

“The Gospel According to ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’”

**Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017**

First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5

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.”

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 1:67-79

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”



Sermon: *“The Gospel According to ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’”*

According to the church calendar, we are now in the season of Advent. On just about everybody else’s calendar, it’s Christmas season. What’s the difference? Well, in the Church, Christmas doesn’t actually begin until December 25 and it runs all the way to January 5, the day before Epiphany (which is what gives you your traditional twelve days of Christmas, by the way). For the society around us, though, Christmas is a season that begins before Thanksgiving and then builds to its magnificent crescendo on Christmas Day. So, on December 26, when the church is just beginning it’s Christmas observance, for the rest of the community, Christmas is over. 364 more shopping days until the next one!

And Christmas season creeps earlier and earlier on the Calendar every year. Christmas decorations start going up in late October. Stores begin their Christmas sales earlier. If you’re waiting for Black Friday these days, you’re already missing some of the best sales. The church says, “hold up, slow your roll, wait for it, it’s not quite Christmas yet,” while the culture around us screams forward at full speed toward a brightly wrapped and over-priced bacchanalia.

While the church encourages us to consider why Christ’s birth is so significant, the culture is already singing Happy Birthday to Jesus! And I think that’s okay. The point of Advent is for Christians to prepare their hearts and minds and lives for the celebration of Christ’s birth, even as we anticipate His return at

the completion of God's Kingdom. In Advent, we wait. But there's no reason that our preparations and our waiting can't include some parties, cooking, shopping, and coming together with friends and families. I don't really have a problem with that.

If the celebration of Christ's birth softens people and brings them together in some sense of joy and peace on earth, then that's a good thing; And more of that is better. In joy and peace, we experience the presence of God... and God with us, being reconnected to God in the world in the birth of Jesus Christ, is ultimately what Advent and Christmas are about.

So, rather than resist the secular coopting of Christmas, this year, I will embrace it. Since the world is rushing to Christmas, then we will join them. But let's do so with an eye towards this season of preparation, for the coming of the Christ-child into the world and for His anticipated return as the Kingdom of God comes to completion.

One of my favorite things about this time of year, has always been the Christmas movies and television specials. When TBS runs their *24 Hours of A Christmas Story*, I generally end-up watching about half of it. I know that movie backwards and forwards, so I can step right into the story without any explanation, whenever I turn it on. Same goes with *Christmas Vacation*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

But it just wouldn't be Christmas without those old, animated TV specials that started back in the 60's and have been running annually ever since. It's been especially fun introducing my own children to them and piling onto the couch to watch them as a family. When I think of the ones that mean the most to me, I realize they all have deep theological meanings that emphasize, rather than distort the messages of Christmas and the themes we celebrate as we prepare for it's coming.

In this season of Advent, I will tell you about three of my favorites and why they are such powerful stories for, not just secular Christmas celebrations, but for our own preparations to receive the infant Christ. I'll count them down like a top three, the first one today and the rest as we move through Advent. Number three on our countdown is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Now these days, you can buy these specials on disc or stream them online, but back in the day, you had to wait until they came on TV, just once a year. And it was so exciting. There would be a special logo that would fill the TV screen with some jaunty music and then a voice would intone: "Tonight's Episode of *Columbo* will not be seen so that we can bring you this *special* presentation."

Then the title would fill the screen and the Who's, would start singing their familiar "Fahoo-Forae, Dahoo-Dorae" and we knew our year-long wait was over. Then the sonorous voice of Boris Karloff would commence the narrative:

*Every Who down in Whoville, liked Christmas a lot,
But the Grinch (Bum-Bum!) 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, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight,
it could be his head wasn't screwed on just right,
but I think that the most likely reason of all,
may have been that his heart was two sizes, too small.*

*But whatever the reason his heart or his shoes,
he stood there on Christmas Eve hating the Whos.
Staring down from his cave with a sour Grinchy frown
at the warm lighted windows below in their town.¹*

The story follows our green Grinch anti-Santa as he hatches a plan to steal Christmas from the Whos. Not the day mind you, but all of the trappings that he believes defines the day. So, he sews himself a fake Santa Clause suit and sneaks into Whoville on Christmas Eve. He slips into their homes while they are sleeping and begins filling large sacks with all their Who-Christmas decorations and food, and presents; stuffing them one by one up the Chimneys, and loading them onto a sleigh pulled by his poor, little dog Max, who is fittingly, if unconvincingly, disguised as a reindeer.

In the execution of his plan, we see him engage in some of the most underhanded, and cunning deeds imaginable. He commits criminal impersonation, breaking and entering, vandalism, larceny, and I'm pretty sure when he's riding that sleigh down the mountain he is exceeding the speed limit.

Think too, of the risk he takes to hatch his plan. What if someone wakes up while he's burgling their house? Who knows what the gun laws are like down in Whoville? At one point, he is surprised by a little child who has awoken to the sounds of his work and who comes out to see what is happening. She mistakes him for the real Santa Claus, and when she asks why he's stealing her tree, he tells her that he's not. He's just taking it to the North Pole to fix a light that won't light on one side. "I'll fix it up there, and I'll bring it back here." Add deceit and dishonesty to a child to the list.

And that's not the worst of it. After he cleans out every living room, empties every refrigerator, steals every bit of the Whos Christmas stuff, he takes it all up to the top of Mount Crumpit to dump it.

But before he does, as he stands at the precipice, he waits to hear the sounds of grief; the weeping and wailing he expects will come drifting up the mountain from the little town as the Whos awake to the realization "that no Christmas is coming."

Standing there atop Mt. Crumpit, as the first light of Christmas morn breaks over the horizon, he watches stunned as the Whos come together in their town square, hold hands, and begin singing in Christmas Joy.

