Here’s a trivia quiz for you. What do these actors have in common? James Earl Jones, Jim Carrey, Patrick Stewart, and Bill Murray? What if I add George C. Scott, Cicely Tyson, and Tom Hanks? Got it yet? Here’s one final hint, maybe the greatest actor of our generation: Scrooge McDuck. All of these outstanding thespians - and thesp-ducks - have had the honor of playing the role of Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.”

It’s probably the most famous Christmas story outside of the Bible, and it’s been retold countless times because it’s a timeless story about the passing of time. In one fateful night, Scrooge is confronted by his past, his present, and his future, all for the purpose of helping him change his greedy ways and catch the Christmas spirit. And his companions for the journey are three ghosts, each with their own personalities and purposes. How’s your Christmas spirit doing so far? If you’re like me, this past election season and the oncoming rush of the holidays has me feeling a lot more Scrooge-ish than usual. Maybe we need to see some ghosts to help us open up our hearts to what is coming this Christmas.

For our Advent sermon series this year, we’re going to be spending some time with Scrooge as we peer into the past, ponder the present, and yearn for what is yet to come. As we know, the ghosts were able to help change Scrooge’s focus from the pull of materialism and money to the true spirit behind the coming of the Christ child. The ghosts did it for Scrooge in one night; do you think they can help us over the course of four weeks?

If you’re not familiar with the story, Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly old man whose love of money has left him leading a lonely life. Dickens describes him this way: “He was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!” To which I would add, “Bless his heart.” He mistreats his employee, Bob Cratchit, and dismisses an invitation to his nephew Fred’s Christmas party with a scowling, “Bah humbug!”

On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge learns that Marley has been condemned to walk the earth carrying heavy chains because of the greedy life he led. Marley warns Scrooge to avoid the same fate, and says that three ghosts will be visiting him that night. The first ghost to arrive is the Ghost of Christmas Past, a strange childlike phantom with a brightly glowing head. The spirit escorts Scrooge on a journey into the past to previous Christmases from the curmudgeon’s earlier years. Scrooge revisits his childhood school days, his apprenticeship with a jolly merchant named Fezziwig, and his engagement to Belle, a woman who leaves Scrooge because his love of money was greater than his love for her. Scrooge is moved to tears by both the joy and the regret he experiences.

We all probably feel the same way when we think about our past Christmases. There are memories that fill us with happiness and memories that would just as soon forget. Sometimes those memories are captured in our decorations themselves. We’ll put up our Christmas tree today, and each ornament carries a story with it. We have ornaments that were given to us when we were little by relatives no longer with us. We have ornaments marking rites of passage, like “Baby’s First Christmas” or handmade ornaments from our girls when they were little. I’ve collected a bunch of sports ornaments down through the years, but I’m not allowed to have them
in the house, so they’re on a tree in my office. Just putting up the tree can be a trip down memory lane.

Of course, the good ol’ days of Christmas aren’t always good. My Poppy’s birthday was Christmas Eve, so each year that day is a reminder that he is gone. And each Christmas morning we used to gather at my PawPaw’s house for a huge Christmas breakfast. Although it’s been a decade since we have done that, I miss it every year. And when we get together with family at Christmas, I’m keenly aware of the people who are not there because of broken relationships. Like Scrooge, we can be moved to tears by both the joy and regret of the past.

That’s the kind of power our memories hold over us. Our past can shape how we perceive the present and how we move forward into the future. For Scrooge, his complex past shaped who he was and how he lived, as his love for money, developed at an early age, calcified his heart and his ability to love others. The past has the same power for Joseph in our scripture passage. He was committed to be married to Mary, only to find out when she returns from a trip that she is four months along in a pregnancy initiated by the Holy Spirit. Imagine that first conversation! “Honey, I’ve got some good news and I’ve got some bad news. The bad news is, I’m pregnant and you’re not the father. But the good news is, neither is anybody else!” If you were Joseph, how do you respond to this? He wasn’t quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knew it had nothing to do with him.

So he faces a decision, one of the most important decisions faced by anyone in the Bible: what to do with Mary and her unborn child? We are told Joseph was a righteous man, which means in Jewish tradition that he was a faithful follower of God’s law, so the law gave him his options. He could follow what was laid out in Deuteronomy 22, which says, “If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die.” So one of Joseph’s options is to expose Mary’s apparent transgression and have her stoned to death.

