

Midnight Mass
Christmas Eve 2008

Isaiah 9:2-7 Psalm 96 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 1:1-20
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Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it.: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

So begins, of course, one of the most famous of all Christmas stories, which is also one of the most famous ghost stories, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. For modern people, especially Americans, the idea of a Christmas ghost story is kind of an anomaly. We tend to think that the Dickens' famous tale is unique. Not so, actually. I'm not a Dickens scholar. In fact, I don't really like Dickens. I have to agree with Oscar Wilde, that "it would take a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing." I'm not a Dickens scholar, but I'm given to understand that he wrote a Christmas ghost story just about every year for one magazine or another. I read one recently about the nasty old Sexton of a country church who hates children and poor people and is carried away by goblins on Christmas Eve and shown the error of his ways. "Deja vue all over again," as Yogi Berra used to say.

The fact is that in other times and other places, Christmas Eve was a time for ghosts and goblins, and time for the weird, the uncanny, the numinous. You all know the song, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," written originally for Andy Williams, but of course the only cover of it is the one by Johnny Mathis, which you can learn on his website if you go there tomorrow. Maybe you have puzzled over the lines to this popular song,

There'll be parties for hosting,
Marshmallows for toasting,
And caroling out in the snow.
There'll be scary ghost stories
And tales of the glories of
Christmases long, long ago.
It's the most wonderful time of the year.

"Scary ghost stories!" Somehow Eddie Pola and George Wyle managed to include an ancient memory in their 1963 hit.

In the Scandinavian countries in days of old, tonight was the night that trolls and gnomes left their frozen hiding places to revel in the realm of mortals. And tonight was the night when the dead might return to the houses where they had lived and loved. At the end of the night, families would set the table in the dining room with cloths and candles, plates and cutlery, good and drink, and then retire for the night, leaving the dead to feast until dawn. In south Germany, where my own people came from, the Lady in White was likely to come howling through the village on these long midwinter nights, accompanied by her pack of hounds. Anyone who was unfortunate enough to be caught out of doors was likely to be carried off into the other world. In England, as Shakespeare tells us in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, these winter nights were the time when the spectral huntsman, with antlers upon his head, rides across the heavens, accompanied by the souls of the dead. And while we're on the subject, I couldn't help but notice that the Sci-Fi Network is having a Christmas Marathon of their "Scariest Places on Earth" series and their "Ghost Hunters" series.

But you don't have to be a believer in the supernatural to be visited by Christmas ghosts. For just an awful lot of people, the frantic Christmas rush of shopping, cards, decorating and entertaining is punctuated by periods of terrible melancholy. Maybe there were Christmases with more love and more laughter, more warmth and more security, less care and responsibility—childhood Christmases, Christmases of youth, that the Christmases of middle age and old age can never equal. Or maybe those ancient Christmases were a nightmare, filled with the exquisite misery that only family members can inflict upon one another—a nightmare from which we have not quite, even now, fully awakened. Maybe you yourself are responsible for your share of Christmas misery—not because you're an evil Dickensian villain, but because you're a human being who like all human beings doesn't always love enough or at the right time or in the right way. Maybe your Christmas ghosts are real ghosts, memories of those whom death has taken away. Or perhaps they are phantoms of the living—still here, but not with you, not anymore.

These long, dark nights can bring a kind of emptiness and dread. Whispers in the dark asking quietly, Why bother? Who cares? What difference does it make? These are perhaps indicators that the great epic of our life—the great drama in which we are the hero—the hero who triumphs over all obstacles to complete the quest, to attain the goal, to win the prize—these are perhaps indicators that the great epic of our life is not so great after all, but rather a quite ordinary story of success, failure, and a great deal in between.

The Christmas revels that we indulge in—eating, drinking, enjoying material toys and treasures are meant to keep the Christmas ghosts at bay. And maybe they do. Maybe they do. Maybe you can have a little more to drink on these long dark winter nights. I can't myself, not anymore, but if you can do it then God love you. Maybe you have escaped unscathed from the recent economic vicissitudes and you still have plenty of money to do with as you will. If so, my number is on your service bulletin. Lunch soon! We'll chat.

But if the ghosts and trolls and gnomes of Christmas Eve refuse to go away, might I suggest doing what they did in ancient times. People of old believed that all the trolls and all the gnomes, all the ghosts and all the specters, all the goblins of Christmas Eve could be put to flight with the sign of the cross. This is a short way of saying a lot. It's a short way of saying that God entered into the world of time and space on Christmas Eve—that the Creator has become the creature,

that the infinite has become an infant, that the immortal has put on mortality, that the source of life has become subject to death. It's a short way of saying that the source of all has come to know poverty and hunger and thirst and cold and loneliness and fear, that the Almighty has become vulnerable, the eternal blessedness has come to know torture and pain and grief, that heaven has descended into hell, and that God is born in Mary's child—in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the story that we imprint upon our bodies with the sign of the cross, the story that defeats all the powers of death and of the devil.

And it doesn't matter if our lives are not a thrilling epic, an heroic drama in which the hero triumphs over every obstacle. The God who became one of us in Jesus is the God of the losers, as well as the winners, and the God of everything in between. Whatever our life has turned out to be, our life is God's life and God's life is our life. There is more for all of us in the heart of God.

One characteristic of all the Christian ghost stories is that everything is all better on Christmas morning. When Christmas morning dawns, the dead are happily back at rest, the trolls and gnomes and goblins are back in their lairs, the wild hunt has passed by and we are still alive. So on this long, dark night, don't be afraid to come face to face with your ghosts and your gremlins, with whatever fills you with gloom and dread, with sorrow and regret. Face them, call them by name, and tell them that it's time for them to step aside—that it's time for you to move on. Wake up on Christmas morning to a new hope, a new future, a new life in Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever. AMEN

The Rev. Martin Hauser, Pastor