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CHRISTMAS: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
 Luke 2:1-20; Christmas Eve; December 24, 2025

In 1843 Charles Dickens wrote, “A Christmas Carol,” one of my least favorite so-called “Christmas stories.” If you are not familiar with the plot, its main character is Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly man who has no “Christmas spirit.” Scrooge is visited by the spirit of his dead business partner who tells him that he will have three ghostly visitors on Christmas Eve: the spirits of Christmases past, present, and future. Dickens wrote the story to raise awareness of the poor and needy of England and to inspire generosity for their care. He donated the profits from the sale of this book for the care of the poor, a noble cause.

As far as I can recall, there are no actual references to anything overtly Christian in the story other than it takes place on Christmas. The “carol” Dickens wants us to sing is not to God for the gift of His Son, but to man for his generosity. The three ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future preach a law sermon to Scrooge: it is up to him to save himself from a bad future. If he will let go of some of his money and care about the needs of others, he can save himself and others from a bad present and hopeless future.

Christmas Eve brings out a sense of nostalgia in me. I grew up hearing the Luke two Christmas story in the King James Version of the Bible, and it only sounds right to me that way, so I impose it on the congregation. I want to hold onto that part of my past. (It is also my opinion that it sounds best in its traditional English form.)

As we gather again in church to celebrate this Christmas Eve, our thoughts may go to Christmases past, present, and future. What comes to your mind from past Christmases? Family gatherings? Gifts received? The sadness of those no longer with you? The “no room in the inn” for Mary and Joseph reflected by no room in the church as it used to be filled to beyond capacity? What were your “Christmases past” like?

Before the first Christmas, Luke noted, **“it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”** God used Caesar to ensure Christ’s birth in Bethlehem.

Christmas is about God's plan for us, a plan that reached far back into the past, continues now in the present, and will go on into the future, even for all eternity.

In the past, at the first Christmas, St. Luke writes: **“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”** There would be no Christmases present or future without the birth of God's Son in the past.

God took into account our pasts, our beginnings in this world as sinners, and resolved to do something about it. The first Christmas needed to happen because the first humans fell into sin. When Adam and Eve fell to the devil's temptations and sinned, death became their future. God then promised to send a Savior, born of the woman who would take on the devil, our sin, and conquer death for us. The baby Jesus was born of Mary. Christmas is about God keeping His past promises in the birth of His own Son.

That makes the Christmas past that matters most the one when Christ was born. There are a lot of things we can think about from our past Christmases, but unless we remember the first Christmas, we have nothing but nostalgia and memories with no future, which is sad.

In the present, we hear the angel say to the shepherds at the first Christmas: **“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”** In their “present” they had reason for joy. They heard good tidings (news) of a Saviour born for them. God the Son had come to be one of them to bring them into God's kingdom.

I don't know what your present Christmas is like, but if it is based on this good news, then you too have reason to rejoice. We will sing later in *Silent Night* “Christ, the Savior is born.” Jesus is not a dead savior from the past, but a living Lord in the present. We are saved by this good news that brings us to faith in Jesus. Our sins are forgiven now. We have life in Him now, and we have a future with Jesus.

In the future, what should we expect? After Luke tells us everything that led up to the Holy Family being in Bethlehem, Jesus' birth, the shepherds hearing the angels and visiting the stable and them telling others about what they had heard and seen, he concluded: **“all they that heard *it* wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart.”** The question on all their minds was, “What does this mean?” (It appears that there were Lutherans studying their catechisms already then.)

Whenever a baby comes into this world the parents wonder about the future of their child. What sort of life will this child have? Mary pondered in her heart everything that had happened in the past leading up to the birth of Jesus, the present situation, and what this would all mean for her Son in the future. Her Son was the Son of God, the Lord God Himself. What a great mystery that was! Her Son was Christ, the King of the Jews. What sort of kingdom would He have? Her Son was the Savior of all; what would happen in the future so He would save His people from the sins?

When Jesus was forty days old and it was time for Mary and Joseph to offer the sacrifice of redemption of the first-born son at the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon alluded to the sort of future Mary's Son would have. **“[He] blessed them and said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)’”** (Lk 2:34-35). Something in Jesus' future would pierce Mary's heart like a sword. What would it be?

What child is this, who, laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet While shepherds watch are keeping?...

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you; Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The babe, the son of Mary! (LSB 370:1, 2)

Jesus is our Savior and that means we have a present and future. Because His future had a cross, death, and resurrection, we are saved from our sins now and forever. For as many future Christmases God may give us, our eternal future is secure because God's Son is the Word made flesh, the babe, the Son of Mary. Amen.