

“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?”

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!”<sup>1</sup>

Ghost stories. They expose us to our darkest fears and anxieties that appear as energies without bodies. A classic ghost story is not only timeless, but it provokes us here in our present situation with the feeling that something else might be going on. Dickens’ classic ghost story ends with hope and reconciliation, but at the point in the story that I just read to you, Ebenezer Scrooge is still frightened; threatened with the possibility of dying alone, unloved; confronted by the likelihood that his own possessiveness, his clutching selfishness, will lead to the death of a small boy. What Scrooge is beginning to notice about his deep, dark fears is that there may be a way through them. There is meaning for us in this story that goes well beyond its original Victorian English setting.

Parables are also timeless and provocative and overflowing with new meaning, but *this* one...this one also presents many of the characteristics of a good ghost story! Late one night, a shout wakes up a group of people, but only half of them have light. The rest of them are sent out into the darkness to fend for themselves, but when they return, the door is shut and the person who invited them no longer even recognizes them.

This parable gets explained and often preached as though the wedding banquet represents heaven with Christ as the bridegroom. Five guests are prepared and five are not. The five that are prepared are let in to heaven and the five that aren’t find that not only is the door to heaven closed to them, but that the Christ who invited them no longer even knows who they are. Final judgment. The point of this version is that we must be ready at all times for the Second Coming, because it will happen at some unexpected hour in the future. Once Christ has returned, there will be no further

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story of Christmas*. Oxford University Press, 1992

opportunity to prepare. Those who are ready will be in, and those who are not ready will be, you'll pardon the expression, left behind.

Now, I have masters' degree in Divinity (and, yes, I do find that a little funny...who has actually "mastered" Divinity?) and I have passed all manner of theological, psychological, spiritual and even physical testing, but even with all that study and preparation, I could not claim with any integrity to be "ready." And so I have to put my name in with the foolish women. Maybe that explains why I have so many questions.

Why, for example, is Christ—if that's really who the bridegroom is—why is Christ so uncharacteristically arbitrary, even a little mean-spirited? Wasn't *he* late? And didn't the five foolish women respond immediately when they realized what needed to be done? The five wise women were prepared for the bridegroom to be late...were they prepared for every other possibility? More disturbingly, are some of us to be excluded from God's heaven because we might be...well, no, let me be more direct: am I to be excluded? Because I know myself to be faltering, questioning, uncertain and occasionally even doubtful as I pray to know God more deeply.

And why is the behavior of the so-called wise women even acceptable, let alone preferred? I picture them walking off with their extra oil tucked under their arms rather smugly self-satisfied with their own wisdom. They go to the banquet having not done what Jesus taught—to share generously, even if it means your own suffering. Why don't they care about their sisters? The wise women and the bridegroom just leave them behind, rejected despite having made one last heroic effort. My heart begins to ache with concern that some of the people that I love and admire are to be shut out of heaven simply because they didn't have enough...what? Enough faith, enough knowledge, enough commitment?

And so I find myself on my knees, wondering with Ebenezer Scrooge, "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?" Where is the good news in this Gospel? Where is the Jesus who earlier in Matthew said: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be open"?

But then two brief lines capture my attention. Jesus typically starts his parables with something like "the kingdom of heaven is like..." But opens this parable with a different line, which in the Greek is: "*Then* (or "consequently") the kingdom of the heavens *will be compared* to ten virgins..." Will be compared by whom? And when? In the passages prior to this reading, Jesus has been chastising Pharisees who do not act in accordance with their teaching. He has been warning the disciples not to be led astray

and about false prophets who will come after his death and resurrection. Are *these* the people who will compare the kingdom of heaven to ten virgins? If he is warning about false teachings, already the story not about maintaining a constant state of readiness.

But it is the line at the very end that really refocuses the story for me: “Keep awake...” or in the Greek, “be on the alert...” Jesus does *not* endorse the wisdom of bringing extra oil, whatever the oil may represent, nor does he chastise the foolishness of those who don’t. Jesus makes no mention of oil at all. Instead, he tells the disciples to stay awake; be on the alert. In the parable, *both* the wise and the foolish virgins have fallen asleep. In the chapter after our reading this morning, Jesus will take his disciples Peter, James and John aside in the Garden of Gethsemane and ask them to stay awake with him as he prays. They have just heard the story of the wise and foolish virgins, and Jesus’ caution about staying awake. But they go to sleep. They sleep as Jesus, their teacher, prays that God might change his fate and prepares for his own murder. Three times, Jesus wakes them—the third time to tell them that his betrayer is at hand—and yet it is this same Jesus in Matthew who has given Peter the keys to the kingdom.

I wonder: Maybe Jesus is asking the disciples to stay awake because in the days after his death and resurrection, people will compare heaven to a place where an elite will be invited into a banquet that will exclude others who have been invited, but who have fallen short. Or perhaps there really may come a day when only some will be granted the fullness of the invitation extended to all and those invited guests who have chosen not to be in relationship with God are left on the other side of a closed door. But all that is conjecture, and there is a more immediate and sobering lesson.

And it is this: There is time to wake up. The door has not yet been closed. We have not yet heard the shout, “Here is the bridegroom!” We can let this upsetting ghost story wake us up to *this* precious opportunity to pass the light of Christ to others, to share whatever oil has been given us, even if we have been sleeping.

“What’s today?” cried Scrooge, calling down to a boy in Sunday clothes, who perhaps had loitered in to look about him.

“Eh?” returned the boy, with all his might and wonder.

“What’s today, my fine fellow?” said Scrooge.

“Today!” replied the boy. “Why, Christmas Day.”

“It’s Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven’t missed it!”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

And neither have we. We have been wise and we have been foolish. We have slept when we have been asked to stay awake. But we have *not* missed our opportunity to wait with each other. To wait as though we were already in heaven. We can still wait in vigil with each other, bearing each other's burdens through times of pain, loss or sorrow. While we wait, we can still celebrate with each other through times of joy, increase and healing. While we wait, we can pursue justice and mercy on behalf of our brothers and sisters despite our political differences. While we wait, we still have opportunities to extend hope, comfort and courage to a world awash in cynicism, pettiness and fear. We can wait with each other through dark nights, prepare with each other for the future coming of Christ and to encourage each other with the promise of Christ's presence *now*. Today, Christ asks us to wake up—the same self-emptying Christ who lived and died as one of us, to reconcile all of us to God. Be alert, then, for Christ is at hand and be nurtured by him. Carry the Holy Spirit in your heart like a torch, but remember: it is a light made greater when you pass it on to others.