*He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming, it came.
Somehow or other it came just the same.*

*And the Grinch with his Grinch feet ice-cold in the snow,
stood puzzling and puzzling. How could it be so?
It came without ribbons. It came without tags.
It came without packages, boxes, or bags.*

*He puzzled and puzzled '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.*

¹ Geisel, Ted. *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. The Cat in the Hat Productions/MGM Television, 1966.

*Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.*²

And we see his eye color change from red to blue and we learn that his heart grew three sizes that day, which is actually a serious medical condition that he needs to see his physician about immediately.

But he is changed, and he decides not to dump the Who's Christmas stuff. And then, with his abnormally large heart, he actually prevents that sled from falling, and turning it around, rides it back down into town blowing his trumpet and giving back all of the things he had stolen the night before. And even though one might have expected his appearance that morning to have been greeted by the authorities who probably should have locked him away for an awfully long time, the Whos actually welcome him and allow him to sit at table with them and share their celebration.

The story tells us that the Grinch finally understood the true meaning of Christmas... but then the show doesn't really tell us, the audience, what that is, except to imply that presents and decorations are not what Christmas is about. But in the story, we can see it, if we're paying attention.

See, if the Grinch only teaches us that Christmas is about more than consuming and buying and getting, then that would be a noble lesson. But there is more. For those of us in tune with the Gospel, we can plainly see that there is Advent good news for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see. Zechariah prophesies at the dedication of his son John saying:

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The promise of the Christ-child for whom we prepare, is the promise of salvation from our Sin, and reconciliation with God, no matter how deep that sin runs, or how high or how wide. In the figure of the Grinch, and in his transformation, we find the message of salvation and redemption that is the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You see, it is easy to find in the Grinch just the villain of a children's Christmas story. This is just a cartoon, after all. In fact, one author argues that we, the viewers, are meant to enjoy the Grinch's crime. "...the wicked curl of his grin when he thinks up his plan, [and] the sheer fun he seems to be having while pursuing his "wonderful awful idea," draws the viewer in, establishing a kind of weird empathy."³

But one could argue that in the Grinch we see the worst kind of evil. He hasn't been threatened by the Whos. If so, we could maybe argue that he acts in self-defense. He doesn't need or want the things he steals from them. He isn't plotting to keep them and turn his mountain cave into some sort of Who Christmas themed palace. He doesn't want to profit from his plan, either. He isn't going to sell the things he steals and pocket the money. He isn't even meaning to re-distribute what he takes like Robin Hood, stealing from the Who's and giving to the "Whoevers."

² *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, 1966

³ Jerome, Copulsky E. "The Grinch and I." *Tablet Magazine*, Nextbook, Inc., 23 Dec. 2008, www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/1294/the-grinch-and-i.

No, his sole intention is to steal everything that he associates with the Whos' Christmas joy and throw it all off the highest mountaintop he can find. He doesn't want the stuff. He only wants to see the Whos suffer. Let that sink in for a moment. Here in the midst of a classic children's tale, lies the dark heart of depravity. The banality of evil in its purest form. The Grinch is driven by the singular desire to steal the joy of others and to cause them pain.

The Grinch cannot redeem himself, but God can. When God breaks into the world in the life of this small child, light is brought into the darkest hearts. Watching the Grinch as morning comes and the light of Christmas fills the world around him, we can see Zachariah's words embodied:

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

But the Grinch is not just shown the error of his ways. The realization that we are sinners leads to confession, but confession is only the beginning. We are then called to repentance which means more than simply admitting our sins, it means working to live in a changed way that refuses to indulge those sins any longer.

Zacchaeus doesn't just own his shortcomings as a tax collector who cheated his neighbors, he changes his behavior and gives back what he has taken plus interest.⁴ Matthew doesn't just renounce his own tax-collector past, he gives up everything to follow Jesus.⁵ Saul doesn't just acknowledge that he has sinned in persecuting Jesus' followers, he changes his name to Paul, turns his life around and dedicates himself to preaching the gospel.⁶

Author Jerome Copulsky writes "I wonder whether *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* intends for us to be seduced by the Grinch, becoming a conspirator in his crimes, in order to discover, in a most Pauline manner, our own sinfulness, and thereby participate more fully in the Grinch's redemption."⁷ When we see the Grinch transformed and we see him return the things he has taken, we should be reminded of the power of Christ that breaks into our lives to change us, too, and of our own responsibility to turn away from our own sins and sinfulness to allow ourselves to be the people that we were created to be.

The final act of the Grinch's redemption is his reconciliation with the people of Whoville. At the beginning of the story he is physically separate from them; he at the top of his mountain, they in the valley far below. Now, the physical distance is closed, and he is welcomed at the table, where he, himself, carves the roast beast.

The story that begins in alienation and separation, ends in fellowship and reconciliation. And believe it or not, that is our story, too. And yes, we are meant to see ourselves as the green, selfish, slightly broken Grinch. And we are meant to commiserate with his plot to destroy that which aggravates him most deeply. But in the end, we are also meant to see ourselves as the ones who are changed by the deep and abiding love of God most perfectly expressed in the life of the Christ-child, whose birth we celebrate and whose return we await even now. And as we prepare to dine together at the table of God, we rejoice that we

⁴ Luke 19:1-10, NRSV

⁵ Matthew 9:9, NRSV

⁶ Acts 9:1-22, NRSV

⁷ Copulsky, Jerome E., *The Grinch and I*

❖ 6 ❖

too have been redeemed; that we too have been reconciled to God and one another; and that we too are set free from our sins and given new life.

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