

***“The Gospel According to ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’”***

**Reverend Bill Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 17, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 53:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup>But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup>All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup>He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup>By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. <sup>9</sup>They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

**Second Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46-55**

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”



**Sermon: *“The Gospel According to ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’”***

Most people are familiar with “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and his story of redemption, transforming from outcast to hero in the amount of time it took Santa Claus to figure out that the solution to his fog-related problems was putting something bright at the front of his sleigh. Apparently at the North Pole they can make every type of toy and game imaginable, but they’ve never heard of head-lights.

For 69 Christmases now, children and adults alike have made this song about the ninth reindeer a part of their annual yuletide celebrations. But the familiar song is actually based on a story written by Robert L. May as a promotional piece for Montgomery Ward back in 1939. On a broadcast of NPR’s Morning Edition in 2013, Jessica Pupovac noted that:

*“May didn’t see himself as a winner. He had always felt like a bit of an outcast, and, at 35, he felt he was far from reaching his potential, pounding out catalog copy instead of writing the Great American Novel as he had always dreamed he would.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Pupovac, Jessica. “Writing ‘Rudolph’: The Original Red-Nosed Manuscript.” *NPR*, NPR, 25 Dec. 2013, [www.npr.org/2013/12/25/256579598/writing-rudolph-the-original-red-nosed-manuscript](http://www.npr.org/2013/12/25/256579598/writing-rudolph-the-original-red-nosed-manuscript).

Maybe that's what inspired his story of an outcast who is underappreciated but who has just the right skills to be the underdog who saves the day.

The story was a tremendous hit and Montgomery Ward distributed over 2 million copies around the country. 10 years later, May's brother-in-law put the story to music and had it recorded by none other than cowboy legend Gene Autry. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" remains Autry's single greatest success in a storied recording career.<sup>2</sup> Then in 1964, Arthur Rankin and Jules Bass took the basic storyline of that three-minute song and developed it into the hour-long television special that has become a Christmas tradition.<sup>3</sup>

We know the basic story. Rudolph has a shiny red nose. The other young reindeer laugh at him, call him names, and won't let him play with them. But then one day Santa is in a bad spot and needs a miracle. And Rudolph steps in to save the day. You could say it is his moment to shine. But just under the surface of this Christmas classic lies something darker. What is it like to look different or to be seen as different and to be ridiculed and rejected by your peers, and to have the adults in your life treat you like something broken? Arthur Rankin and Jules Bass explore those questions with Rudolph and his companion, Hermey.

Rudolph's story begins in his childhood when we learn he is the son of Donner (sic), one of the eight reindeer who pull Santa's sleigh. But we see right away that he is born with a "congenital defect": his nose is bright red to the point that it glows. The reception he receives is tragic. His mother says, "We'll have to overlook it." But his father replies, "How can you overlook that? His beak blinks like a blinkin' beacon!"<sup>4</sup>

When Santa arrives to visit the newborn and is surprised by his bright shiny nose, Donner tries to ease whatever concerns Santa might be having telling him "I'm sure it'll stop as soon as he grows up." To which Santa replies "Well, let's hope so if he wants to make the sleigh team someday." What in the world does *his nose* have to do with pulling a sleigh? Either you can do it, or you can't. What you look like shouldn't matter, right?

No doubt concerned about what having such a "deformity" will do to his own reputation and his son's future prospects, Donner covers Rudolph's nose; first with mud and then later with some kind of false nose. Nevermind that doing so feels uncomfortable for Rudolph and makes his voice sound different. Covering the "defect" is all that matters.

At the "Reindeer Games" Rudolph excels. He flies when all the other reindeer fail. Athletically he is gifted and shows true potential to one day be a part of Santa's team. But then the false nose comes off and everyone is stunned by the glowing red proboscis underneath. Other young reindeer mock him. And surprisingly, rather than correct the rude children, Santa actually chastises *Rudolph's father* telling Donner "You should be ashamed of yourself!" And then adding as a special bonus: "What a pity, he had a nice takeoff, too." Again, as if having a slightly different appearance would affect his ability to pull a sleigh. And then the coach, a supposedly responsible adult, leads the other reindeer children away saying "From now on, we won't let Rudolph join in any of our reindeer games!"

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<sup>2</sup> Bronk, Bill. "A Reindeer Tale - How Rudolph Became a Christmas Hit." *Goldmine Magazine*, Goldmine Magazine, 7 Dec. 2015, [www.goldminemag.com/articles/reindeer-tale-hail-hail-rudolph](http://www.goldminemag.com/articles/reindeer-tale-hail-hail-rudolph).

<sup>3</sup> Pupovac, Jessica, "Writing Rudolph..."

<sup>4</sup> All Dialogue Quotes taken from: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Rankin/Bass Productions, 1964.

There is one bright spot for Rudolph: Clarice. She is a doe about his age who likes Rudolph for who he is. After Rudolph's nose has been discovered she tells him "I think it's a handsome nose. Much better than that silly false one you were wearing." And they seem to develop a genuine bond as friends.

But then her father arrives and forbids her from ever seeing Rudolph again. "No doe of mine is going to be seen with a red-nosed reindeer." It's all very "West Side Story"/"Look Who's Coming to Dinner".

Rudolph is a "misfit." And it is through no fault of his own. But worse, we can't just shake this off as children being cruel as children will sometimes be. The adults are active participants, too. This isn't just schoolyard bullying, this is culturally accepted, systemic prejudice.

