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Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23
Psalm 148

Get Scrooged

Merry Christmas, and welcome to you, the few, the proud, the can't-get-enough-of-church crowd. There are twelve days of Christmas, and I'll be here for two of them. It's hard to believe that December 25th is the beginning, and not the end, of the Christmas season, coming off that long preparation that was Advent, but it is, and so for these next two Sundays, we are going to explore just what Christmas meant with two of the Gospel stories. Advent and Christmas Eve were for the Gospel of Luke, with its powerful, mystical discourse on the reception of Jesus, Mary and Joseph by the hosts of heaven and the flocks in the field. Today, we will talk about the Gospel of Matthew, whose subsequent account we have just read, and next week will discuss the Prologue of St. John. Because we have this two-week series, you will forgive me if I jump right into the scripture lesson, before bringing our minds around to that other text, always present at Christmas, that further Gospel of Jesus Christ written by Charles Dickens and reenacted by Charlie Platz last week.

So, how many of you feel like our gospel reading for today sounded familiar, but not quite right? How many of you think that, somewhere in the depths of your memories from Bible Study or Church School, there is a detailed story about all the first-born children being killed by a tyrant, with a future Savior being spared? Maybe escaping in a reed basket? What does this story remind you of? Call it out. That's right, Moses. Now, these next two may also seem familiar, but maybe not quite as easily recalled. How about a family that escapes down to Egypt,

the land of plenty, when they are forced to flee their homes in the North? This reminds us of a story from Genesis, about the patriarch Jacob taking his family into exile, explaining how the Israelite sojourn there began, many years before Moses implored Pharaoh to let his people go. Finally, in Egypt, Matthew tells us that Joseph has a dream. Some of you may yet recall Jacob's son Joseph, who was left in a pit by his brothers and had a coat of many colors and became a counselor to Pharaoh. God spoke with that Joseph in dreams, too, warning him of feasts and famines in Egypt. So in this brief passage of Matthew, we have a lot of parallels to the Hebrew Bible. Clearly, Matthew sought to put Jesus in the same context as these great Patriarchs of ancient Israel. Because, chances are, the events we read today didn't actually happen. It is possible that Jesus's family spent some time in Egypt. We just don't know. But it's almost certain that Herod, referred to in other ancient sources as "the sly fox" did not order anything so blunt as the murder of male children under two. There's nothing in ancient sources, and one imagines there would have been a rebellion in this non-docile corner of the greater Roman Empire. So Matthew is really offering us an allegory to the stories from the Hebrew Bible when he gives us this account of Jesus's early life. He wants his audience to see parallels between the story he tells about Jesus and the stories of the ancient prophets and patriarchs, and the temporal fear they inspired in illegitimate rulers. Luke offered us the endorsement of heaven for Jesus's mission, Matthew shows us the endorsement of the civil authorities and the scriptures. But why? Why offer us this likely unhistorical allegorical account?

Matthew tells us, several times, that Jesus did certain things, "to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord," or by Jeremiah, or by some source he did not identify. If you had been paying attention during Advent and, if you are here on December 26, you probably were, you would have noticed a lot of prophecy from the book of Isaiah, predicting a new savior for the

people of Israel. Isaiah wasn't the only one making predictions. The Hebrew Bible is full of minor and major prophets, Jeremiah being a great one, and a nontrivial number of them are predicting the coming of the Messiah in one way or another. And those are just the Scriptures we still have. There were, of course, other writings and sermons, long since lost to us, to which Matthew may have been referring, as well. Because of Matthew's attention to all these Jewish traditions, his emphasis on the ways Jesus fulfills the Jewish prophecies, and the attention to Jesus's knowledge of Jewish Law, the Gospel of Matthew is widely considered to be the Gospel to the Hebrews, to establish that Jesus was the fulfillment of everything they were expecting. And so here he presents Jesus's birth in that way. Only fear of a new, legitimate king of the Jews would scare Herod, so Herod is scared of Jesus. The Messiah for the Hebrews would go into and be called out of Egypt, just like the tribe of Israel in Genesis and Exodus. So Jesus goes into and is called out of Egypt. Matthew knows that Jesus has presented some Truth to the world, and so he takes some liberties with Jesus's past to show how Jesus fits into the story of Israel. Faced with a Jesus that was not the warrior-king most of the prophets of ancient Israel were expecting, he is helping to retell the story of ancient Israel in a way that includes and shows Jesus as nonetheless heir to that tradition. He is putting the Jesus story in an understandable context to reach his audience. As always when we are talking about scripture, it is important to remember that just because something didn't happen, doesn't mean it isn't true. Matthew, in his allegory, is showing the underlying truth of the Jesus story. He might as well have been called out of Egypt, and Herod ought to have been as afraid as Pharaoh, because this baby was Christ the Lord.

