



In the Dickens story, A Christmas Carol, Scrooge the miserable and cold-hearted miser is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Marley, who also spent his life making money and exploiting the poor. Marley warns Scrooge that if he doesn't change his ways he will, like Marley, be damned. But in order to give him one last chance at redemption, Scrooge is visited by three spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the

Ghost of Christmas yet to come. All this, combined with a trip to his untended grave, transform Scrooge into the picture of generosity and bonhomie. Instead of keeping all his wealth to himself he buys a turkey and helps the Cratchit family. Dickens concludes the story of Scrooge by telling us

"Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him...it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

In the traditional translation of the angel's song over the Bethlehem hills, they sing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." That traditional language shows up in many of our carols. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill

toward men.” I have always thought of that goodwill as being rather like the transformed Scrooge, a general generosity and kindness, like Christmas every day of the year.

But when we hear the angel choir in more contemporary translation we hear ““Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” This changes the song for me; no longer is it about peace between the nations and goodwill among all people but it is specifically about God bringing peace. The goodwill has become much more specifically God’s goodwill toward humanity. In an attempt to avoid gender biased language, the translators have made it sound a bit exclusionary – “peace among those whom he favors” suggests there are those whom he doesn’t favor. But that’s not what it means at all. “Peace among humanity whom he favors” would be closer to the sense of the Greek.

In fact, this same Greek phrase appears in other passages where it refers to Jesus as God’s beloved Son. At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens opened and a voice said “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”. It’s the same language. So the Angels are singing “Peace among humanity in whom God is well-pleased.” Now we’re a long way from the good will of the transformed Scrooge – this is not about turkeys and helping cripples. This is much more.

Peace among humanity with whom God is well-pleased.

God is pleased with us. God is pleased with me, God is pleased with you.

In fact, God is so happy with us that he or she chose to come and take up residence with us, to take on human form and experience all the joys and difficulties of being human.

This is not the picture of an angry, judging God. This is not a God who punishes and destroys our hopes and our dreams. This is not even a genial God with a white beard who dispenses gifts to some people who have been good or exceptionally lucky but ignores others who are starving or in agony, presumably because somewhere along the line they've been bad.

For a long time, humanity has had it wrong about God.

We have seen God as vengeful and angry. When we read the Old Testament we often see that picture of God and even in parts of the New Testament that image persists. It has continued and been propagated by Christianity - the picture of God as one who punishes us for our sins or is so angry about our sin that he has to kill someone, but fortunately chooses to kill his own Son instead of us so that we can escape his wrath by taking Jesus as our Savior.

I don't think so.

*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among humanity with whom God is well-pleased.*

As Christians we interpret the Scriptures through our understanding of Jesus who taught that the reign of God is one of rejoicing and freedom from oppression. And with the incarnation of Christ in Jesus, this became a reality not just in the heavens but here on earth, As we heard in that very brief reading from the letter of Titus, "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." In Jesus, God's grace appeared in human form, bringing salvation to all.

Salvation is not something we have to work for or to beg for. We don't have to appease an angry God. Salvation is ours through God's grace.

God is saying to each one of us tonight “You are my beloved Daughter or Son, with you I am well-pleased.” “You are my beloved Child, with you I am well-pleased.”

So when that angry God appears in your mind, the one who keeps a list, the one who condemns you, the one who accuses you, please try to remember that that is not the voice of God. The voice of God is the one that calls for peace and forgiveness. The voice who loves you and is well-pleased with you.

Yes you screw up, we all do. The voice of God does not condemn you but encourages you to try again. The letter of Titus says. “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly.” God’s grace blesses us and trains us to become Christ-like ourselves.

This is our calling. To become Christ-like, and to practice and nurture peace and goodwill in our own lives and community.

If we are, like Scrooge, to keep Christmas well, it will be because deep in our hearts we know and believe that we are God’s beloved and She is ours.