And then we meet Hermey. Hermey wasn't part of the original story or the song, but he is added to the television special as a companion for Rudolph. He shares Rudolph's plight because he too is made to feel different from everyone around him. Hermey is an elf who doesn't want to make toys. He wants to be a dentist. He explains this to the Head Elf, noting that he doesn't really want to make toys and sing in the elf choir, he wants to work on people's teeth and there really is quite a need for that skill-set since there is no dentist currently residing at the North Pole.

The Head Elf shuts Hermey's idea down telling him gruffly "Now, listen, you. You're an elf, and elves make toys. Now get to work!" Hermey doesn't feel like a Toy Maker. He feels like a dentist. How frustrating it must be to know yourself and to know that you're not the person everyone expects you to be. How sad to be forced by circumstance to live a lie.

Rudolph is dismissed because he is physically different. Hermey is dismissed because he is not like the other elves. The two find each other and decide to leave Christmastown together. The song they sing about being misfits asks a profound question with which we are invited to struggle:

*We may be different from the rest  
Who decides the test  
Of what is really best?*

Indeed. It would seem that "Who decides the test of what is really best" would be the majority who look down upon and shame those who they see as different. One blogger, a pastor who has clearly spent some time thinking about these Christmas specials as I have, suggests that there is a more subversive message here than many people watching realize. She writes that Hermey's "misfit-ness" is the result of something within him that makes him feel as though going along with what all the other elves are doing is for him, to live a lie. He can hide it though, and has for a long time. Every day he is forced to choose between being true or false to himself. Rudolph's misfit-ness is exterior; with him there is no ability to hide in plain sight, everyone he meets sees his misfit-ness and judges him accordingly before there is ever a chance to know who Rudolph really is. "Change 'dentist' to 'gay'" she writes, "and 'red nose' to 'brown skin' [and] Now the subversive message is clear..."<sup>5</sup>

All of a sudden this is not a cute story about Christmas characters who save the day, it's about all of the people our society deems to be "different" and "less-than" and the way that we devalue them, ostracize

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<sup>5</sup> Thweat-Bates, Jennifer Jeanine. "Theological Reflections on Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." *Rude Truth*, Jennifer Jeanine Thweat-Bates, 19 Dec. 2005, [rudetruth.blogspot.com/2005/12/theological-reflections-on-rudolph-red.html](http://rudetruth.blogspot.com/2005/12/theological-reflections-on-rudolph-red.html).

them, and push them to the margins. It's about the ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes not so much, that we treat differently those who look different or act different or believe different or love different.

That theme is underscored as Rudolph and Hermey find their way to the Island of Misfit Toys where unwanted toys are brought by benevolent King Moon Racer. When a toy is unloved, the King brings them to his island until a home can be found with a child who will love it.

Here we meet a bird who doesn't fly, he swims, a train whose caboose has square wheels, and my personal favorite, A Jack in the Box whose name is actually Charlie ("No child wants to play with a Charlie-in-the-Box!"). Again, essentially superficial traits have left these toys unwanted and apparently unfit for the simple purpose of bringing joy to a child.

The rest of the show tells the story of Rudolph and Hermey's adventures as they journey back to Christmastown to fulfil their promise to tell Santa about the misfit toys. When everyone in Christmastown hears their story, the narrator tells us, they realize that the ones they saw as misfits actually have a place, too.

Which is consistent with what Jesus taught.

One of the great hallmarks of Jesus' ministry was His propensity toward eating and spending time with those the rest of the community deemed unfit. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He defended a woman accused of adultery. He made Samaritans, a despised group of people in His day, the heroes of His parables. He valued women and children at a time when both groups were seen as little better than property. He healed the blind and the lame and those with ailments that struck fear in people like leprosy and demon possession. The power of the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark and Luke's gospels<sup>6</sup> is that while on His way to heal the daughter of a prominent leader of the synagogue, Jesus stops and allows himself to be delayed by a woman who is unclean. He listens to her, spends time with her, and heals her, even though she is of no consequence to those around her, certainly not when compared with the more powerful and well-respected synagogue leader. Her low state does not mean that Jesus will ignore her in order to rush off to help someone of greater standing in the community. The misfits of His time were important to Jesus and it is to them that He came.

In the words of our second scripture reading this morning we find the song Mary sings at the time she is told by Gabriel that she will be the mother of the messiah. In her song, we hear these words:

***<sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.***

The Messiah comes to herald the Kingdom of God, but that Kingdom turns the world as we know it upside down. Those who are on top are brought low. Those who are lowly are lifted up. Insiders are sent away. The misfits find a place.

It is reminiscent of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount...

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 5:22-43 & Luke 8:40-56, NRSV

*“<sup>20</sup>...Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”<sup>7</sup>*

Which is both comfort and challenge as the gospel always is. In the birth of Christ, we celebrate the coming of one who will lift up those who have been shamed and hurt and pushed out not because of what they have done, but because of who they are and what they believe and what they look like and who they love and where they come from. To those who find themselves defined by this world as “misfit,” the gospel brings good news of inclusion; that all are welcomed and loved by God, not in spite of who they are, but because of it.

When Rudolph is assigned to lead Santa’s sleigh, I can’t help but think about these reversals. The one who was seen as unworthy to even be on the team because of his nose, is now leading the whole thing. Here we see that the lowly are lifted up.

But we are also reminded of the challenge of the Gospel, in which Jesus teaches that all of us are children of God and worthy of love and respect. And we are called to look into our own hearts and find the places where we judge others prematurely and unfairly, and to see one another not by what lies on the surface, but by the mere fact that we are each one of us, God’s beloved.

In this Christmas season, we celebrate the birth of God’s son who announces the coming Kingdom of God in which justice and righteousness are the norm and mourning and crying and pain will be no more; a Kingdom defined not by power and prestige, but by love and grace and mercy.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:20-23, NRSV