

Keeping Christmas

25 Advent Reflections
on
A Christmas Carol

Allison Pittman



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Allison Pittman, *Keeping Christmas*

Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2020. Used by permission.

© 2020 by Allison Pittman

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pittman, Allison, author.

Title: Keeping Christmas : 25 advent reflections on a Christmas carol / Allison Pittman.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020007088 | ISBN 9781540900067 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870. Christmas carol. | Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870.—Adaptations. | Advent—Meditations.

Classification: LCC PR4572.I885 P57 2020 | DDC 823/.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020007088>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

A *Christmas Carol* quotations and illustrations are from the original work: Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, illustrated by John Leech (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm>. Subtle changes to the text have been made since 1843.

The author is represented by William K. Jensen Literary Agency.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Contents

Author's Note 7

1. Dead, to Begin With 11
2. Covetous Old Sinner 15
3. Good Afternoon, Gentlemen! 19
4. Air Filled with Phantoms 25
5. Evergreen and Summer Flowers: Christ in Christmas Past 31
6. Home, Dear Brother! 35
7. Old Fezziwig 39
8. Belle, with a Full Heart 45
9. The Empty Scabbard: Christ in His Brother 51
10. A Peculiar Flavor Sprinkled from the Torch 55
11. Bob Cratchit's Dwelling 59
12. Here Is a New Game 63
13. Within the Robe: Ignorance 67
14. Within the Robe: Want 71
15. A Single Hand: Christ Emerges from the Darkness 75

Contents

16. One Little Knot of Businessmen	79
17. Bed Curtains and Sugar Tongs	83
18. The Name upon the Stone	87
19. A Splendid Laugh	91
20. The Turkey Big as Me	95
21. A Great Many Back Payments	99
22. He Went to Church	105
23. It is I, Your Uncle Scrooge	109
24. Tiny Tim, Who Did Not Die	113
25. Keeping Christmas	117

List of Scriptures Referenced	121
-------------------------------	-----

Author's Note



Dear Reader,

Charles Dickens opens his novella *A Christmas Carol* with this:

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful Friend and Servant,
C. D.

I humbly offer the same plea.

As a reader, scholar, teacher, and writer, I have always had a deep-rooted fascination with this particular work. I've seen nearly every version ever filmed, from the silent movie available on YouTube to the iconic Lifetime adaptation starring the inimitable Susan Lucci. The arc of the story never changes. Ebenezer Scrooge, no matter the actor who hosts the character, comes off as a miserable person. Mean, greedy, abrasive—and lonely. There are circumstances as to why he (or she, e.g., Tori Spelling) feels that way. And three supernatural beings guide us through the past, the present, and the future. Watch *Scrooged*,

Scrooge, or *Scrooge!* They all have it. As does *A Christmas Carol*, *A Carol Christmas*, or *An American Christmas Carol*. Scrooge has been embodied by a former Miss America (Vanessa Williams) and a former Fonzie (Henry Winkler). The tale has been animated by pen and ink, augmented by CGI, and cast with Muppets in which a birdish Gonzo plays the role of Dickens himself. No matter what liberties are taken with the story (a dance number in hell, two Marley brothers to capture a Bob Marley moment), the end is the same. All of the Scrooges confront their sins, repent, and go on to live kinder, more generous lives.

It takes a reading of the original text, however, to capture the true, spiritual essence of Scrooge's transformation. A close—very close—reading reveals his visits to be more than simple encounters with supernatural beings; they are confrontations with Christ—the One in whose name we celebrate this season. Scrooge doesn't just become a better man, he becomes a new man. So, just as Scrooge relies on the Spirits to guide him on this pilgrimage of self-awareness, I beg the opportunity to offer myself to guide you through the text of this beloved Christmas classic. Maybe, like me, you've read the original a dozen times and will—again, like me—see something in a new light. Perhaps you've watched some film adaptation every Christmas of your life, but you haven't delved into the text. If that's the case, I invite you to grab a copy to read for yourself. I promise the dense prose that may have seemed intimidating in the past will come to life. It did for me, in the same paragraphs and pages I thought I knew by heart. The difference being, I gave the story over to my heart, looking past Scrooge's obvious, outside transformation to find the profound inner change that brings it about. He is not, with all compliments to Dr. Seuss's Grinch, a creature whose heart merely grows. He is a man whose heart is transplanted.

Full disclosure: I am not a theologian or any kind of Dickensian scholar. I'm an English teacher who has devoted a lifetime to helping students wrangle with symbolism and metaphor. And I'm a writer who

strives to bring fictitious souls to Christ within every work. For us, as we travel this little book together, I hope to bring the best of both of my worlds—to enlighten, to lead, and to share bits and pieces of my own story.

Throughout my study for this work, I clung to the promise found in 2 Corinthians 5:17–19: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

I see Dickens’s tale as a message of reconciliation as well as an illustration of the life we ought to live once reconciled to Christ. It’s not only a journey through the past, present, and future but also a journey from death to life. Not just a reclamation but a rebirth.

