

The Spirit of Christmas. We hear a lot about the Spirit of Christmas this time of year. Do you ever find yourself sitting down exhausted at this time of year and asking yourself, "Do I have the Christmas Spirit?" That can be a tough question! Perhaps it would be better to ask first: what exactly is the Spirit of Christmas, anyway?

The popular Charles Dickens story "The Christmas Carol" gives an answer to the question of Christmas spirit. And it arrives there through three visits by literally spirits, the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future. Ebenezer Scrooge is visited throughout Christmas Eve night by these Spirits, and he's basically scared silly into this Christmas morning vow: "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me." And we go on to see an Ebenezer Scrooge who has changed from a bitter, old miser to a caring model of generosity.

There's a lot to be said for Charles Dickens' picture of the Christmas Spirit. I think he's on the right track when he shows us a changed person such as Ebenezer Scrooge, who in one night goes from being a "scrooge" to being more like Mother Theresa. I believe that is the change that the Gospel seeks to make in each of us, that we be transformed into caring models of generosity.

And yet to find the ultimate answer to the nature of the Christmas Spirit, I think we need to go a bit deeper than Charles Dickens. We can take our own journey with the Christmas Spirits of Past, Present, and Future. For us, of course, the Spirit of Christmas Past takes us back all the way to that first Christmas. We have already read the story from St. Luke's gospel; we've already been visited with a heavenly chorus of praise in our choir's and in our own singing. But I think there is something about these two stories -- Charles Dickens's story and St. Luke's story -- that we need to see. I'm talking about the role of fear in these

two stories. Both stories give us some unsavory characters. Ebenezer Scrooge is so famous that his name has entered into our language as a word describing any mean, nasty, stingy person. The unsavory characters in St. Luke's story may not be as obvious to us. The shepherds. We have to shake free of some of our Christmas piety. This is not some nice little pastoral scene. Shepherds in the first century represented something like bikers, socially. They were the unwashed, unscrupulous. People locked their doors when they came into town.

But now what role does fear play with the unsavory characters in these stories? In Dickens's story, Scrooge is scared silly by the three specters, the three ghostly spirits of Christmas, who frighten him into a fortunate transformation. Especially the speechless Spirit of Christmas Future leaves Scrooge shaking in his boots before his own tombstone. It's no wonder he is moved to change. Moved by fear.

But what about those unsavory characters in Luke's story, the shepherds? Luke tells us (Luke 2:9 KJV) And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. They were terrified. But what does this heavenly messenger immediately say to the shepherds? This is the key to the difference between these two stories. In one a haunting, voiceless specter points to a gravestone; in the other a holy angel says, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Rather than a grave marker designed to frighten, this angel says "Do not be afraid!" and brings Good News for all people. Rather than a death-threat, this angel brings an invitation, an invitation to witness the beginning of New Life. And these shepherds accept the invitation, not only going to witness this child for themselves, but to also spread the Good News to others, telling others the amazing story of how God made known these wonderful things to them, of all

people. Charles Dickens tells us a story of an unsavory person transformed by intimidation; St. Luke tells us the story of unsavory characters transformed by invitation. The Spirit of Christmas Past, the Spirit of that First Christmas night, was an invitation to New Life, not an intimidation by the specter of death.

Second, let's journey with the Spirit of Christmas Present. What characterizes the spirit of our Christmas celebrations today? Is it the Spirit which moved those shepherds to make a trip to the manger? Or is it the spirit that has moved us to make all those trips to the mall? Manger or mall?

Let's take a clue from Mary. In a story that comes just before the Christmas story, St. Luke tells us about the pregnant Mary going to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth, and she erupts into song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." What spirit is it that has shaped Mary in preparation for that first Christmas? Answer: the Spirit of Holy Scripture. For the song that follows is an eruption of all the themes from Scripture. What is the corollary for that in our world? Today, what would we erupt with? Would we erupt with something formed from the spirit of Scripture like Mary's song? Or would we erupt with some TV commercial? What is the spirit that forms us?

I must confess that one of the prominent images for me this holiday season has been that TV commercial where a couple is stranded on a frozen wasteland in the middle of nowhere. They are standing in front of their car with the hood up and steam rising from an apparently torn radiator hose. The wife says, "Hey, I know, I can call for help on the new cell phone you bought me for Christmas." And she pulls out of her bag and opens up her new...waffle iron! "Oh yea," she says, "you got me this nice waffle iron instead of a cell phone. Wait, I know, I can make smoke signals with this lovely new blanket you bought me." And she fans the radiator steam with her blanket.

Have you seen that commercial? It makes me laugh. Behind the humor, though, subtly lies something else, of course. This ad wants to give me the spirit of wanting to buy their cell phone and to move me to make that trip to the mall. And, despite the humor, it presents me with a dangerous situation, that of being stranded in the winter cold. So, even though I laugh, there might also be sparked a touch a fear underneath it. If I haven't already bought my loved one a new cell phone, this commercial is basically trying to frighten me into getting one, isn't it? What would happen if your loved one were stranded someday without a cell phone? You better run out to the mall and get her one for Christmas! And so, what may be presented more as a friendly invitation to buy their product may in actuality be planned as an intimidation of sorts.

I ask again: What is the Spirit of Christmas Present that has formed us and brought us here tonight? Is it the Spirit which moved those shepherds to make a trip to the manger? Or is it the spirit that has moved us to make all those trips to the mall? Manger or mall? What shapes and forms us? Is it Scripture like Mary? Or is it the barrage of TV commercials, the many pressures we face in this consumerist age we live in? Which Spirit shapes us? Is it the Christmas Spirit?

