



Grand Prelate's Annual Christmas Message, 2023



Grand Commandery, Knights Templar of Iowa



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BAH! HUMBUG!

It was Charles Dickens who put those words into the mouth of one Ebenezer Scrooge when, on December 19, 1843, *A Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* first appeared in print.

A Christmas Carol, as we know it today, was to become one of Dickens' most famous and beloved works. It is an important part of many household Christmas celebrations wherever Christmas is celebrated, and English spoken.

Scrooge, when we meet him, is the very definition of a miserly misanthrope.

Oh! Dickens says, But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

This Christmas—2023—marks 180 years since *A Christmas Carol* appeared. The nearly two centuries, sadly, have seen little improvement in human temperament, interaction, and condition.



We live in an era of Scrooge. The amenities taken for granted in much of the world are completely lacking for many of God's children. Even in the richest parts of the world, many go without food or shelter. They certainly lack medical attention. The prisons and workhouses—beloved of Ebenezer Scrooge as appropriate dwellings for the poor and homeless—are today a growing industry, not only in foreign places, but also in our own country. Politicians of every stripe are at each other's throats in solemn halls where our very structure of government is considered. There are those who would deny the rights of citizenship to their own countrymen.

"Bah! Humbug!" is the cry where once civil discourse was the accepted means of reaching compromise—whether in families, or communities, or states, regions, or nations.

As I write, in November 2023, there are vicious wars raging in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and southeast Asia. Conflict threatens in Asia. Not only are people dying as the result of battle, but even more have been driven from their homes, and many starve to death, or freeze, or perish from diseases that might be prevented in better circumstances.



What kind of place has humankind created? What have we done?

We may need visits from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come!

As Knights Templar, we are sworn adherents of the Christian religion. Our annual celebration of Christmas recalls the very beginning of our shared and obligated beliefs—and responsibilities.



The basic story of the original Christmas is simple enough: In response to an order from an oppressive occupying government, a heavily pregnant girl and her older fiancé travel some distance from their home to be placed on federal tax rolls.

While they are traveling, the girl gives birth to their son, her firstborn. According to Biblical accounts, particularly in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, several extraordinary events, even including the appearance of angels from heaven, accompany the birth of this child.

He is our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, the long-promised. The long-awaited. Promised by God.

It is important to remember that the Holy Bible is, for us Christian knights, the “Book of our Faith” and *not* the “history of our religion.” While there most certainly are historical points of reference in our Holy Book, there is also much important symbolism to describe and define our beliefs.

As Masonic knights, we, of all men, should understand the importance of symbols. After all, our very basis of Masonic teaching is a “system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols,” as we learned in our very first experience with our Gentle Craft.

Thus we should accept the differences between the Christmas Story as we learned it as youngsters, and the historical evidence of our Savior’s presence on earth. We need to remember that the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses to the life of Christ, and even the earliest accounts of His life included in Holy Writ date from more than a half-century after the Crucifixion. Matthew and Luke, our primary sources for the Nativity story, are even later. I hope, then, that we can accept the story of Our Savior’s birth *NOT* as historical fact, but rather as a profound philosophical and religious symbol—a symbol perhaps even more meaningful than fact.



But for all our belief as Christian knights—and for all our pious oaths in Temple, Chapter, Council, and Conclave—when this time of year comes around, and maybe even more particularly *this* year, with all the noise and sorrow of the world around us, it can be all too easy for us to retreat with our Victorian friend Ebenezer, throw up our hands, and echo, “*Bah! Humbug!*”

Too little time! Too much pressure! Too much noise! Too many saccharine Christmas songs, repeated and repeated and repeated on the radio! Too much hype! Too many ads! Too many hands out for my money! Too much whining! Too much fake red and green and gold! Too little time to myself, even to think for one minute! On and on: the noise, the interruptions, the demands for time and money, and thought...

BAH! HUMBUG!



Hold up a moment, Sir Knight!

Time to unScrooge yourself!

Think back to those Scriptures about the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Think back to how you learned them as a child. Think back to the wonder as you imagined Mother and Child in the rude stable in Bethlehem. Think of the angels singing to shepherds in the countryside, watching their flocks in the middle of the night, keeping sheep and lambs safe from predators and thieves. Remember the wonder of those symbols of our faith you felt when you were eight years old.

Take a deep breath, my Brother. Think back...

Remember that the Christmas story has perhaps even more meaning and immediacy now than it did all those years ago.

Your calling today may not be to wield a metal sword as a Christian knight, but your call is perhaps more urgent today than it was when you took an obligation as a Knight of the Temple.

We are a beneficent Order, and we have work to do.

If we do not fight with swords, the fight is nonetheless very real.

There is evil afoot in our world.

We have sworn to combat it.

We have much to do!



Remember the words of Matthew, not far in his Book from the story of the blessed birth of Jesus of Nazareth:

“ ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ ”



Those are our marching orders, Sir Knights.

Our brothers and sisters on this fragile globe are hungry and thirsty and need nourishing food to eat and clean water to drink. They are strangers and need our love and hospitality. They are naked and need clothes. They are sick and need healing. They are imprisoned unjustly and need help.

Whenever we address the wickedness and inequity of our world, we follow the promise of our Lord's birth.

It's not up to Him to do the heavy lifting.

It's up to us.

And when we undertake that work—and hard work it is!—that ancient ghost of Christmas in the stable at Bethlehem descends upon us, and we can sing with God's own angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace!” “Bah! Humbug!” fades away.

When we can do the work before us, and do it in good faith, we are unScrooged. Scrooge himself was transformed by the very Spirits of Christmas, and he became the man he was always intended to be.

So may it be with you and all of us, beneficent Sir Knight! Remember our Lord's words: ***Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*** If Jesus the Christ, born on Christmas Day, is our brother, so are the least on earth our brothers and sisters.

May the peace and love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ be with you, Sir Knights and my dear Brothers. Let us push from us—if only for a moment here and there—the raucous racket of those looking only for gain at this holy time, and let us celebrate truly and faithfully what the symbolism of Christmas teaches us.

A famous prayer, ascribed apocryphally to St. Francis of Assisi, is even more important in our time:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen and amen.

Merry Christmas to you and yours, my Brothers and beneficent Sir Knights! May the peace of Jesus be with you and with us all!

Merry Christmas!

