

“GOOD NEWS FROM WHOVILLE”

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

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“Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch who lived just north of Whoville did not! The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now please don’t ask why, no one quite knows the reason. It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right. It could be perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”

I haven’t seen the new *Grinch* recently released in theatres, but I’m thinking I’ll be able to persuade my daughters when Alix is here over the Christmas season. I used to do a fairly dramatic reading of it every year until quite recently. After a few years, they’d recite large portions of it with me as I read.

Christmas Eve, 1991 was the first time I brought the Grinch into the pulpit with a message entitled “If God were welcome...” based on some verses from John 1. I’ve preached that sermon in several congregations including here in (I think) 2005. For some reason, a person on the worship team remembered that sermon and thought this would be a good year to do a little reprise on it. I believe they were hoping to ease our work load a little this month, which was nice; but I seem to have misplaced that sermon somewhere. It’s too old to be found on my current laptop and the 2005 sermon file seems to be missing. To complicate matters, the text I’m using today is different from the 1991 version which I do still have. In other words, you are not getting a reprise this morning. It’s pretty much a total rewrite.

To begin with, I have to somehow bring in John the Baptist. No problem. This is the guy that preached about repentance. The first words that he utters in Luke are: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” You’d probably be a little touchy too if your diet consisted of wild locusts and honey and your clothes were made from camel hair. I can sooo see him with a “sour grinchy frown.” Can’t you?

The Grinch’s issues center around the party. He assumes that all the noise, noise, noise, noise is about all the fun they’re having and that when the Whos sing, sing, sing, sing, they are thinking about all the presents and the feasting. And so he comes up with this idea that he thinks will drive them to their knees and tears. Perhaps he wants them to repent of their excessive materialism and gluttony. Perhaps he thinks that they have commercialized Christmas. Was there, do you suppose, a self-righteous streak that said, “Repent, repent, repent, repent?”

You know what he does, of course. He tries to steal their celebration. Dressed as a fake Santy Claus, he goes down to the village and steals all the presents, all the food for their feast. Even the Christmas trees are not spared. Absolutely nothing is left except “a crumb that is even too small for a mouse.”

There are Whos and there are Grinches. Sometimes we're one and sometimes we're the other. Sometimes we're singing and sometimes we can't stand the sight or the sound of someone else's joy. Sometimes we're into the gift-giving and sometimes we're on the critics of materialism bandwagon. Sometimes we feel blessed and sometimes we feel cursed.

Sometimes we are so down on life that we don't know what the singing's all about. We don't have our health; our debts are getting out of hand; we're the victim of a crime or of violence; the divorce is dragging on.

Christmas is tough on people. The hospitals fill up. Losses are felt more deeply. We don't normally begrudge other people their joy, but sometimes it makes our pain worse. Maybe we're not grinchy, perhaps just a little grouchy.

So maybe we feel a little like John the Baptist, wanting to put a damper on the celebration. He tells the crowd not to rely on their rich heritage, that the axe is lying at the root, and the beautiful tree we imagine is fit for nothing but to be cut down and thrown in the fire. That's really grinchy stuff. You don't need that second coat! You don't need all that food! You really don't need all that money!

"It was quarter past dawn... All the Whos still abed, All the Whos, still a-snooze When he packed up his sled, Packed it up with their presents! The ribbons! The wrappings! The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings! Three Thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit, He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!"

And there we are, some years, atop Mt. Crumpit, with our grinchy John the Baptist criticism of the way others celebrate Christmas. Perhaps we didn't mean for our sorrow, or misfortune, or bitterness to undermine the joy of others; but there we are, prepared to jettison the party into the abyss. And certainly, we are not relishing the thought of hearing the wailing that is soon to come from Whoville, which is a good thing, because the tears never come.

You know what happens. The Whos remain undeterred. They gather together, hold hands, and they sing, sing, sing, sing! Christmas came anyway.

"It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags! And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more. And what happened then...? Well... in Whoville they say that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!"

The story is of course a secular story. There's nothing about Jesus, nothing about a manger, nothing about the word made flesh. But as the Grinch stood atop his mountain of hate, he heard from Whoville, "good news."

And, ironically, as we listen to the words of John the Baptist, imagining them to be somewhat harsh, imagining them to be criticisms of our frivolous celebration of the season, he is not the Grinch as could imagine him. His call to becoming less reliant and attached to our traditions... his call to let go of the practice of accumulating things and over indulging in consuming things is not an attempt to steal our joy. Judgmental as his words sound, they are in fact good news, a kind of song, that encourages us to look beyond the “packages, boxes, and bags” to something more profound, more satisfying, and more joyful. Luke tells us at the end of today’s reading, “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.”

John sounds like the Grinch, but he is in fact a “Who!” His song has been immortalized for us in Handel’s *Messiah* and they are indeed joyful: “Every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill brought low. The crooked shall be made straight, the rough places plain, and all flesh shall see the glory of God!”

A song still comes from Whoville. Good news rises to greet those who are keen to listen. And John sings his own song that prepares “the way of the Lord.” Wherever we are, dreading the celebration of the season or anticipating the joy, God comes. Jesus is born. The Word is made flesh. God is present. So whatever comes or doesn’t come... sing, sing, sing, sing!

Amen.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas by Theodor “Dr Seuss” Geisel, 1957