

Ebenezer

Isaiah 61:1-3

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2: 1-20

Good evening and welcome to one of the most misunderstood days in the Christian calendar.

Oh, don't get me wrong, we DO know some parts of the story, but we have done significant modification to make the story fit us, rather than the other way 'round.

Let's start with the inn. Somehow in our heads the image of the inn has transformed into either a wooden, ramshackle building from the time of the musketeers **or** into some sort of cozy first-century B and B that was already fully booked for the night.

In the first century context, "no place in the inn" just means there was no place to bed down in the front of the cave where guests bedded down, but there **WAS** a place in the back with the animals – and that was enough. The place and the meaning turned out to be just right. The birth happened, the night shift shepherds came to see what was going on amid the animals in the back, and the magi showed up to attempt to figure out what had happened in the cave.

The simple fact is that this story is intended to be **OUR** story, a story to remind us that we are **ALL** a part of the story. This is a story beginning in the margins, in the unimportant place reserved for "everyone else". There wasn't much room for Jesus in the center of life or commerce, but there was room here in the margins.

As we learned throughout His lifetime, Jesus fulfilled His purpose from the margins. Even at the end, His life ended outside the city gates in the local garbage dump, the landfill. There's not much more being marginalized than that.

We seem to forget all that on Christmas Eve when we sing pretty songs, unwrap gifts or eat splendid meals, have time with family and loved ones. Those are important, wonderful parts of our celebration, but they are not the story. It's not that we don't **KNOW** the story, we simply forget.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol". I bring that up right now because it, too, is a story about the margins: an old miser, Scrooge, is shown the truth about how so much of humanity lives on the margins. With that, and the help of three spirits, he re-discovers the joy of sharing and caring.

The story is a common one, Scrooge is afraid; He has lost hope and in his selfishness he has marginalized himself. Over the years he has become hardened to the struggles of others, indifferent to anyone else, focused exclusively on his own problems.

As he has withdrawn from others, he has failed to see that he is shrinking inside and that his capacity for love is dying. In losing his ability to acknowledge the worthiness of others, he too loses any sense of his own worth, even though he is the richest man around.

That's not very far from many in our world. Much of the running over one another – to buy, to visit, to party, to own, to possess – evolves out of an elemental need to know, or, perhaps, to believe, in our own self-worth.

To often people can't find the answer because they can't describe the question.

There is now, just as there has always been, an elemental need to know God, to seek meaning and purpose, to face our fears and uncertainties and to discover love and belonging. Yet we run the risk in the midst of all our running around, agonizing over the "stuff" of the holidays of marginalizing ourselves from the true connections that we so desperately need.

We gain freedom when we finally discover that it's all right to be on the margins. It's only wrong to pretend we're not. It's all right to be vulnerable, it's only empty to play as if we're always strong.

Most of us are tired of clanking around in our personal armor, bumping into masks. It's all right to admit that we need more connection, more love, more forgiveness; it's only wrong to pretend we don't.

It was into this world in which there is very little room for God to dwell that Christ comes uninvited.

He came for the marginalized and those who forgot that there were margins. His place is with those for whom there is no place. His place is with those who do not belong, who are terrorized, tortured, exterminated. He came to bring us all back from our self-imposed marginalization.

He came for the forgotten and those who forget.

Remember the story I was describing a few moments ago, the one about Scrooge? It was not by accident that Charles Dickens chose his name. It was an intentional and powerful reminder to each of his readers...as well as to us, here, this evening about the purpose of celebrating Christmas.

Oh, I'm not talking about the "Scrooge" part; I'm talking about his FIRST name, Dickens' message to us.

Ebenezer!

Ebenezer has two meanings...the first is: "commemoration of divine assistance" and "remember in strength". This was the name of the stone that Samuel set in commemoration of God's help at Mizpah.

When the people faltered or became weak or lost their hope, lost their way, they were to turn to the Ebenezer and remember. When they began to believe in their own strength, that somehow, THEY were the center of the universe, not God, they were to turn to the Ebenezer. When they lost vision that they were a part of a much larger, God driven story, they were to turn to the Ebenezer.

Ebenezer is all about remembering. The spirits helped old Scrooge do just that. The Spirit helps us as well.

So, you see, we HAVE the story of the baby and the angels, and the shepherds and all that goes with it. That's not the challenge. The challenge is to remember that the child came from the margins and for the marginalized, came from the unknown and for the lost, came for the weak, came for the displaced, came to help us remember our own God-given purpose.

Came for people like you ... and me.

My prayer is that this evening your Christmas will be happy, your celebrations meaningful, your heart lifted, and your joy magnified. And that you rediscover your Ebenezer...and that it is a blessing. AMEN.