

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner... Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.”

If you're not familiar with it, those are the opening lines to Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." According to the Internet Movie Database, there have been no less than 40 versions of "A Christmas Carol" performed for film or television. There have been lighthearted, animated versions performed by the characters of the Flintstones, the Smurfs, Mr. Magoo, and Disney. There have been serious, well-respected versions performed by Patrick Stewart, George C. Scott, and Albert Finney.

But the favorite around the Ketelsen household is a blend of the two: A Muppet Christmas Carol. Which combines the humor of Henson's muppet troupe with the outstanding performance of Michael Caine as Scrooge, all using a script that actually contains far more of the original Dickens novel than many of the versions you'll see on TV today. I highly recommend it.

And as we were watching it recently, I began to realize that there was yet another dimension of Dickens' genius. Beyond the surface lessons of charity and friendship and selflessness, that are so well known, Dickens actually manages to hit on a theological principle that not all Christians recognize: the ubiquity of prophecy.

You see we tend to think about prophecy as foretelling the future only. As always being forward looking. But that's actually not very true to God's Word. Because in Scripture, prophecy can be about the past, present, or future. It's ubiquitous. It looks at all times.

In Dickens' Christmas Carol, the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Scrooge and says, "I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate." Marley's job is to deliver a prophecy to Scrooge. But the only way he can do that is by offering him three spirits. The Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Future.

Much like God's Word to us, Marley's prophecy for Scrooge's redemption necessitates a message that is ubiquitous. That looks past, present, and future. And for good reason. Because Scrooge would never understand the hopeless tragedy that is his own future unless he first looked at all the mistakes he made in the past and all the opportunities he was missing that very day, which then led to that future.

And really, that's exactly what the prophecy in our Gospel lesson does for us. Because what Simeon says to Mary and Joseph is not just a prayer. It is a prophecy. And in the words of what we often call the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon, are buried a ghost of Christmas past, a ghost of Christmas present, and a ghost Christmas future. All of which need to be heard before we can see our own redemption.

The ghost of Christmas past pops up in the very first words of Simeon's message. "*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word.*" Within that statement are two prophetic principles that are at the foundation of just about every prophecy in scripture.

First, that this is a prophecy from the Lord. In fact, the NIV goes a step further in their translation. It says this is a prophecy from the "Sovereign Lord," which is a helpful phrase to use.

The Lord is sovereign. He is above all things. He is in control of all things. Nothing that has ever happened in this world has happened apart from His presence. And nothing has ever happened that is beyond His control. As St Paul writes in our Epistle, it was God who determined the fullness of time for Christ's coming, God who sent forth His Son, God who adopts us as sons, God who sends his Spirit into our hearts. He is sovereign over all things.

And when we look into that past and we see his power and sovereignty, we see it used time and time again in the pursuit of one thing: the fulfillment of His promises. God speaks his Word. And then he acts according to his Word, just as Simeon says. God is sovereign and God is trustworthy. If he says he's going to do something, then he's going to do it.

And that's both a reason for joy and a reason for fear. Because God has promised us many things. He has promised to judge the wicked and condemn the unrighteous. He has promised that, in our sinfulness and rebellion, we will be punished. He has promised that from dust we were created and to dust we will return.

Yet, he has also promised reasons for hope. In fact, the baby in Simeon's arms was a promise of hope. God had promised Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. The anointed one who would save the world from its sinfulness. And now Simeon knew that he could die in the peace of knowing that God had once again acted according to His Word.

Which is exactly where we find the ghost of Christmas present. *"For my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."*

As he lay in the old man's arms, Christ was Simeon's Christmas present. And He is our Christmas present. And from either perspective, He is our salvation. For Simeon, that Christ child was the glory of Israel. The living, breathing proof that God was still with His people. That their faith in His promises had not been in vain. And that if they followed this child, He would bring them salvation.

For us, the salvation worked through Christ goes one step further. For whether the people of Israel chose to follow Christ or not, they had the light of God's Word. They did everything with their eyes open.

But us? We're Gentiles. We would be lost in a world of darkness if Christ had not come to us by the working of His Spirit in our hearts. He is more than just our salvation, He also is the light by which we see our salvation. By which it is revealed to us and by which we take hold of it.

In Dickens' story, the ghost of Christmas present revealed to Scrooge all the wonderful friends he had that were right under his nose, if only he could see them. In God's story, Christ reveals to us the wonderful Savior we have working for our redemption right under our noses, if only we have His light to shine upon our hearts and show us his salvation.

But that salvation came at a cost. It came at the cost of the ghost of Christmas future. *"Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'"*

Like in a Christmas Carol, the ghost of Christmas future is the ghost of suffering. The ghost of a grave. The ghost of death. That was Jesus' Christmas future. It was there waiting for Him the day He was born. It was there waiting for Him in the very name they gave Him that day in the temple: Jesus. The Lord saves.

The Lord saves, not by dodging death like Ebenezer Scrooge did. Not by avoiding the ghost of Christmas future. But by accepting it out of love for us. Jesus let His name be written on that terrifying gravestone for one reason: so that our name wouldn't be written there.

And so now, we do have the Christmas future that Scrooge had at the end of A Christmas Carol. A future of joy and celebration. A future of love and charity and thanksgiving. A future we have, not simply because we've repented of our past mistakes and dedicated ourselves to living a more righteous life, as he did.

No, our Christmas future was bought for us on the cross of Calvary. Our Christmas future came through death... and also through resurrection. So that when we look to our Christmas future, we do so with the peace that Simeon had. Peace that simply accepted that he would depart from this life into the hands of His sovereign Lord. Knowing that this child had brought him salvation.

Luke calls this peace "the consolation of Israel." Like the consolation that we give to one another when someone needs a glimmer of hope in the midst of their grief and sadness. God consoles His people in Jesus Christ. He consoles us by raising Jesus from the dead.

Because our Christmas future isn't just a ghost in Scripture. Our Christmas future is the living, breathing body of our Lord, risen from the dead on Easter morning. And that bright, hopeful future is God's Christmas Carol to us. Amen.