

## Sermon :: 14-Dec-2025

### Advent 3, Year A

“ let your bountiful grace and mercy  
speedily help and deliver ”

It may be somewhat difficult for us Christians of 2025 to grasp ... but for the first several centuries of Christianity, it was *Epiphany*—the appearance of the MAGI at Jesus' side—and *not* Christmas ... that was the primary (or culminating) feast of the winter 'incarnation cycle' of the Church year: Originally, the revelation of God to the *gentiles*, **specifically** ... was the chief cause for the celebration of GOD-WITH-US.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, however, the singular significance of the *birth* of Jesus—the advent of God, in *human* form—dawned on the Church ... and in the West, by the early fourth century, Christmas—its date coinciding, as I'm sure many of you know, with Roman winter solstice festivals—took its place among the greatest feasts of the Christian year.

And *then*, it was decided that if *Easter* merited a forty-day period of preparation in *Lent* ... then *Christmas* needed one, *too*. And so was born “St Martin’s Lent”: a forty-day period, beginning the day after St Martin’s Day (November 11<sup>th</sup>), of fasting and abstinence to prepare for the *Coming*, rather than the *Resurrection*, of Christ.<sup>2</sup> While St Martin’s Lent would eventually be shortened (to begin four Sundays before Christmas) and its practices relaxed ... and *also* come to be renamed *ADVENT* ... still, the desirability (or, perhaps, just plain *delight*) of a ‘Sunday of ease’—of our ‘letting up’ a little—during our spiritual preparation for Christmas *persisted*. Hence, *GAUDETE* Sunday, which we’re observing today ... named for the very first word, in Latin, spoken in the traditional Mass<sup>3</sup> for this day: *Rejoice*—GAUDETE, in Latin—in the Lord always, and again, I say, *Rejoice!* (Phlp 4:4).

Now, in our overly-commercialized, sky’s-the-limit, more-is-more Christmas culture ... we **hardly still** require a day of dispensation from fasting, or relief from somber contemplation (!) ... but it *is* fun, isn’t it, to put on a little pink ... have flowers again ... sing out REJOICE ... and allow ourselves just a *smidgen* of the joy of Christmas ... that still *seems* so far away.

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“A smidgen of Christmas joy”: This is also what comes to steal its way into Ebenezer Scrooge’s heart during the visitation of the Spirit of Christmas *Present*. Last week, we considered his difficult trip down memory lane, with the Spirit of Christmas *Past* ... which ended with Scrooge’s desperately trying to snuff out the spirit’s too-revealing light: literally plunging himself back into the darkness of rationalizing away and forgetting his past ... rather than wondering whether he might be able ...

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<sup>1</sup> I don’t know this on any authority, but I can easily surmise there may have been some anti-Semitism in this practice, *viz*: The coming of Jesus to the Jews, who didn’t accept Him, wasn’t the ‘real deal’—wasn’t ‘the’ moment to be celebrated. ‘Only when He came to “us Gentiles” (as if the Church hadn’t been founded by twelve or thirteen Jews who’d been commissioned by Jesus Himself!) do we get the *real* holy day (!).’ Christmas, then, was just the ‘stepping stone’ to Epiphany.

<sup>2</sup> By most accounts, the requirements of St Martin’s Lent were comparatively relaxed: fasting, for example, on only Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and not (as in Lent) also on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

<sup>3</sup> *I.e.*, the introit, an element of the ‘minor propers’ for each Sunday of the year. The ‘major propers’ (*i.e.*, those that *must* be used) are the collect of the day and the lessons. In addition to the introit, the minor propers (*i.e.*, those that *may* be used) include the gradual (psalm); the Alleluia or tract (at the gospel lesson; the tract used only in Lent); the offertory verse; and the communion chant. In our tradition, the lectionary assigns a proper psalm (or canticle) for each Sunday and feast day, in addition to three lessons from Scripture.

indeed, might be *called* ... to change: to *reclaim* his full human- (and *humane*-) ness ... his full belovèdness of God.

But *today*, we find Scrooge, waking at the coming of the *second* spirit, a **new** (or, at least, renewing) man. He accompanies the jovial, well-fed spirit through the streets of London, a-bustle with everyone's last-minute holiday preparations<sup>4</sup>; next, to Bob Cratchit's home, where the whole family is pitching in to prepare their quite modest, yet happy and contented, feast; soon, back out to the neighborhoods, with windows all aglow, in merriment; then off to a remote miners' encampment, where people who have almost *nothing* are, nonetheless, gaily singing Christmas songs ... to an isolated lighthouse on the coast, where the two keepers share a simple meal and wish one another a heartfelt "Merry Christmas" ... and even out to sea, where sailors far from home and with *very little* by way of 'extra' ... still find it in their hearts to say, as Dickens puts it, "a kinder word to one another *that* day than on any day [of] the [whole] year."

