

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church  
By Chris Fillingham  
“From Scrooge to Mary and Back Again”  
Luke 1:39-45; 2:1-7  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent.  
December 20, 2015**

Ebenezer Scrooge: “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!” Dickens writes.

**“Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.”**

It’s Christmas Eve, and his nephew Fred invites him over for a holiday party.

**“Bah Humbug”** was all Scrooge had to say to that. He wasn’t interested in the invitation in the least. He didn’t welcome the welcome he’d received.

His clerk, Bob Cratchit, closes up shop and Scrooge reluctantly agrees to give him Christmas Day off... while grumbling about still having to pay him.

**“It’s only one day a year,”** Bob says.

**“A poor excuse for picking [your boss’s] pocket every twenty-fifth of December!”** said Scrooge.

That night, Scrooge would crawl into bed, and be led on a great journey through Christmas past, present and future... a journey right into the living room of his nephew Fred and the home of his clerk Bob Cratchit.... a journey into their lives and homes that would change old Scrooge.

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Mary’s words from last week, her allowing, her surrendering, her **“I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be so...”** sent her on a journey of her own... into some very different living rooms and homes.

She packs up her things and heads south to the Judean hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who the angel said is also pregnant. Of course, Elizabeth and Zechariah have no idea she’s coming, but when she shows up on their doorstep all kinds of exciting things happen.

Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice out on the front porch and the babe in Elizabeth’s womb (the baby that will grow up to be John the Baptist,) leaps within her...

and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit...

and as she runs out to meet Mary, a great blessing comes blurting out of her mouth, the scriptures say: **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”**

I imagine Elizabeth blushing just a bit, unsure of where all that came from. But,

apparently she's excited to see Mary, and welcomes her young, unmarried, pregnant cousin into her home.

Zechariah, on the other hand, was probably a little less excited to see Mary. After all, his elderly wife is 6 months pregnant, and should probably be on bed rest, not hosting family, right now. He's shaking his head at the in-laws and thinking, **"Why does Elizabeth's family always come at the worst times?"** (It's part of the holiday tradition, you see.)

But the angel silenced his tongue, remember? So, he has no choice but to keep his remarks to himself. And it's a good thing too... because Elizabeth's hospitality is a great gift... not only to Mary, but to Elizabeth, her baby, and their whole house.

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It's a strange little episode right here in the birth narrative. We don't know exactly why Mary went to see Elizabeth, or what she was doing the three months she stayed.

Maybe Mary was there to help Elizabeth in the last trimester... but she doesn't seem to stay and help with the birth.

Maybe she was there trying to figure out how to tell Joseph about her own pregnancy, trying to get advice from her older cousin.

Maybe Mary just wanted someone else to talk to who knew what she was going through.

We don't know for sure. All we really know is that for three months Mary was there... in Zechariah and Elizabeth's home, watching them get ready to have a newborn in the house.

And apparently, in the midst of all they had going on, Mary was welcomed there. She was the gracious recipient of their hospitality. And yet, according to the scriptures, the one who received the most out of this visit, wasn't Mary. It was the one who welcomed her. It was Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is the one filled with the Holy Spirit.

Her baby is the one to have leaped with joy.

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Scrooge's journey takes him to all kinds of places. First to his past, his childhood and young adult years. And then into the Present... where he is able to enter into another family's home.

Unlike Elizabeth, Bob Cratchit's wife isn't pregnant.

And unlike Mary, there's no one leaping for joy at the sound of Scrooge's name.

But Scrooge is able to watch this family unseen, as he is. He watches as they celebrate Christmas Day. He watched as Bob Cratchit walk into their home, carrying their son, Tiny Tim on his shoulders.

"Alas for Tiny Tim," writes Dickens, "he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs

supported by an iron frame!"

They had been at Church that Christmas morning, and Mrs. Cratchit asked how Tim behaved.

"As good as gold," said Bob, "and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, [the One] who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see." Bob's voice trembled as he told her this.

Just then, Tim's "active little crutch was heard upon the floor, and back came Tiny Tim before another word was spoken, escorted by his brother and sister to his stool before the fire."

Scrooge watched all this taking place. He was the unseen guest in their home. He watched, as the family ate their meager Christmas meal and gave thanks for what they had. At the end of their meal, Bob held out his cup and toasted: **"A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!"**

Which all the family re-echoed.

**"God bless us every one!"** said Tiny Tim, the last of all.

He sat very close to his father's side upon his little stool. Bob held his withered little hand in his, as if he loved the child, and wished to keep him by his side, and dreaded that he might be taken from him.

"**Spirit,**" said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, **"tell me if Tiny Tim will live."**

**"I see a vacant seat,"** replied the Ghost, **"in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die."**

**"No, no,"** said Scrooge. **"Oh, no, kind Spirit! say he will be spared."**

The journey continued for Scrooge, from the present to the future. And there in Christmas future, he saw a gravestone. One where no tears were shed... and the name inscribed... was none other than Ebenezer Scrooge.

And then he was taken back to that same familiar family, minus one... where tears *were* shed as the family remembered little Tim.

A deep and profound sorrow gripped Scrooge's heart, as he was carried from scene to scene... from one place to another and back again.

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Mary is also carried along, here and there. She's made the long trek down to the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth, and three months later back home. But she doesn't get to stay there long. Next thing you know, she and Joseph are headed back south. This time, they aren't going to family's house. But they are going back to the town of Joseph's ancestry, to Bethlehem.

