

A few years back, I came down with the flu during Holy Week. But the worst of it hit me on Easter morning. And at my sickest that morning, I remember how everything just seemed wrong. For while in one sense everything seemed normal, at the same time nothing seemed quite right. That is because the sun had come up that morning at just the right time. The birds had begun chirping exactly on cue. And just like every other Sunday morning, there was the sound of cars in the church parking lot and joyful voices as people greeted each other. But as I laid in my bedroom, too sick to even get up, something just seemed wrong about it all. At this time last year, many people felt the same way. Holiday celebrations were cancelled or were so modified they just didn't seem the same as in years past. Families did not get together like they had just a year prior. And even the lights and sounds of the season seemed muted.

For some people that is how this time of year always feels. They see the brightness of the lights but feel darkness casting its shadow over their souls. They hear the songs of joy but do not feel joy in their own spirits. And they see the smiles on people's faces but are not able to smile themselves. As we come to the end of 2021, we may have similar feelings. For while our holiday celebrations have not been cancelled this year we may still feel out of sorts participating in them. We may see the lights shining but feel the brightness muted. And we may hear songs of joy being sung but not feel joy in our souls.

I felt that way this past Friday. I had to run out for something, but it did not seem like the joyful first day of Christmas shopping. The store was playing Christmas music but it seemed like no one noticed. And there were Christmas items on display but it seemed like they were there as part of an after-Christmas sale for all the attention they received. Even people's faces didn't seem happy. As a result the air was filled with the feeling that everything still feels wrong.

Given that this is the state of affairs as we enter Advent in 2021, we are going to turn to the imagery of someone Theodor Geisel once said always felt that way as Christmas approached. For Geisel (better known by his pen name Dr. Seuss) always felt that way himself. So as Christmas approached one year he decided to try to exercise that demon by writing a short story. He aptly titled it The Grinch Who Stole Christmas because every year the Grinch like feeling that everything was wrong seemed to steal away his Christmas spirit. The story touched a nerve. People responded. People resonated. And they then retold his story decade after decade, turning it into movie adaptations, and eventually into a holiday program at Universal Studios Theme Park. And the reason for all that resonance is simple: there is a bit of "The Grinch" in all of us.

Fortunately, we do not have to let our grinch-like tendency rule our lives or ruin our holidays. For like the Grinch, we can change! We can be transformed. And we can be saved by the message of what this season is really all about. To help us have such a 'conversion experience' as we come to the end of a second year of grinch-enducing pandemic struggles, we will move through an Advent worship series titled The Heart That Grew Three Sizes: Finding Faith in the Story of the Grinch. It was created by Matt Rawle to invite people to hear in the imagery of Dr. Seuss's famous character what God says to us about preparing our heart for the celebration of Christmas. For that is what the season of Advent is all about: allowing our heart to grow in such a way that we are able to better

walk with the One who offers us eternal life.

For even in the midst of the darkness of this lingering pandemic, God invites us (as we sing in a famous Christmas carol) to “*prepare room*” for Him in our hearts. He invites us to “*receive our King*” once again. And He invites us to work to not “*let sins and sorrow grow*” or “*thorns infest*” the ground of our hearts. For this is the only way to allow Christ to rule our lives with “*truth and grace*,” and not only help us experience “*the wonders of His love*,” but also the joy He wants to give us when Christmas finally arrives. So let’s begin to look at how to let God grow our hearts three sizes by finding faith in the story of the Grinch.

To begin to do that, let us turn to the gospel passage that is traditionally assigned to the first Sunday of Advent this year. It comes from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel, and tells us what Jesus said when He spoke about what biblical scholars call “the end times,” the events that will occur in the time right before Jesus returns. For according to Jesus, this time will include things like people seeing “*signs in the sun, moon, and stars*,” people observing the “*roaring and tossing of the sea*,” and people witnessing “*heavenly bodies*” being shaken. Which sounds horrible.

But it is only really horrible if we are not seeking to have our faith grow even in the midst of turbulent times. That is because when we listen to what Jesus said in this passage carefully, we notice that He not only said a time is coming when everything will seem wrong (and when we will know with certainty that “*the kingdom of God is near*”), He also said we should make sure our hearts are not “*weighed down*” when it happens. He said we should make sure our souls are not burdened by “*the anxieties of life*” that will lead up to it. And He said we should make sure our minds are seeking to “*escape*” the darkness of the calamities that will befall us as the end rolls in. For Jesus also said that “the END times” will be the beginning of a new realm of time.

