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Isaiah 58:3-8
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The Man Who Invented Christmas

A young man in London aspired to be a writer. But everything in life seemed to be against him.

With only four years of school to his credit, his father in jail because he couldn't pay his debts, the young man often went to bed hungry.

At the tender age of 12, he was able to secure a job pasting labels on bottles in a rat-infested shoe polish factory.

He slept in a dismal attic room with two rough boys from the slums.

The young man had so little confidence in his ability to write, that he sneaked out and mailed his first manuscript in the middle of the night, so nobody would laugh at him. Story after story was rejected.

Finally, the day came when one of his stories was accepted for publication. He wasn't paid anything for the story, but the editor praised his work.

One editor had given him recognition, showed appreciation.

The young man was so thrilled that he wandered aimlessly around the streets of London with tears rolling down his cheeks.

That one bit of expressed appreciation changed the young man's whole life and career.

The story just goes to show how words of recognition and appreciation that we might show to others, especially to young people, might serve to change the whole course of their lives.

So, don't withhold words of appreciation and recognition. You have the power to change lives!

But back to the story.

You have already guessed the name of the young man in the story, I am sure. It was Charles Dickens, one of the world's most beloved writers.

In case you missed it, it was just a few years ago that the world celebrated Charles Dickens' 200th birthday.

Now, I need to tell right up front that I am not a Dickens expert, nowhere near. I have read some of his 15 major novels, but certainly not close to all of them.

If you have been here the last three weeks, you should know that my favorite Dickens work is *A Christmas Carol*, a story that helped change the way the Christmas holiday is celebrated today.

As an aside, Dickens wrote that *A Christmas Carol* unfolded as he wrote it.

He said in doing so, "I wept and laughed, and wept again as I walked the black streets of London fifteen or twenty miles many a night when all sober folks had gone to bed."

Here is some more interesting trivia about Charles Dickens that you might not know.

No other writer has inspired more movie, TV, and stage adaptations of their works. More than 320 movies—dramas, musicals and cartoons—have been inspired by Dickens' novels.

All of Dickens' works were adapted for the stage during his own lifetime, and, get this, he often was in the cast himself.

When Dickens came to America for his first reading tour in 1842, he drew huge crowds.

Ticket scalpers worked his appearances like they do today at rock concerts and Super Bowl games.

People flocked around Dickens like he was an idol.

His second American tour attracted more than 100,000 people at his 76 public readings, earning him \$95,000, which is equivalent to about \$1.5 million in today's money.

Dickens is also credited by the Oxford English Dictionary with introducing 247 new words and usages into our language.

These include such words as butter-fingers, fluffiness, flummox, the creeps, dustbin, and two words I was not familiar with: ugsome (disgusting), slangular (leaning towards slang).

He married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and together they had 10 children, all of which he gave strange nicknames, such as "lucifer box", "chickenstalker" and "skittles".

And a tip to all you aspiring writers: In order to improve his writing, Dickens believed that he had to always sleep facing north – which he always did.

Now, although the title of my sermon suggests it and many over the years thought it was the case, and there is a movie of the same name, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* didn't really help to "invent" Christmas.

While it did help to invent some new traditions around Christmas, it mainly helped to revive the traditions and enthusiasm for Christmas.

It is true that when Dickens went to his publishers with his idea for the book, they told him that Christmas was but a "minor holiday."

That obviously has changed over the years.

Still, the book was influential in inspiring various seasonal foods, including turkey and mashed potatoes. It promoted the notion of family gatherings, games and festivities. And it popularized the use of the term "Merry Christmas".

Most importantly, I believe, it helped to define the spirit of Christmas, with an emphasis on joy and charity instead of wealth and material things.

Terms like "Tiny Tim" and "Scrooge," which originated from the book, emphasize these contrasting meanings of Christmas and are still widely used today.

But I think the best thing about Dickens, other than his wonderful books, was that he was a social reformer, a social reformer, in the spirit of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, and of Jesus.

Isaiah believed that his people would be blessed for being careful to see to the needs of the poor, oppressed and downtrodden.

He was tired of empty religiosity; repeating nice religious words and going through the motions of religion such as prayer and fasting, when at the same time the actions of daily life took no regard of, and even inflicted suffering upon, fellow humans.

Isaiah's phrase, "you pursue your own interests and oppress your workers" could just as easily have come right out of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Which leads me back to Dickens. Dickens sympathized with and advocated for the poor and oppressed.

He never lost his interest in and never stopped advocating for those in prison (remember, his father had been in debtors' prison), orphanages, and institutions for the insane.

When traveling through the southern United States, Dickens was appalled at the sight of southern slavery and became an outspoken voice for abolition.

And Dickens' advocacy and efforts to change social injustices and inequities come through in the novels he wrote.

For instance, as I hinted earlier, *A Christmas Carol*, at its core, is not really about Christmas customs. It is about something much deeper.

A Christmas Carol was a call for society to consider the plight and working conditions of the poor and unlearned.

One of the key passages in *A Christmas Carol* is early in the work when the ghost of Scrooge's deceased business partner appears to him.

Scrooge says to Jacob Marley's ghost, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob. . ."

To which Marley's ghost replies, "Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business."

And then when the Ghost of Christmas Present prepares to leave him, two children, a boy and a girl, are revealed from underneath the Ghost's robe.

The children are wretched, hopeless, frightful, hideous, miserable. "Spirit! Are they yours?" Scrooge asks.

"They are Man's," said the Spirit. "This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both."

In other words, the passage is a call to social reform to see to the needs of the world's children who all too often are victims of ignorance and want.

And then the concluding message of *A Christmas Carol* is a call for the reader to examine his or her own life and make sure that Christmas is

being celebrated in the heart and demonstrated through acts of charity and benevolence to the poor.

It's sad that this season is only a moment in the headlong rush of our lives. We hope not to become as separated as Scrooge from human contact.

We long to find the redemptive spirit of generosity as Scrooge later did.

We hope that we will have the spirit of connection to care for each other and the planet we live upon in all our days, that the natural connections between people will not be packed away with the twinkling Christmas tree light—only to be unpacked next year.

The African-American theologian Howard Thurman characterized these needs as the "work of Christmas":

When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks, The work of Christmas

begins:

To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the

prisoner,

To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among us all, To make music in the heart.

– Howard Thurman

Could we hope for anything more? Every day we are at risk of becoming the worst of Scrooge and the best as well.

Whether we live the spirit of Christmas in the seasons to come is up to our generosity and connections with life on this planet.

Dickens tells us that Scrooge was a changed man from his Christmas encounter and that he made Christmas a central part of his life thereafter.

The truth is that we are all like Scrooge. We are all mortal and when we think of death it is common to think of the things we have contributed to humanity.

Some people are gifted with the ability to lead others to the good. Others have generosity of spirit that lives on in and sustains their families and friends.

All cannot give of their lives great things like curing diseases or writing great poetry to last the ages.

But whatever good we can do here and now, it is our blessing and our opportunity to do it.

Our faith teaches us to believe that human beings, through recognizing our interconnections, can build a better world and that it is our duty to try to do just that.

Let me close with the closing paragraphs from Dicken's "A Christmas Carol."

"Here is the end of the story: Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he became a second father.

He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world.

Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and he little heeded them.

For he was wise enough to know that nothing happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset.

And knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms.

His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

He had no intercourse with Spirits . . . and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if man alive possessed the knowledge.

May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!"

Amen