
My favorite is “Scrooged” - a re-telling of “A Christmas Carol” where Bill Murray plays Frank Cross, a heartless, money-mongering television executive. The movie came out in 1988. I was probably too young to watch it, but I distinctly remember this being the movie that brought the idea of “Christmas Spirit” alive to me. Being raised in the church, I knew Christmas was solely about celebrating Jesus’ birth, which was, of course, something to celebrate and be thankful for. But, in my mind, Christmas required no more of Christians than any other day - Christians are still expected to love others as we love ourselves, serve others as Christ serves us, and worship as one community of faith. For me, the “miracle of Christmas” was always associated with Jesus’ birth, not with seeing humankind through kinder, more empathetic eyes because we are supposed to be looking through those glasses all the time.

Anyway, “Scrooged” is a secularized dramatization of the “Christmas Spirit” - about how this one night, Christmas Eve, is exceedingly special and, therefore, shows us it is never too late to change one’s life. Similar to Ebenezer Scrooge, Frank Cross (Bill Murray) is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past (a cigar smoking taxi cab driver), the Ghost of Christmas Present (a
sugar-plum fairy with a mean right hook played by Carol Kane), and the finally the horrific Ghost of Christmas Future. What struck me so powerfully, even with being familiar with Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol,” was that this seemingly unredeemable character (the epitome of the power-hungry, materialistic yuppies of the 1980’s) was redeemed and at the end of the movie seems completely transformed. A light went on in his heart, mind and soul and the dark shadow of greed and power that started to engulf him since he was young had started to dissipate. He had experienced the “real” (the secularized real) meaning of Christmas and his life will no longer be the same. I cry at the end of the movie every single time I watch it. I always have a new excitement for Christmas after watching “Scrooged” - I usually add a few more people to my Christmas list, agree to bake a few extra items at our various Christmas gatherings, contact some people with whom I haven’t spoken in a while, and apologize to my husband for something that he has forgotten about, but yet the “spirit of Christmas” forces me to reconcile.

The power of the Christmas Spirit! The power of our Christmas ghosts. The power of re-visiting the ghosts of our past, gazing with a different perspective at the ghosts of our present, and peering through a crystal ball at the ghosts of our future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes us to the home of Elizabeth who is running to the door to greet her cousin Mary. Elizabeth, a woman of an older maternal age (which probably means my age!) was plump and glowing in her 6th month of pregnancy, is delighted, ecstatic even, to be with Mary who is also pregnant. These women are not typical women, nor are they typical pregnancies. One is married to a sterile priest, the other - well, she’s not actually married. One has a husband who did not believe something like this could happen even though he is a faithful religious leader of the great and mighty Yahweh and would have known the Sarah and Abraham story backwards
and forwards. The other has a husband-to-be who is probably not overly jazzed about his soon-to-be wife being pregnant with, uh, “someone” else’s baby.

So, when these two atypical pregnant women meet, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and says in a loud voice: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” This phrase “in a loud voice” in Greek means to shout as though using a mega-phone, literally a “big” or “mega” voice. This is how Elizabeth speaks her prophetic words to Mary, and so to us - in her outside voice.

It is so obvious to me that a man wrote the account of this meeting between Elizabeth and Mary, because when two pregnant women find one another, they usually do not talk theology or prophecy on behalf of the other! The conversation instead revolves around morning sickness, heartburn, swollen ankles, stretch marks, unflattering maternity clothes, and the specific birthing plan. So, reading between the lines, it is obvious this meeting was nothing more than a 1st century Baby Shower! Two women coming together to celebrate, commiserate, and share with each other the joys and anxieties of these babies growing inside them. Two women choosing to weather this stage in their lives together rather than apart.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows us this scene in our own Judeo-Christian past, a scene showing Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, celebrating the miracle of their pregnancies and the awesomeness of God’s power.

The Ghost of Christmas Present came to a halting stop outside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Gunmen in an elementary school?! 20 children brutally murdered by multiple gunshot wounds?! 6 school employees dead?! Hundreds of family members paralyzed with
grief, an entire community, the whole country really, paralyzed with fear and doubt?! The horror and tragedy of this situation is nearly unfathomable. It incites a sick feeling in the pit of one’s stomach that will not go away. Tears come to our eyes at the mere mention of it. This is our present reality - 26 households that will be gathering at funerals this week for the loss of a loved one who, most likely, already has presents under the Christmas tree with their name on it. When I got home on Friday, Jeff met me at the door and said, “I can’t even think about it, and yet, it will not escape me.” Violence of this magnitude cannot be shaken.

And it’s not as if this season has been holly jolly up to this point. I mean, just because it’s Christmas does not mean that life will be all joy-filled and merry. In the last month in our church, members have died - people have buried spouses, parents, children, friends; members have received unpleasant health diagnoses or had or will have major surgery; members have lost jobs or are still unemployed. Life does not stop because we’ve decked the halls and trimmed the tree. Tragedy does not pass us by just because we put bright lights on our homes and baked delicious once-a-year treats. Or unpleasant anniversaries do not fall off the calendar because we have too many Christmas festivities planned.