The season of Advent is itself a journey: twenty-four days to mark the moment when Jesus Christ came to transform the world. But it is so much more than just a Christmas countdown; it’s a time when we can celebrate our own transformational experience. The long winter nights of Advent are meant to be a time of contemplation, reflection, anticipation. The story of Scrooge happens over the course of one of those nights—a matter of hours—a time of confrontation, repentance, and salvation.

And so, to paraphrase:

I have endeavored with this little book to raise up the eternal truths, which shall not raise the ire of Dickensian scholars, theologians, Christmas fanatics, or classic film buffs. May it haunt your hearts pleasantly.

A faithful Friend and Servant of Christ,
A. P.

1

Dead, to Begin With



Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.”

These days, with the Christmas season so full of white twinkle lights and red silk ribbons adorning unnaturally green trees, it’s hard to reconcile such a bleak, grave statement with the story so synonymous with the holiday. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. In other words, he was dead, dead, dead, dead.

“Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.”

Marley was so dead . . .

(How dead was he?)

Deader than a coffin nail.

Deader than a two-a-penny nail.

Dead enough to earn the phrase that we all still use to drive a point home like a hammer on a nail head.

Not deader than a doornail, mind you. Because once you’re a doornail, well, you aren’t going to get much deader.

Keeping Christmas

But dead.

Gone.

Undertaken and buried.

Merry Christmas.

God begins his Christmas story in much the same way.

“But . . . but!” thousands of Sunday school teachers and Nativity scene collectors and pseudosecular celebrators decry. Christmas is the “Infant Holy,” “Away in the Manger,” the “Silent Night, Holy Night” where unto us a child is born. Pregnant Mary. Stalwart Joseph. Infant Jesus. Cattle lowing, donkeys looking on, sheep following shepherds following a star. Christmas is life.

All true. But the life of Christmas, like all life as it cycles through God’s creation, begins with death. We cannot sing “O, Little Town of Bethlehem” without also pondering the lyrics of “Mary, Did You Know?” Yes, we know the sweet story of the swaddled child, but we also know the story of that same child, grown and crucified. We know those chubby hands will be pierced; the downy head will someday wear a crown of thorns. The shepherds left their fields to behold a perfect lamb born for slaughter. Quite the sobering shadow on your Nativity scene.

The timeline of the Scriptures holds a sharp divide. Old Testament. New Testament. The opening chapters of the Gospels are resplendent with life. With beginnings. John takes us to the birth of the universe, where there was nothing but the Word. Mark promises to tell a story about the Good News. Luke sets out to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus. Matthew starts with the family tree: a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Any of these texts would be perfect for the voice-over narration in the church Christmas program. (Especially John, if you want to add a certain gravitas to the shepherds in the field.) All those

elements of the Nativity are so achingly familiar, it's easy to forget what came just before.

The nothingness.

The silence.

Before that, in the waning verses of the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi speaks a dire warning: “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty” (Mal. 4:1).

And after that, silence. Malachi dies, and the tongues of God's prophets fall still for four hundred years.

Nothing spoken to the clergymen.

Nothing recorded by the clerks.

Mute, like a doornail.

That's not to say that God didn't speak during that time. I'm sure he communicated as he always has, whispering directly to the hearts of righteous people. Clearing paths so the wise might follow. Gentle rebukes of conscience in the face of sin. Still, four centuries go by without anything to pass the muster of recorded Scripture. Nothing for the masses—no encouragement, no warnings. Prophecy nailed shut until the time was right to wrench it open and start a New Testament for humankind.

Too many film adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* skip over the death of Marley. They like to open with the snow-strewn Victorian avenue, carolers plowing through the third verse of “Good King Wenceslas,” men tipping top hats, delicacies displayed in candlelit windows. A book shop. Sweet shop. Tailors and haberdashers. The Hallmark Entertainment production (from the days when Hallmark took their Christmas programming a little more seriously) starring Patrick Stewart, however, opens with a black, horse-drawn hearse. Marley's casket in a grave surrounded by snow-cold ground. Scriptures about

Keeping Christmas

life being fleeting, like a flower. Sown in misery. Later, the sound of a scratching quill, the book signed to certify Marley's eternal state.

Melodramatic? Yes. Perfectly so.

Marley was dead. Later, readers learn he's been dead seven years. A perfected number of years, to be exact. He died on the eve of Christmas. He's been dead long enough for the forces of nature to erase his name from the sign hanging outside of his place of business. Dickens implies this same time of silence, for the story picks up with the single living soul who stood as chief mourner at the officiation of Marley's death. The reader must be completely, fully accepting that the time of Marley is over, that his voice is removed from all natural sound.

Marley is dead.

Scrooge, on the other hand, is very much alive.

Well, mostly.

