

## Epiphany II (14 January 2024)

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

+In the Name of...

As a general rule, I was not allowed to play in the street. We lived on a corner with trees planted on the edge of the driveway that exceeded the height of the average boy in our household. “Cars come whipping around that corner so fast,” my mother would warn my brother and me, “by the time they see you it will be too late.” Here a straight path might have helped, as the hypothetical driver could have seen us.

Not all times and streets are quite as dangerous. My mother’s childhood home was at the very end of a long dead end street with two sharp turns in it. My grandparents owned the home until only about ten years ago, so I too, knew what it was like to play in that

neighborhood. No one worried about allowing their children to play in the street, at least not for the traffic. If a driver got past the “No through traffic” sign and both turns, not only was he travelling pretty slowly by then, he likely belonged in the neighborhood. There was an entirely different feeling than my own neighborhood. One of peace and safety. I would not have thought of this at the time, but I imagine that when my mother watched my brother and me play in my grandparents’ neighborhood, it almost took her back to her own childhood, and what seemed like a simpler, safer time in our nation’s history.

Notice from our Epistle lesson this morning that this is the peace we want: the Lord’s peace. Following the Lord’s straight path will bring us peace. So not only do we want it because it sounds idyllic, but we want it for the reason we should want anything: because God wants it for us.

In the Hart household we cannot get past the Christmas season without watching [A Christmas Carol](#). I know there are

many versions, but the one to which I am referring is the 1999 production starring Patrick Stewart. For purposes of sermon illustration, any version, or even the book itself, will take us where we need to go. In one of the opening scenes, Ebenezer Scrooge is seen walking through the streets of London to get to his shop. It is just as you would expect: people young and old, boys and girls, filling the streets, chatting with one another, going shopping, playing, and appearing to enjoy every minute of it despite the apparent cold (there is snow on the ground) and the fact that it is the day before Christmas. Scrooge, of course, is oblivious to the festivities and merriment, or more likely, attempting to shut it out. Peace for him is only found while balancing his books in his dreary office, or sitting alone with his thoughts in his drafty home.

Back up to the Epistle where we find a very important to-do list from St. Paul. Couched in the middle of this absolutely fabulous reading, we find some of the most important directives in all of the Gospel: “Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that

which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” For most of us, we find it easier to be jolly at Christmastime. Perhaps all is good during that time of year, and what is not, we shrug off and go along our merry way. We will not let anyone ruin the peace of *our* Christmas! But now that the ribbons are thrown away, the wrapping paper recycled, and the last of the Christmas ham has been put into soups and casseroles, are we able to maintain St. Paul’s imperative? Do we have an honest love for our fellow man, and for all that is good? Do we actively hate, and thus avoid, that which is evil?

What should be startling for both Scrooge and us, is that these instructions of St. Paul are likely the *minimum* Christian duty. “Minimums” get a lot of press this time of year. What is the *minimum* I can pay on my charge card after Christmas shopping? Now that those W-2s are arriving, what is the *minimum* I can pay the IRS this year and not get audited? Local salesmen know we over-shopped at Christmas, so the commercials promise us that

they will get us into a new car, boat, house, you name it, by only putting the *minimum* down. How kind of them... But St. Paul and God are not interested in the minimum we are willing to invest. St. Paul does not want us to cleave to that which is good only during Christmastide or abhor that which is evil only in Lent, but all the time. And God – what could be more opposite of doing the minimum than dying on the cross? We see the crucifix every Sunday, and so it can too easily become like a piece of furniture. Take a good look at it. Scripture tells us there is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friend. How glorious that we are included in the friends of God! God wants us to get the *maximum* out of our lives. I do not mean the so-called *prosperity gospel* one might hear preached in other places, but the fullness of living a life for the God who loves us.

And that is an important point, brethren. Scrooge apparently had no love of either the people of this world or the God who created it. His only love was his money. The irony there is that no

thing of this world would ever love him back. Nor will it love any of us. Satan will use the sinful distractions of our society to break our hearts over and over again. The result is a hardened heart.

Because we know how the world sometimes treats us, we are hesitant to give our entire heart to anything or anyone, even the God Who created us out of love. “If I keep my heart protected,” we reason, “then I cannot get hurt.” Scrooge had his issues: a father who sent him away to boarding school, an unfulfilled wedding engagement. We all have something which makes us want to look inward instead of outward.

When we look outward, we should see the evil to which St. Paul refers, and it should horrify us. But being offended is not much of an accomplishment. People are offended all the time. It must move us to action: cling to that which is good. Cling is not really an action verb, though. We must be willing to work at doing those actions to which St. Paul exhorts us and the Romans: ministering, teaching, praying and hospitality, among others. But

the world will fight us every step of the way. They will tell us what we know is good and beautiful is ugly and to be avoided. Yet because we are armed with Scripture and Holy Tradition, we know that this world is not the source of our knowledge. But what is most sad, is that so many people, some Christians included, will be oblivious to that which is evil. They will go along to get along, not wanting to upset the apple cart or make their friends and family think that they are odd.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come leads Mr. Scrooge through a lonely cemetery in order to show him the final gift this world gives to all of us: a grave. Cold, dark, and in England, damp. God promises us a different sort of gift: also represented by a grave, but an empty one, from which sprang the Savior on that first Easter. We accept this gift by obeying His commandments and following the directives of St. Paul and all Holy Scripture. Then can we help to usher in that peace of which St. Paul speaks.

Not just in Old Jerusalem, Victorian England or a quiet cul-de-sac  
in SE Portland, but in all the streets of Christendom.

+In the Name...