When they arrive, they are strangers, but you may be surprised to learn, that they receive a warm welcome and abundant hospitality, just the same. Offering hospitality to strangers and travelers was simply what you did back then. Your honor and the honor of your whole town depended on it.

Of course, we've all seen the pageants with the grumpy innkeeper who shouts at them, "**Can you see the sign? No vacancy.**" But that's probably not what's actually happening here.

The word Luke uses for "inn" isn't typically talking about a commercial inn. There's a different Greek word for that. This room is most likely the guest room, or the only bedroom that the average peasant home in ancient Palestine would have had.

Most homes were actually just one large room, where the family cooked, ate, and slept all in the same space. One area was typically marked off with a few timbers right when you entered the house. This is where they would bring the sheep, or goats in for the night.

It's what people who live in adobe houses still do in many parts of the world. You bring your animals in so they aren't stolen, and you bring them in your house for warmth. They're on one side of the timbers. You and your family sleep on the other... but it's all one large room.

Some homes did have another room attached at the end, or up on a second story, an upper room, the gospels call it. It's the same word here at the beginning of Luke that the gospels uses for that room Jesus and the disciples shared the Passover meal. This room might be where you sleep, or it might be where you welcome guests.

All that to say, Mary and Joseph were welcomed into this home, that was already quite full. There was no room left in the guestroom. So, they stayed in the main room, ***with the rest of the family... with all of them gathered together.***

And when Jesus was born, they placed him in the manger, over there in the corner of their living room.

I know, it's a little different image from our romanticized version of the Nativity scene. I don't mean to ruin anyone's sentimentalized picture of Mary and Joseph all by themselves out where the "**cattle are lowing**" and "**the ox and ass before him bow.**"

The reason I tell you all this is to help you see what we so often have missed. **Hospitality is there at the very heart of the Christmas Story.** Most scholars would agree, Joseph and Mary were welcomed into someone's crowded home. There wasn't really room, but this family made room.

It was a great gift to Mary and Joseph, but not just to them. Because by welcoming this young couple, this family received the great gift of having Christ born

among them.

Christ was born in their home.

This family was the first to hear the shepherd's story.

It was their door that the wise men knocked on when they brought gifts.

Because they welcomed these two strangers into their lives,

because of the hospitality they offered,

because they made room in their home,

even when the guest room was full,

they received what you and I and the world over longs for: the presence of the Holy One in their midst.

From Mary's trip to Elizabeth home in the Judean country, to her trip with Joseph to a stranger's home in Bethlehem, hospitality is being offered... and there is a blessing in both the giving and receiving of it.

This just might be the most over looked and hardest part of the Christmas story. Welcoming the stranger, welcoming those who are different, welcoming the unexpected... is incredibly challenging for us.

It's hard to know how this should look for us. Most of us aren't called to put strangers up on the living room couch every night. But I don't think we can avoid that uncomfortable truth that this is the way the gospel story begins. This is the way God comes to us.

Which may just mean we're all called to practice some radical kind of welcome... a hospitality with those we know and those we don't know...

a deep welcome for our unexpected arrival on our door step,

and a deep welcome for the world...

a welcome that will stretch our imaginations and stretch our hearts so that there is enough room for Christ to enter in and make us whole.

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Scrooge, work up the next morning, relieved to find that it was still Christmas Day after all. And he remembered the invitation that his nephew had offered him. Suddenly, he was eager to receive their hospitality. And so, he went to the party, but not before he found the largest turkey in town and sent it anonymously to Bob Cratchit's family for Christmas.

The next day, when Bob Cratchit showed up to work, Scrooge does the most surprising thing. He smiles. **"Merry Christmas!"** he says to Bob with a slap on his back... which makes Bob very nervous that something awful must be about to happen.

**"A merrier Christmas, Bob, than I have given you for many a year! I'll raise your salary, and endeavor to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of [soup], Bob!"**

Scrooge was changed, and because of that, it saved Tiny Tim's life. But you know, the story isn't really about saving Tiny Tim. It's about Scrooge's life being saved. He learned to embrace those around him, and for the first time, he learned to allow them....to also embrace him.

That's what real hospitality can look like. A welcoming, a blessing that flows back and forth...

from Mary to Elizabeth, and back,  
from a Bethlehem stranger to Joseph and back  
from Scrooge, to Bob Cratchit and Tiny time and back  
from you to others and back...

... there is a mutuality.

And in the midst of it all, the Holy One is there... You might not see it. It may be just as hidden as a baby in the womb, but God is there.

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And so, I wonder, if we find a way to practice God's great welcome this year... if our hearts were to stretch open, even to one person at the door step of our lives.... might we be surprised to find Christ born anew in us?

If that were to happen, then we would most certainly hear a "Tiny" voice say,  
**"God Bless Us, Every One!"**

Amen.

Reflection:

*The light was in the world,  
and the world came into being through the light,  
but the world didn't recognize the light.  
The light came to his own people,  
and his own people didn't welcome him.*

*But those who did welcome him,  
those who believed in his name,  
he authorized to become God's children,  
born not from blood  
nor from human desire or passion,  
but born from God.*

*The Word became flesh  
and made his home among us.  
We have seen his glory,  
glory like that of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.*

~John 1:10-14