

One hundred seventy years ago the English author Charles Dickens introduced us to the character of Ebenezer Scrooge in his novel, “A Christmas Carol.” Scrooge became the epitome of the “bah-humbug” attitude toward anything joyful in life, especially Christmas. That is until the spirit of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, appeared to him late one Christmas Eve. Marley announced the impending arrival of three Christmas ghosts, past, present and future. Scrooge is terrified by what he sees from each of those times in his life. There are bad memories from the past, a lonely life in the present and bleak years to come. Scrooge becomes convinced that he must change his ways. He awakens on Christmas Day knowing he has a second chance in life. Now he is full of the spirit of the holiday. He shares joy with his own family and generosity with the family of his employee Bob Cratchit.

Today’s passage from the Apostle Paul is also a vision of the past, present and future. But Paul does not need a ghost to show him the way. He has the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, as his guide. Paul’s vision of life is quite the opposite of what Scrooge saw. Paul describes his past, present and future with words like joy, grace and love. As with Paul, so also it is with us. In Holy Baptism our Triune God has begun a good work in us so that we can share in His grace and be pure in His sight when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.

Paul has warm memories of the Philippians, the first Christian congregation he had founded in Europe. They were mostly Gentiles, non-Jews, who accepted Paul’s teachings even though he was a total stranger to them. They were willing to follow as their Savior a Jewish man named Jesus who had barely stepped out of His homeland during His life. But this faith they had in Jesus as the Son of God living in human flesh was not of their own making. It was not Paul’s doing either, even though he was the one who had proclaimed Jesus to them. This was the work of God’s gospel, good news that comes with the faith-creating power of the Holy

Spirit. This was the work of God in the life, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus which reunites us with our Creator and Lord.

This work of God has taken place among us, for God has claimed us as His own in our baptism. He teaches us of our salvation in the written and spoken Word of God which is the Bible. He assures us of the forgiveness of our sins as the body and blood of Jesus are present for us in the Lord's Supper. This work of God which makes us His forgiven people also has reunited us with one another. With Paul, with the Philippians and with each other we are partners, fellow believers whom the Holy Spirit has joined in worship, witness, service and prayer. This Christian faith that we confess is God's work in our past.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians in our passage proceeds from the past to the present. He is thankful for their generosity. They have sent him a gift of support for his time under house arrest in Rome. He is awaiting trial before the Roman Emperor for his preaching of Jesus. Instead of being ashamed of Paul as a prisoner and wanting nothing to do with him, they provided for his needs to encourage him during this time of trouble.

Today the Christian faith and Christian faithful are under assault like never before from the hatred and opposition of unbelief around the world and even here in the United States. The life values that God has revealed to us as being pleasing in His sight are mocked and rejected as old-fashioned and mean-spirited. The holy ways in which God calls us to live are ridiculed as unenlightened and restrictive. Even we Christians still succumb to the devil's ancient temptation, "did God really say?" with the answer, "maybe not, so I'll just do what my sinful nature wants me to do."

For us as Christians defending God's gospel with our words and confirming God's good news in our lives is necessary. If we do not stand together in the faith as the people of God in Jesus Christ, we will fall apart separately, fragmented into small groups of believers trying to keep the faith privately but afraid to display it publicly. Even if it means the chains of prison for us we are boldly to defend and live the faith God has revealed

to us. This is our way of sharing with one another the affection Jesus Christ has for us. This grace of God is ours because of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and His victorious resurrection from the dead.

From the present Paul's prayer flows into the future as he asks for our lives to be filled with the fruit of righteousness, faith at work in our lives until the day of Christ. This is not Christmas Day, but the time when Jesus returns to earth in all His glory and receives the praise of all His faithful people, both still living and those resurrected. This fruit of righteousness is love, a sacrificial care for others that gives to them without expecting something from them in return.

Another fruit of righteousness is knowledge, a mature discernment that has moved beyond Sunday School stories and the doctrine we learned as 14-year old confirmation students. This knowledge expands as we open up God's Word in personal devotions and group Bible studies. With this God-given knowledge we can better face the challenges of this rebellious and decaying world. There is right and wrong. There is what grieves God and what pleases God. With this knowledge we can go against the flow of this sinful world and be better off for it. We live for our Lord now knowing that we are being prepared to live with our Lord forever. Others do see our good works and praise our God who has worked His glory in our lives.

Scrooge went through agony that night before Christmas. It was filled with painful visions of the past, present and future. This happened in order for him to become a changed man. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, went through the agony of suffering and death on the cross so that we can be changed into the forgiven people of God. In Holy Baptism our Triune God has begun this good work of faith in us. Now we share with one another in the grace of God which promises us eternal life. When Jesus returns we will see that life and ourselves the way God now sees us, as pure and blameless. Amen.