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One of my favorite Christmas stories is the Christmas Carol. Movie versions and plays based on this classic Christmas tale abound. One of the pivotal scenes in the Christmas Carol is also among the most macabre, the old business partner, Marley, appears as a ghost weighed down with chains and shackles. In a few versions of the tale Marley appears to Scrooge wearing a long chain with cash boxes, money bags, keys, and ledgers attached. The chain drags and scrapes the floor as he shows his burden to Scrooge. When Scrooge asks Marley why he is fettered Marley says, *I wear the chain I forged in life, I made it, link by link, and yard by yard: I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.* Marley made this chain for himself to wear from all the evil and wicked deeds he committed. And now he must wear this chain forever. Marley tells Scrooge, *“Or would you know the weight of the strong coil you bear yourself”.* And Marley reveals to Scrooge that the chain waiting for him is greater than Marley’s, because of all of the wrongs that he has committed. Marley tells Scrooge that if he continues in his way when he dies he will share the same fate, *No rest, no peace. Incessant torture of remorse.*

Before Marley disappears and announces the three ghosts who are to visit Scrooge, and he laments Scrooge’s hard-heartedness and ignorance. He says, *not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode?* Marley made the mistake of replacing real peace, God’s peace, with the securities of the world. And like Marley, Scrooge is famous for having loved his worldly security, his money, more than he loved his neighbor, even more than he loved himself. Scrooge was

idolatrous about his money and it made him miserable. He was so captivated by mammon that he hated anything else, to such an extent that he gave no thought to God or his fellowman, not his employees nor the poor and destitute. He was unable to even receive any act of kindness, giving a *bah humbug!* to anyone who showed him any form of love. The chains that Marley warned Scrooge of already shackled and weighed him down.

Of course, we know how the story ends. Scrooge having been visited by three ghosts who show him Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future, three visions of hell, repents of his evil ways. The original tale, which the film adaptations overlook, is that Scrooge does not just promise to amend his ways and make things right with the family of "Tiny Tim." Scrooge goes to church giving alms all along the way, asking his neighbors to pardon him for his meanness, and buying gifts for the many poor children he meets along the way. Dickens ends the tale by telling us that Scrooge's conversion was so complete, his amendment of life was so sincere that he *was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more.* Scrooge repented of his ways and did penance for the rest of his life, by doing for others, and by keeping Christmas in his heart daily. Some, blind to their own chains laughed at Scrooge when they say how much he had changed, but Scrooge bore even this in perfect humility.

It is unfortunate that the most explicit reference to Christ in this tale is Marley's mention of the *wise men led to a humble abode*, and Scrooge repenting of his ways and going to church on Christmas Day. Yet we recognize that even though Scrooge is a fictional character, only Christ can effect such a dramatic conversion. Only Christ, who John the Baptist prophesies of in this morning's gospel, can turn cold hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Only Christ can bring true peace, the kind of peace that passes all understanding. The king of peace that humanity longs for and which the likes of Scrooge and the scribes and Pharisees tried to fill with the security of worldly wealth and the ritual law. They

thought of themselves as secure in their wealth, power, and righteousness, but these things divorced from Christ never give peace, but only a hell on earth. And so the scribes and pharisees are blind to the chains that shackle them and deaf to the prophesy of St. John the Baptist.

Advent invites us to take a step back from the business of the holiday season and to prepare ourselves to meet Christ in the manger on Christmas morning and when He comes again in power and glory at the end of the world. Advent invites us to assess the shackles we are bound by and the chains that we may be busily creating for ourselves. We are given yet another opportunity to cast off these chains, to make an amendment of life again so that we may better meet the Prince of Peace when He comes. By recognizing that which shackles us we sort out all the things that are really part of the peace and security that the world gives, and to separate them, at least in our thinking from the peace of God.

But unlike the Christmas Carol, Christ need not be hidden in the tale of our conversion. Jesus Christ, even though the distraction of the rush and busyness of the holiday season and the extravagant decorations obscure His face from our view, is always calling us, beckoning us to return to that humble abode in Bethlehem and find him there in a simple manger. Let us pray,

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.