Today marks the third anniversary of Jeff’s sister Kristy’s death. Kristy lost her fight with ovarian cancer three years ago today - leaving behind a husband of 15 years and an 11-year-old son. Christmas does not feel the same in the Gehring family without Kristy’s gorgeous smile and engaging conversation. One can’t enter December without the dread of knowing that with each passing day we get closer to passing another year without Kristy. December used to be a time of great celebration because besides Christmas, it is also Jeff’s birthday. But, three years ago Kristy’s visitation was on Jeff’s birthday. Now Jeff’s birth date is another unpleasant reminder of the loss of a
woman who would have been our daughters’ hero. It stinks. It really stinks.

The Ghost of Christmas Present haunts many of us this day. The Ghost of Christmas Present quite effortlessly brings us to a place of loneliness, grief and fear.

The Ghost of Christmas Future in both “A Christmas Carol” and “Scrooged” follows the path exactly from where the present left off. Both Ebenezer Scrooge and Frank Cross die alone and those in their employment continue living in circumstances far more tragic then their present ones. The Future is bleak.

What Future does our Ghost of Christmas Future foresee? I cannot answer that question, nor can you, I suspect, because no one moment is the end of the story. No one moment is the end of our story. No one moment is the end of your story.

The moment when Elizabeth greeted Mary in her megavoce and John the Baptist leapt in her womb, was not the end of Elizabeth, Mary or their unborn children’s story. We know how their stories continue. Elizabeth’s son John becomes an eccentric, faithful prophet preparing all who will hear in body and spirit for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus, albeit it in a stable surrounded by animals, is born and spends his life here on earth connecting people to God through his teachings and parables. In fact, Jesus’ birthday is in our future. But even that moment, what we celebrate as Christmas, is not the one moment that tells the rest of the story for Jesus. Nor is it the one moment that tells the rest of our story either. We know the rest of Jesus’ story, don’t we? We know that he lives into his 30’s until he is betrayed by his friend, crucified on a cross, is dead for three days, and then, most miraculously, comes back to life and lives forevermore. That one moment, the moment of
Christ’s resurrection, is the moment when we know that above all else, our future is full of hope.

The one moment in Connecticut on Friday is not the end of the story either. Don’t worry, I am not going to Pollyanna-ize this tragedy in any way. I will, however, offer a perspective in which to view the present that will hopefully color your future and the future of those affected by this terrible tragedy. I steal this perspective from Mr. Fred Rogers of “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.”

*When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers - so many caring people in this world.*

The one moment in Connecticut also included some amazing helpers, people who protected the children or who comforted families of those that died. That one moment, the moment of utter tragedy and loss was also a moment surrounded by many helpers. So, in that one moment we know that maybe, just maybe, there is hope for our future.

It was a few days before Christmas Eve and the Chancel Choir was practicing one last time - a dress rehearsal of the Christmas Cantata. The choir director, my mother, was in a snit because the tenors (it’s always the tenors!) cannot get their part right on the men’s only song. The organist is exhausted and grumpy because he had a long week ahead. Joseph, played by high school senior Joe, is sulking onstage because he is not overly keen with the church who is not overly keen with his sexual orientation, but agreed to sing because he loves my mom so much and really he has the best voice for it. My little brother and I are in the balcony peering over the railing at dangerous angles in the hopes of getting our parents attention so we can
get the heck out of the church because, well, we might as well live at the church around Christmas. And then there’s Mary, played by mom’s student teacher Lori, sitting quietly in the congregation with a half smile on her face just taking in the drama unfolding before her awaiting her cue to sing her big solo.

I know this Cantata backwards and forwards so I know this is the part where Mary responds to the big news that she is to bear God’s son. The organist plays the introduction, my mom cues Mary to walk down the aisle, the choir stands, then she gives one of these *** and Mary sings:

My soul doth magnify the Lord.

My soul doth magnify the Lord.

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.

I know Mary is supposed to sing this twice and then the choir comes in with their part “Cherish that wonderful name...” But, much to my mother’s chagrin, Mary keeps singing her part . . . over and over. My mom, in one angry move, cuts the choir and the organist and is turning around to shush Mary when she sees Mary standing before the cross like this (arms outstretched, eyes closed) as she’s singing. It’s the only sound in the sanctuary, this young woman’s voice declaring that, in the face of an uncertain future as the mother of the Christ child, the only thing she can say is “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” Ruth Logan, the 82-year-old off-key soprano clutches her music tightly against her chest, closes her eyes and joins Mary . . . Edith . . . Before long, the entire choir is singing these 4 lines, over and over . . . because in the face of the ghosts of our past, present and future, sometimes these are the only words we can say.