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Advent and the Arts Series #2
Seeing Themselves Whole
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Each of the New Testament Gospels has its introduction of Jesus. The Gospel of John (the last to be written, some 60 years after Jesus' execution) utilizes a creation story as its introduction to Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was made flesh...."

Matthew's Gospel begins with a lengthy genealogy, then, moves to Joseph having a dream about his fiancé, Mary, being pregnant. Herod, the Wise Men, and the Star from the East are all unique to Matthew's version of the birth.

From Luke, we receive the traditions of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem for taxation, no room in the inn for the couple, the manger, shepherds, and angels.

Our gospel text for the day comes from Mark—the oldest of the gospels—still written 35 to 40 after Jesus' death and 70 years after his birth. Mark has no birth details. His introduction of Jesus is John the baptizer preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the desert. John the Baptist's introduction of Jesus (in this gospel) is:

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

The stories of Advent and Christmas are not limited to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Many examples of music, paintings, sculpture, and literature tell their own story of God's coming and the importance of Jesus. We will leave Mark's introduction of Jesus for now and come back to it further in the sermon.

Today, I am using a specific example of a second art form, literature, that cradles the Christmas story—Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—written in 1843. England is the setting. Dickens' book was written with haste to pay off pressing bills, but its contribution to literature has been great. It was an immediate hit, and in the long run revived the waning celebration of the Christmas season.

The story is about a wealthy financier, who seems to have little happiness in his life. Though wealthy, he lives like a miser. Keeping his own living quarters barely heated and making his own candles for light to save a little money, Dickens' describes his world this way: "Darkness is cheap."

Insensitive to others, selfish, and a miserable tight-wad was the way his nephew and most people described him.

The story begins on Christmas Eve, which is also the seventh anniversary of his former business partner's death—Jacob Marley. After complaining about giving his employees time off on Christmas Day, he turns down an invitation from his nephew to join the family for Christmas Dinner with the famous "Bah! Humbug!" then returns home at the end of the day. Soon after he falls asleep, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley. Marley tells him that unless he changes his ways, he will die and afterwards invisibly walk the earth forever facing the misery and suffering he could have alleviated during his life.

Marley's ghost has arranged Scrooge's only chance for redemption through three visits to follow—The Ghost of Christmas Past, The Ghost of Christmas Present, and The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

At the clock's strike of the first hour, the Ghost of Christmas Past takes him on a journey. He sees himself being rescued by his sister from a lonely exile at a boarding school. He sees the image of the young woman he loved and planned to marry—but who rejected him because of his obsession with money. He sees his kind apprentice-master who taught him his trade, and then remembers how badly he has treated his own best employee, Bob Cratchit.

The second of the three spirits—The Ghost of Christmas Present—makes his visit at the striking of the next hour. Scrooge is carried to the meager but happy celebration of the Cratchit family. There he discovers the lame son of Bob Cratchit—Tiny Tim—and learns that without proper medical help, the boy will have an early death. He is taken many places and discovers how his reputation of being cheap and uncaring is widespread. He sees the images of two pitiful children huddled under his own robe. They personify the major causes of the suffering in this world—ignorance and want. The bell strikes twelve and the Ghost of Christmas Present vanishes and the third spirit appears.

The third ghost is the most frightening of all. Scrooge is given the vision of a future Christmas with the Cratchit family, without Tiny Tim. He sees his own home and corpse alone and being robbed by thugs. He understands he can avoid this future, but only if he changes. When he awakens, he discovers it is Christmas morning. You know the rest of the story. It becomes one of those “and they all lived happily ever after” because of the changes that occur.

The story, now 165 years old, is a classic because of its simple yet profound truth. And, that is where Mark’s gospel-introduction is important. John the Baptist brought the preaching of repentance and forgiveness (the ghost of Christmases past and present); Jesus brought the very presence of God’s Spirit to the people (a vision of what can be).

Last Sunday evening, Jennifer and I watched a special CNN program, “CNN Heroes of 2008.” The two-hour program was the story-telling of the lives of ten incredible human beings. What was special about each was how they had changed the lives of other human beings by their unselfishness, their caring, and their creativity.