But by New Testament times, that punishment was rarely meted out. So, the only other option Joseph faced, according to the law, was divorce. No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to end the relationship and sever the marriage contract. He could honor the shaming dictated by the law and expose Mary’s sin through a public divorce, humiliating her in front of her family and friends and leaving her future in question. Or he could divorce her quietly, with only a few witnesses, doing everything he could to keep both his and Mary’s reputation intact. But he simply couldn’t stay with her.

This is just a mess for Joseph. He would forever be defined by this transgression. From this point forward, he’ll be known as the guy whose soon-to-be wife got pregnant. It only took one split-second act to change his life for the worse, and he didn’t even have anything to do with it! I know a lot of people whose lives have been changed by one bad decision. I have a friend who’s lost his job, his home, and a lot of his friends, all because of one bad choice he made. That’s all it takes, right? We all have at least one thing in our past that we regret, a memory that haunts us, a decision we would give anything to undo. Even if we’ve survived the consequences of it, we still know what happened, and we can never go back and change it.

I’ll give you a trivial example. A few years ago, I was loading groceries in my trunk and had the cart sitting behind my car. Another driver was impatiently waiting to take my parking space, so I quickly loading my groceries and got in my car. I noticed the space in front of me was empty, so instead of backing out, I pulled forward, forgetting that I had left my shopping cart blocking the parking space so the other car couldn’t pull in. To this day, I want to find that person and explain that I’m not really a jerk, I just forgot my cart was there. I don’t know why, but I still feel horrible about that to this day. If it was one of you, I’m really sorry!
The power of the past. Scrooge weeps with regret when he realizes how his greed ruined his relationships. Joseph agonizes over what to do about his situation, whether to follow the laws of the past or trust what the angel is telling him about the future. Do we have to be who we’ve been? Are we beholden to the ways of the past? Christian rock group Relient K has a song called, “Who I Am Hates Who I’ve Been.” But there’s good news for us, just as there was for Scrooge and for Joseph. The God we worship is not only the God of the future and the God of the present. God is the God of the past, which means God’s forgiveness stretches backward, covering our past actions and altering how the shape our lives.

We are not who we were. We can choose to act like we are, to act as if the mistakes we have made still plague us, still define us. Or we can have hope. Hope that God can work through our past to redefine our present and open up our future. Hope that we are not limited to either staying the same or running from the past. Hope that God presents another option, to help us claim who we were as a part of becoming who God wants us to be. Yes, I left a shopping cart blocking a parking space. But I’ve also held doors for people and helped carry their grocery bags. So which person am I? The one who made the mistakes, or the one who tried to help others? I guess that depends on where I choose to put my focus. Yes, we have made mistakes, and those mistakes are a part of our story. But they don’t have to be the whole story. Scrooge let himself be defined by his past, but that’s only one part of his story. We can reframe our past regrets as a small part of a larger story of forgiveness and growth. God has something greater planned for us.

I liken our situation to driving a car. If you want to know what’s behind you, you have a couple of small mirrors you can use. The sideview and rearview mirrors give you a small glimpse of where you’ve been. I wish I had used mine before leaving that parking space! But if we spend too much time looking in our rear-view mirror, we miss what’s coming ahead. I think there’s a reason that the rear-view mirror is so tiny and the windshield is so spacious. It’s important to glimpse at the past every once in a while to know where we’ve been, but it’s much more important to stay focused on what’s in front of us. We were meant to spend most of our time looking ahead of us, not behind.

For Scrooge, the Ghost of Christmas Past reminded him of the pain his actions caused as a way of setting the stage for him to look forward. For Joseph, the angel shows him that this one action of Mary’s pregnancy, so condemned by society, doesn’t have to keep him from doing the right thing. For us, the birth of the Christ child brings with it the hope that our past doesn’t have to be our present, and that our future is pregnant with the possibilities God has for us.

For many of us, Christmas is a mixed bag of emotions. While the season is meant to be joyous and delightful, we are burdened by memories of loved ones no longer with us. We are weighed down by grief or guilt. We don’t know how we can move forward because of what we have done or what others have done to us. So what will Christmas bring us this year? More painful memories, more staring at the rear-view mirror? Or will we look ahead through the windshield at the hope the Christ child brings this year. Scrooge still has two more ghosts to go before his transformation is complete. But ours can start right now. Right now. You are not who you used to be. You don’t have to be a prisoner to the past. Just look at all God has planned for you!