We see this in what John writes in Revelation, saying he “*saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people. . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes. [and] there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’*” And then John writes that “*He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’*” The best news about that promise, however, is that we do not have to wait until the Second Coming to experience the new chapter of life that the Lamb offers us.

At the beginning of His ministry on earth, He announced that “*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*.” Throughout His ministry on earth, He told people they needed “*ears to hear and eyes to see*” that the kingdom had already arrived. And at the end of His earthly life, He proclaimed “*it is finished*” because He had done everything necessary to open the door to new life to everyone willing to walk through it.

To figure out how to do that, let’s turn back to the imagery of The Grinch. For as the story opens, Seuss writes that “*every WHO down in WHOville liked Christmas a lot . . . but the Grinch who lived just north of WHOville . . . did NOT*.” And it wasn’t just that the Grinch didn’t LIKE Christmas. The

Grinch HATED Christmas. As Seuss then tells the Grinch's story, he does not say however why he hated Christmas. And while subsequent movie versions all have stated reasons for his hatred, each one came to the same conclusion: his hatred (however it came about) wasn't helpful. Each movie said it didn't make the Grinch's life better to carry around it around. And each movie showed how expressing his hatred didn't take away the pain of what had caused it. What's was worse, the Grinch's hatred for Christmas led him to also hate the WHOS.

We hear this when Seuss writes so "*whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes, Grinch stood there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos.*" Which is what happens in a person's life when they allow hate to have a presence in their hearts: it starts in one part and then soon fills the whole thing, moving from one target to another until it makes a person's heart "*two sizes too small.*"

The reason for this is how God created us to live. For "*God is love,*" as the Apostle John reminds us. And because of that, John also tells us in his epistle that "*everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God,*" and "*whoever does not love does not [therefore] know God.*" Which relates to the consideration of what we should do when nothing seems right. That is because "*whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.*"

Which is exactly the problem in which the Grinch found himself. For as we go through life we encounter difficulties. We run into problems. And we have hurtful things happen to us - often at the hands of those John calls "*a brother or sister.*" Sometimes that "*brother or sister*" is literally related biologically. But sometimes they are just a fellow worker, a fellow church member, or a neighbor. But no matter who they are, they do things that hurt us because they are sinners. And in response, because we are also sinners, we get angry. And in our sinfulness, we can then also let our anger turn to hatred. First toward the person who hurt us. And then all too often toward others who had nothing to do with the original harm done to us. Eventually, we get to the point where in our anger every thing - and every one - seems wrong.

That is because unlike God, we cannot hate the sin but love the sinner. The two things get mixed up in our mind just like the hatred the Grinch had for Christmas got mixed up with how he felt toward the Whos themselves. But then something happened. After the "*wonderful awful idea*" his hatred spawned couldn't stop Christmas from coming, he had a revelation. And that revelation Seuss wrote is that "*maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store; maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more.*" For as Christmas, as Dr. Seuss well understood, is the proclamation that God is love, and those who seek to celebrate Christmas must let God's love permeate who they are, and how they interact with others - even when those others do not act in loving ways toward us.

As we think about that, just imagine how different our nation might be this Advent if over the last several years those who "*claim they love God*" (to use John's words) responded to the issues that came up in our land by refusing to allow hatred to rise up in their hearts. Imagine how the responses to brutality and discrimination toward people of color might have been different if those who "*claim they love God*" had shown that love in practical ways. Imagine how the responses to the news that a dangerous virus was spreading around the world might have taken a different route if those who

“*claim they love God*” had said loud and clear that wearing a mask and getting the vaccine were acts of love toward our “*neighbor.*” And imagine how we right here at Christ Church might have responded differently to all those issues if we - like the Grinch after his revelation - fully understood (and were willing to act on the belief) that “*maybe Christmas . . . doesn’t come from a store; maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more.*”

We see this in a series of statements that has been tied to Mother Theresa, although it was probably not something she actually wrote. And it lays out how to let God help our heart grow three sizes, how to find faith even in the hatred that swirls around us (and sometimes within us), and - most of all - how to discover how to let Christmas mean just “a little bit more.” It goes like this:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

***Forgive them anyway.***

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

***Be kind anyway.***

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

***Succeed anyway***

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

***Be honest and sincere anyway.***

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

***Create anyway.***

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

***Be happy anyway.***

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

***Do good anyway.***

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

***Give your best anyway.***