Anne Mahlum, a marathon runner, is a 27-year-old Caucasian female living in Philadelphia. Growing up in a home with an addicted father, she began running at an early age to keep her sanity and at times to get away from the chaos at home. She discovered the emotional power of exercise, in particular for

her, running. She went past homeless men every day in her “runs.” On one day, she asked herself *why* she was running past them. She contacted the shelter, got donations of running gear, and in July 2007 the “Back On My Feet” running club hit the streets. Today, “Back On My Feet” has teams in three Philadelphia shelters, including 54 homeless members and more than 250 volunteers. Runners greet each other with hugs and words of encouragement. While many in her program have controlled their addiction, lost weight, experienced more energy, Mahlum believes they’re also learning important life skills such as discipline and goal-setting, helping them get on the road of self-sufficiency.¹

Another “Hero” was David Puckett of Savannah, Georgia. He started “Positive Image Prosthetics and Orthotics Missions—PIPO.” Puckett first connected with the Yucatan people while volunteering on a mission there as a teenager. Struck by overwhelming poverty and the physical challenges he saw facing many of the people there, he vowed to return and make a difference. When he finally got into the field of orthotics and prosthetics, he said, “Ah-ha. Now I know what I can do.”

“When someone loses a limb they immediately know what they’ve lost,” says Puckett. “The goal is to restore the healthy self-image again so that that person can see themselves whole.”²

CNN had identified many “Heroes” of 2008, and they weren’t just from the United States. They were from all around the world. Ten were noted and their good works presented as some of the best news I experienced in quite a while. Among the ten was a Virginia woman from Norfolk. Her name is Carolyn LeCroy. In 1994, LeCroy’s life took a radical turn. She had been allowing a

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<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2008/cnn.heroes/archive/anne.mahlum.html>

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<http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/08/22/heroes.puckett/index.html>

former friend to use her storage bin. She was aware he had some marijuana in the bin, because he had told her. What she didn't know was how much!

When discovered as police were actually looking for something else, Carolyn was given 55 years in prison, which was eventually reduced. Up to that point, she had never even had a traffic ticket. What made such a deep and lasting impression on her while in prison was that only 20% of the inmates received monthly visits from their children. She was lucky. Her 18 and 22 year-old sons "kept her going." After her visits, she would come back to the floor and would notice the women who never got visits. They were always depressed and unhappy.

After making parole in 1996, she used her background as a film and video producer to start The Messages Project. In December 1999, she and volunteer camera crews were granted admission to Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women in Troy, Virginia. There, they recorded video messages with mothers to be mailed to their children and families as Christmas gifts. Since then, The Messages Project has worked in six state prisons at least three times a year.³

Watching the CNN taping of Carolyn LeCroy make some of these videos, I saw the wider Church at work. There were no religious trappings there. Just a woman with a camera whose life had been changed. She now had been enlightened to the pain of many women separated from their families and knew that she could make a difference in small, unglamorous corner of the world. What I saw in these opportunities for female inmates to send a message home was people telling their children they were sorry, that they knew they had made a big mistake, and asking them forgiveness. No steeples, no crucifix, no preaching, no loud singing of hymns. Just compassion and the opportunity to say something important to their family which metamorphosed into an emotional confession and a request to be forgiven by those she loved most. For some of these, it was the beginning of a new way of living.

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/06/12/heroes.lecroy/>

These are Jesus stories. They are Christmas stories with their own trappings—running shoes, prosthetics, and video cameras in prisons. They contained all the important ingredients of a classic story, yet never done for notoriety. They all contained the three elements of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Mark's introduction of Jesus—consideration of the past, consideration of the present, and consideration of what *could be* in the future with their help. Mark introduced the gospel of Jesus with the presence of John the Baptist who emphasized the importance repentance as a means of cleaning up one's past and making right one's present. And, he presented the spirit of Jesus as one who would usher in the living presence of God, giving birth to a new future.

There is nothing wrong with the symbols of wise men, mangers and shepherds. But, let's not leave the celebration of Advent and Christmas there. Let's let it reflect the living presence of Christ.

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Isaiah 40:1-11

¹Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

"Here is your God!"

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

11He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

