... that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world – oh, woe is me! – and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!... I wear the chain I forged in life,... I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. ... [T]he strong coil you bear yourself... was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it since. It is a ponderous chain.”

Marley has returned to tell his business partner and friend that the world is not as he perceives it, that he, like Marley, has misunderstood what is important and valuable and that he, unlike Marley, has a chance to live by what is real and true rather than by the false and ephemeral. Because Marley’s spirit never walked beyond the countinghouse, never offered compassion to the poor who died in the

streets rather than endure the workhouses, he and others like him must hover by those now suffering and dying, unable to touch or help them. Because he ignored and turned away from these opportunities during his lifetime, he is condemned now to spend eternity in punishment for his failing. (Dickens as a Unitarian of his day believed humankind's salvation lay in following the example of Jesus in caring for the least among us; those who did not follow that example would not rest in heaven but walk powerless in a version of living hell. He was a Unitarian, but not a universalist.)

Scrooge is slow to understand this turning on its head of the values he and Marley had prized – profit and greed, - so he tries to reimpose the order he understands and assuage his guilt and fear. He responds, “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob.”

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

Scrooge is skeptical, still not believing quite in this reality he has never perceived, but Marley gives him no space to agree or disagree to transforming his vision and his life. He merely informs him that he will be visited by three spirits who will show him his past, present, and future in a new light. And as he walks out through the window, Scrooge is enabled to see the street through Marley's eyes, full of

phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost... The misery with them all was, clearly that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever.

The ability to see the double reality fades, and Scrooge goes to bed, trying to scoff at the news he has received, but unable to complete his signature “Humbug” beyond the first syllable. So ends the first stave.

It's a great story, but what does it have to say to us today? As the German mystic Angelus Silesias wrote about the news the angel brought to Mary,

“What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the Virgin,
unless he brings to me the very selfsame tidings?”

We don't live in a world of cashboxes or workhouses – or do we? No, we don't believe that we are literally forging chains, and as heirs now of the Universalist tradition, we don't believe in punishment after death. But Dicken's message is deeper than that. He points us, like Scrooge, to see and believe in a deeper reality, and to trust that our efforts to align our values and our acts with that reality are not wasted. And that is news we need to hear, every year, but especially this year when the darkness feels overpowering. The impeachment hearings and the charges against the President continue to unfurl, while many of those whom we trust to lead our nation with honor prove lacking. This week's UN report on climate change had a more dire conclusion than previous studies. Another report this week showed that the mortality rate among people aged 24-65 has increased across the United States over the past seven years, while in other wealthy nations the rate over the same period has decreased. And the highest increases have been in the New England states, with New Hampshire, at 23%, leading the way, followed by Maine and Vermont, 20%, Massachusetts, 12% and Connecticut, 9%. Only Rhode Island's rate was lower than the national average of 6%. The increase is attributed to many factors, but in large part to the rise in opioid deaths, liver disease, and suicide – in other words to despair. As we head into the feel good bright lights big bling all the time of the Christmas season, it seems harder than ever to reconcile the news and our feelings about it with the joy of the season. Couldn't it make sense to retreat into the warmth of our own families and our own lives and give up on everything else? What can we do? What difference can we make?

But Dickens was writing for a world equally in pain, where the majority lived in poverty, where children roamed the streets and slept – and died - in doorways, where the fog of pollution was so thick that a way to earn money was to carry torches to light people to their destinations. Yet he saw and lived as if the world was a caring place with the Scrooges the anomaly. Scrooge is the only character in Dickens' story who isn't celebrating Christmas as “a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time ... in the long calendar of the year, when [people] seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and 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.” We heard these words earlier – spoken to Scrooge by his nephew Fred when he attempts to offer the hand of peace to his uncle on this holiday. Fred knows who and what his uncle is; he is not naïve. But he lives with the hope that even Scrooge, even the darkness of the world, even greed and disregard may be warmed by the spirit of the season. He lives as if.

And to go back to Angelus Silesias' question, that is the good news of the angel's visit to Mary as well as this first stave of the *Carol*. Like Fred, Mary too lives "as if". Her response to the angel's news that she will bear a child is to sing the beautiful hymn – not a carol but close – known as the *Magnificat*. In it she thanks God for having scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich empty away, and having helped Israel as promised. The verbs are all in the past tense as if they had happened long ago, but you know as well as I and as well as Mary and as well as Luke, who wrote the words, that none of this has been fully realized yet – the poor are still hungry, the powerful still abuse their power, the rich still hold on to what they have. Yet we don't laugh at Mary for thanking God for the fulfillment of her hopes, which are also our hopes, rather we hear it as a renewal of our trust that as we human beings everywhere open ourselves to the spirit, so the promise of peace and justice will be realized. The word of faith speaks in the past tense about that which is still to come. And the person of faith, trusting that the future will unfold as promised, lives in the present as if what will be already is. As one of my favorite hymns puts it, "Faith, while trees are still in blossom, plans the picking of the fruit; faith can feel the thrill of harvest when the buds begin to sprout." This doesn't mean living in a fantasy. It means acknowledging the pain and the sorrow and the hardship, but living into the fulfillment of a realm of peace, a realm of justice.

This is the season of Advent when we are invited to live in the "as if." It is my favorite season of the church year, for Advent meets us where we are, not in the triumph of Easter nor the full blown joy of Christmas, but the not yet of much of our lives, the uncertainty, the waiting, the darkness. This season comes to us and says "yes – but." But peace can be yours now in the midst of chaos; hope can be yours in your worries; love can be yours now in your fear; even joy can be yours now in your pain. Dickens' novel is in some ways a microcosm of the Advent journey – 4 staves, 4 weeks, inviting us to live with peace, hope, love, and joy, not just for ourselves but for all people.

For us today it means on not turning away from the news to the mindless happily-ever-after of Hallmark Christmas movies – at least not too much – we do need to take a break. But even as we turn away, we do it to renew to come back to keep working, keep writing, keep marching. I was heartened this week by an interview I heard with an environmental scientist about the UN report. "It's pretty dire," the interviewer prompted him. And he responded, "Yes, but." But he is heartened and hopeful by the actions of the youth environmental movement and feels that they can turn things around. He has hope to keep working.

And this is the other good news Dickens story offers us – we are not alone in our journey of transformation. Others work with us, some in ways we do not know – as Scrooge didn't realize that Marley's Ghost had often sat with him over the seven years, watching him and willing him to choose the ways of justice and compassion. And it isn't just Marley and the other Spirits who achieve Scrooge's transformation; people throughout his life are working for it too. We too are surrounded by others who join us in our work, who give us heart when we are discouraged, who take up the work when we need to put it down. That, as I always say, is one of the reasons for being part of a religious community. Here those who accompany us on our journeys are given names and voices, hands and bodies; here we are reminded week after week that we are not alone. People like Donna, like whoever is sitting in front of you or behind you offer you a sign of peace.

And so this Advent we begin a journey with Scrooge and in the good company of the loving spirits which surround us to see where we may find peace, hope, love, and joy in this season, in this year, in these times, and not just find them but offer peace, hope, love, and joy out to the world. For those qualities, though sometimes obscured, are there inherent in our world as in Scrooge's.

When Dickens visited the US not long before he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, he was inspired by the thought of the Unitarian Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common." This season is about miracles, not the miracle of a baby born to a virgin, but the miracle of the power of love, the miracle of the power of justice, the miracle of the power of peace to triumph when any sensible person would think it must fail. "The miracle has just begun..." and continues in us.

- Pamela M. Barz