We, too, find ways to put this great miracle into our own context every year. We seek ways to make sure that the story of our lives incorporates Christmas, so that it makes sense to us. These accounts in Matthew and Luke do not instruct us in our behavior or lives without some

interpretation. Yes, Jesus was born in a manger. But mangers are now few and far between, even in Iowa. So what does that mean for us? We need new traditions, new ways of telling this story, to help us understand the gift we have received. And so we make them. Every time we recite "the night before Christmas," written in New York, or decorate our Christmas trees, a tradition imported from Germany by way of Victorian England, or eat our Swedish Tea Ring on Christmas morning, or go over to grandma and grandpa's house or wait for Santa to come, or even come to hear lessons and carols on Christmas Eve, with that candlelit song written on the fly one night in Germany many years ago when the organ went out and a congregation found a new way to bring light to the darkness, we are making ourselves like Matthew. We are finding ways to tell the Jesus story that will resonate with our friends, our neighbors, and our children. And every year, we do something a little bit differently, making sure that our Christmas story is a living story.

So I was thrilled to make it back in time for the Christmas Pageant this year. It had been many years since I last made it back, and even more since that December I played an alien observer having Christmas explained to me by a young Elissa Johnk, but every year our pageant is different and the same. We manage, well, Edie does, really, to find new ways to frame the Christmas story presented in the Gospel of Luke, making sure that it stays fresh and new, understandable and explainable as our world changes around us. Imagine my delight, two weeks after having submitted the title of this sermon, "get Scrooged," at finding that our Pageant was not only a fresh way to look at the Gospels, but an updated version of Dickens's classic A Christmas Carol, which was, in its time, trying to show Victorian England how far they had strayed from the Christmas spirit and Christian Ideal. Are there no workhouses? Scrooge asks. Let them starve, and decrease the surplus population!

Both of these statements symbolize the philosophy of many leading lights of Victorian England. Teach the lazy poor to work! Let them die if they don't have the money to pay for their good health! Let them starve, so that there may be more for the rest. These very prim and proper Victorians seemed not to realize that the workhouses were the new manglers, and their inhabitants the new shepherds. Dickens's story highlights the chasm between the warmth and hope of our Christmas Story and the barren cold of reality for the poor in England, as Dickens, too, put the Christmas story in a context his readers could understand. But of course, there are no workhouses here, and the Dickensian Counting House means nothing to us. So we needed to find a new way to tell that story, to include our own experiences, just like Matthew and Dickens both. And so, the tale of Mr. Churlish was the same as that of Ebenezer Scrooge, in modern America and not Victorian England. Someone who had once known what it was to be a part of Christmas, but who now lived only for himself.

But the Ghosts invited him back. The Ghost of Christmas Past showed him how Christmas had once been in him, how he used to enjoy Christmas before his heart turned to stone. The Ghost of Christmas Present showed him that Christmas was still in those all around him, those who knew him best, and that he was part of their Christmases whether he acknowledged it or not. Dickens tells us that Scrooge's nephew implored him to come to Christmas at his house, and that the party there celebrates him even in his absence. Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim remember Scrooge in their Christmas Eve prayers, over the protestations of the fine Mrs. Cratchit. And as that ghost gives way to the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come, we see the fierce urgency of now; that ignorance and want are still with us; that on his, and our, present path, he will someday get exactly what he wants: to be left alone. His choice is simple. Accept the offer to be part of a story that includes everyone around him, the poor and the rich, his

employees and his family, the familiar and the stranger, or decline it and choose to be alone. He could write two stories. One, featuring just himself, and how Ebenezer Scrooge outwitted the world. It is a very short story. Or, Ebenezer Scrooge could choose to write a different story. One that includes all men and women, those who formed him, and those he loved, and those who remember him fondly a century later. This story is much longer. It is eternal. And Ebenezer Scrooge, personally invited by the presence of Christ in the guise of these Ghosts, chose the latter.

My friends, this is the Good News! We write our own story! It does not matter if we were born Kings, Shepherds, Professors or Prisoners. God is with us. Because "It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved" us, just like Isaiah said. So as we live here, we have the choice! Live that eternal story all the year round, treating every day like Christmas Day, or let ourselves be distracted by the minor worries of the world and forget this feeling that we have on Christmas. My friends, let's get Scrooged.