And at last ... **to** his nephew Fred's house—his nephew who genuinely and constantly *loves* Scrooge, *despite* his uncle's caustic, penurious manner. After Scrooge overhears talk of how it's only *he* who loses out by believing that Christmas is a humbug and of no use to him ... Scrooge's heart, *defrosting* all this time, finally begins to *melt*. Even though he's both invisible and inaudible to the revelers, still, he ... *he*—Ebenezer Scrooge, a *miser* who, at home, affords himself nothing but gruel for his nightly meal; who, at the office, doles our heating coal to his employee *one single lump* at-a-time—Scrooge joins in their singing and their party games. He has become, our narrator informs us, "gay and light of heart." The dour, pinched skinflint of an all-too-fanatical, **year-round Lent** has ... on observing the unalloyed happiness of those who have *less* ... have *little* ... have practically *no* ... **reason** to be happy ... has, at last, stepped into the 'pink Sunday' ... has 'let up' a bit ... has found the word **REJOICE**—and *again*, I say, **REJOICE** ... welling up in his heart ... coloring his view of the world around him ... and, just *maybe*, reorienting the needle of his moral compass—the *directionality* of his highest *regard* and the *object* of his deepest *care*—from *self* ... to *other*.

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This is, I think, also the 'arc' of our lessons for this GAUDETE Sunday. Like Scrooge, we take in *visions* of this *world*: God's *visions* ... God's highest *regard* for humanity and deepest *care of us*. As the prophet Isaiah tells it: weak hands made strong, and feeble knees firm ... the "lame" leaping like deer and "the tongue of the speechless singing for joy" ... those whom the Lord has ransomed *returning*—coming into God's presence<sup>5</sup> with singing, everlasting joy upon their heads. And as we hear the Blessed Virgin Mary sing it: the hungry filled with good things ... the lowly lifted up; God coming to the help of God's people ... and remembering God's promise of mercy, to Abraham and his children—that is, all humanity—forever. And *also* like Scrooge, we're asked to take these beautiful, holy *visions to heart*: to begin to understand that the ways of man are *not* the ways of God; that what appears valuable, worthy or even 'ultimate' to *us*, *scraping* and *contesting* and 'winning' our way through this *world* ... is of *no* interest—*no* value—*no* measure-of-merit—to the *Christ Child*.

For *those human things* ... rigor, tightness, self-sufficiency; wealth, status, power; control, mastery, dominion ... have *no* place in God's realm. For they are accomplishments of *self*, and not of love:

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<sup>4</sup> This is not, by the way, quick last-minute trips to the mall. Dickens paints a warm, but still stark picture of people so poor their kitchens lack ovens. They must roast their Christmas entrees in neighborhood bakers' shops.

<sup>5</sup> *I.e.*, "Zion."

proud achievements well suited, perhaps, for the **sanding-down** *repentance* of Lent<sup>6</sup> ... but completely disjoined from the **restorative hope** of Advent. For *this hope*—hope *promised* and hope *realized*—is what Jesus came to offer ... came to give ... came to plant within us: a *desire*—our desire, mirroring *God's* desire—that those who cannot walk, *may* ... that those who are diseased, be *well* ... that the spiritually dead, be raised to *new life* ... that those who are poor, be brought into the *good news of God's kingdom*. REJOICE ... and *again*, I say, REJOICE.

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Embracing Jesus' restoring Advent *hope* ... moving from God's *vision* for creation into its *realization* ... must begin with the work of our *hearts* ... the *retuning* of our values and the opening of our minds to the possibilities—the *holy* possibilities—that Jesus lays, so *abundantly*, before this world.

And thus ... it is with *just such* holy possibilities—with 'holy question marks'—that Scrooge's second visitation finally *concludes*:

- As Scrooge and the Spirit of Christmas Present prepare to leave the Cratchit home, Scrooge asks whether Tiny Tim will live. The spirit replies, "[not] if the shadows remain unaltered by the future."  
> A once heartless Scrooge—then let the poor die and "decrease the surplus population," he once barked—is now "overcome with penitence and grief": Is Scrooge's heart perhaps telling him that *he—uniquely he*—holds the light to cast out the glowering darkness of this little boy's doom?
- And then, at the end of their time together, the spirit shows Scrooge the two "wretched ... miserable" children cowering beneath the spirit's robe ... one named human<sup>7</sup> Ignorance and the other named human Want: metaphors for the privation-of-necessities and the wishing-away-of-those-in-need that have plagued human society forever.  
> Scrooge, who'd earlier declined to donate even a *penny* for the poor, sternly pointing to the prisons and workhouses they could go to—"I can't afford," he'd said, "to make *idle* people *merry*" ... this *same* Scrooge now **beseeches** the spirit, Is there "no refuge or resource"—no *relief* or *let-up*—no *GAUDETE*—for **them**?

Scrooge's newly—renewèdly—warmed heart is telling him: *You—you*—can be the *pathway* to a smidgen of Christmas joy for the joyless. *You* have the *hope* of God's vision for the hopeless. *You*, Ebenezer—and *we, too*—possess the warm, loving, restorative, pink light of *hope* of the Christ Child ... of *REJOICE!* Will we *share it* with a world trapped in the cold, striving, grey darkness of *humbug*? What a very **holy possibility** for us to ponder ... half-way to the Manger!

THE REV DOUGLAS S WORTHINGTON  
All Souls' Episcopal Church  
San Diego, CA

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<sup>6</sup> As embodied, as it were, by John the Baptist, whom Jesus praises and honors today, but also says is less than the least in the (true—the Christly) Kingdom of Heaven.

<sup>7</sup> When Scrooge asks, "[A]re they yours?" the spirit says, "They are Man's."