Our answers come with the Spirit of Christmas Future. What was Mary's future on that first Christmas? Eventually, there would be the horror of that tiny baby in her arms all grown up and hanging on a cross. But three days later, early in the morning she would be going to once more hold her son's body and anoint it with burial spices. Only to find the stone rolled away from the tomb and an empty grave! Like the shepherds on that first Christmas, she was terrified. But, once again, there was an angel to say, "Do not be afraid!" There was a heavenly messenger to once again announce the Good News and to invite her into a future of everlasting new life. That is the miraculous spirit of not only Mary's

Christmas Future but all of our Christmas Futures, as well. For the tiny child grew up to be the one who would conquer death. He would be the one to rise from the dead and invite us to be transformed into new life. He was not some horrible specter who came to intimidate us or frighten us into shaping up, but he was the Son sent from God to lovingly offer us forgiveness and to invite us to be changed by the Holy Spirit of his life. His is the Spirit of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

O.K., so we've answered the question about what is the Christmas Spirit. The Spirit of our Lord who has conquered death--in other words, even the Easter Spirit!--is also the true Christmas Spirit. But there's still that original question: do we have the Christmas Spirit? The answer to that is a resounding, "Yes! We do have the Christmas Spirit! It was promised to each of us at the moment we accepted Christ as our Saviour and what we all felt at our baptisms!

As we picture the snow flakes falling on Christmas evergreens let me sprinkle you all with a reminder of that fact. Years ago, a pastor, teacher, family member or friend, sprinkled you clean with those words of God's loving forgiveness, and he or she marked the cross on your hearts and the Holy Spirit sealed you assurance, peace and joy. The Spirit of our Lord's Resurrection which is also the true Christmas Spirit. It is a Spirit which doesn't seek to frighten or intimidate us. Rather, it says to us, "Do not be afraid," and it invites us to live a new life. Shaped and formed by Scripture and worship and prayer and serving together in this place, we have the opportunity to be changed people. We are called to be models of generosity in a world that sometimes seems filled with Scrooges.

Baptized as evidence of our Lord's grace, this is a gift truly given to us--to most of us as little babies. It's a gift of the Spirit that, like any gift, can be squandered, misused, or even ignored. But it is a gift given nonetheless. It is the gift

of a new and everlasting life of responding to God's grace by sharing that grace with others. Let us embrace the gift so that 'it may always be said of us,' as it was of Scrooge, 'that he or she knew how to keep Christmas well, if anyone alive possessed the knowledge. And so, as Tiny Tim observed, 'God bless Us, Every One!'"

INV.

If you would like to KNOW 100% for sure that you will spend eternity with the CHRIST Jesus, then:

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The Roman Road to Salvation - It is a group of Bible verses from the book of Romans in the New Testament. If you walk down this road you will end up understanding how to be saved.

Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and come short (fallen short) of the glory of God."

We all have sin in our hearts. We all were born with sin. We were born under the power of sin's control.  
- Admit that you are a sinner.

Romans 6:23a "...The wages of sin is death..."

Sin has an ending. It results in death. We all face physical death, which is a result of sin. But a worse death is spiritual death that alienates us from God, and will last for all eternity. The Bible teaches that there is a place called the Lake of Fire where lost people will be in torment forever. It is the place where people who are spiritually dead will remain.

- Understand that without accepting Jesus Christ that we all deserve death for your sin.

Romans 6:23b "...But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Salvation is a free gift from God to you! You can't earn this gift, but you must reach out and receive it. - Ask God to forgive you and save you.

Romans 5:8, (Rom 5:8 KJV) But God commendeth (Demonstrated) his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

When Jesus died on the cross He paid sin's penalty. He paid the price for all sin, and when He took all the sins of the world on Himself on the cross, He bought us out of slavery to sin and death! The only condition is that we believe in Him and what He has done for us, understanding that we are now joined with Him, and that He is our life. He did all this because He loved us and gave Himself for us!

- Give your life to God... His love poured out in Jesus on the cross is your only hope to have forgiveness and change. His love bought you out of being a slave to sin. His love is what saves you -- not religion, or church membership. God loves you!

Romans 10:13 "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved!"

- Call out to God in the name of Jesus!

(Rom 10:9 KJV) That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

(Rom 10:10 KJV) For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

- If you know that God is knocking on your heart's door, ask Him to come into your heart.

Jesus said,

(Rev 3:20 KJV) Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

- Is Jesus knocking on your heart's door?

Believe in Him.

Ask Him to come in to your heart by faith, and ask Him to reveal Himself to you.

Open the Bible to the Gospel of St. John and read what God says about Jesus, about you, and about being born again.

God will help you. He loves you.

You need to look for a local church where God's word is preached. The Bible says that we are to desire God's word like a newborn baby desires mother's milk. Aren't you hungry to know the truth?

Water baptism is one of the ways you first show that you have been joined to Jesus. This is an action, and actions will not save you. However, it is an act of obedience and a symbol of commitment.

The symbolism is this:

When you go down in the water you show that You have been crucified and buried with Him, And when you come up out of the water you show that you have been raised to walk with Him in newness of life.

(See Romans chapter 6)

You have been born again.  
(See John chapter 3)

Your body has become God's temple. Your heart is where He lives. Forgiveness is yours in Jesus. And you belong to Him. You were sin's slave. But now... You are a child of GOD!

(John 1:12 KJV) But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

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