

In the book God Laughs, William Goodwin tells the story of how he once sang in a choir for a short time. And it was a short time because at his 3<sup>rd</sup> rehearsal he was the only baritone present. Part of the way through the rehearsal, the choir director said to him “*Let's hear the baritone.*” So William belted out a verse of the hymn they were practicing. The director then turned to the rest of the choir, and said “*let's try it without the baritone.*” Which they did. After practice, the director took William aside. Then she put her arm around him and said, “*What this church needs are more ushers.*” Which is how William became an usher.

Whether a person has a voice like an angel, or can't carry a tune in a bucket, most people like to sing. It raises our spirits. It gets us excited. And it usually brings joy. But for any particular person, on any particular day, it may feel like there is nothing to sing about. I saw this last week as I did my Christmas shopping, got groceries, and ran errands. In each store, there were carols playing over the loudspeakers. In one store, I heard Good Christian Friends Rejoice. But I did not hear anyone rejoicing “*with heart and soul and voice.*” In another I heard He is Born. But no one was figuratively playing the “*oboe and bagpipes merrily.*” And in yet another I heard Joy to the World. But not a single soul was trying to “*repeat the sounding joy.*”

Given that this is the state of affairs we continued to find ourselves in when we began Advent, we have been using the imagery of someone Theodor Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) once said always felt that way as Christmas approached: himself. So as Christmas approached one year he tried to excise that demon by writing a story titled The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. The story touched a nerve. People responded. People resonated. And then they retold his story decade after decade because there is a bit of “The Grinch” in all of us. And as a result of that fact, it is all too easy for us to lose our joy - even in the midst of the joyful carols of the season.

To figure out how to keep our grinch-like tendencies from ruling our lives and ruining our holidays, we have looked at the need to push hate out of our hearts. For when we allow hate in our hearts it begins in just one spot but soon fills the whole thing until it makes it “*two sizes too small.*” On the second week, we looked at how the trappings of Christmas can sometimes make us feel melancholy rather than hopeful, so we need to remember that Christmas “*doesn't come from a store.*” For “*Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more.*” Last week, we looked at how the light of God's love “*shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it*” only when we let Jesus reign in our lives. And the way we let Jesus reign in our lives is by making the commitment to “*make straight the path*” for God to not only offer US the gift of salvation but also enable us to work with Him to offer the gift of salvation to others. All of which can lead us toward having our heart grow “*three sizes.*”

But there is one more we need to do to actually have our heart “*grow three sizes.*” We see this too in Dr. Seuss's grumpy character. We have to let joy be our song! For when there is no joy in our heart, there is no song. That is because when there is no joy in our heart it gets filled with other things - hatred (as we already thought about), envy, jealousy, greed. And when we let our heart be filled with those things instead of joy, we end up like the Grinch: “*staring down from his cave with a sour, Grinchy frown at the warm lighted windows below in the town.*”

For according to Seuss, each Christmas Eve the Grinch would not only grow sour as he thought about the Whos down below Mt. Crumpet getting ready to put up mistletoe, hang stockings, and eat their “rare *WHO-roast beast*,” he also increasingly dreaded that they’d soon do “*something he liked least of all! [For] every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing, and stand hand in hand, and . . . start singing.*” That is because their singing, and the joy that was causing them to sing, would remind the Grinch of his own lack of joy. And as a result of the reminder one year, The Grinch had the “*wonderful, awful idea*” that if there was no joy in his soul, he would take it away from everyone else.

But as everyone who had heard the story knows, the Grinch expected that when the Whos saw that he had stolen everything HE thought made Christmas seem like Christmas “*their mouths would hang open a minute or two, then the Whos down in Whoville would all cry BOO-HOO.*” But they didn’t cry. So instead “*he did hear a sound rising over the snow. [And] it started in low. Then it started to grow. But this sound wasn’t sad.*” In fact, “*this sound sounded MERRY.*” And it was merry because the Whos knew something: Christmas isn’t about the trappings we use to celebrate what God began to do in Bethlehem so long ago. For “*Christmas . . . means a little bit more.*” But it only means more if we let joy be our song. We see this in the passage from Luke’s gospel where we heard about two women who found themselves in dire circumstances.

The first was woman Elizabeth. Elizabeth was devout. Her husband was a priest, so she made sure she lived in harmony with his leadership role. But despite her faithfulness, she had not been able to have a child. That made her the object of ridicule and gossip, as the people in that day believed children were a sign of righteousness and God’s blessing, and - conversely - the lack of children a sign of unrighteousness and God’s punishment. But when Mary showed up on her doorstep, the fact that she was faithfully walking with God became obvious. That is because when she “*heard Mary’s greeting . . . the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*” And the Holy Spirit not only came upon her, He enabled her to prophesy that “*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!*”

The second woman was Mary. While younger than Elizabeth, Mary was also devout. And while her husband was not a religious leader, and she hadn’t even had a chance to order her life in any way that was in harmony with anything because she and Joseph were still only betrothed, she chose to trust God and told the angel “*I am the Lord’s servant . . . may your word to me be fulfilled.*” And then, as we heard in the passage from Luke, Mary was also filled with the Holy Spirit and uttered the words biblical scholars call “The Magnificat.”

In both cases, there was a woman who found herself in dire circumstances. Dire circumstances do not typically produce joy. To get joy in their dire circumstances, and to allow it to help them to say the things they did, Elizabeth and Mary had to choose to let joy be their song. And we know they did that choosing because of what Luke tells us Mary said in her words: “*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” For a person doesn’t automatically glorify the Lord. It is a choice that has to be made. So Mary made that choice.

And the reason she made that choice rather than allow her dire circumstances to plunge her into darkness is because she knew that the choice to let joy be our song is part of what it means to be a person of faith. That is because Mary knew the writer of Psalm 33 said we should “*sing for joy in the LORD.*” She knew the writer of Psalm 68 said we should “*shout joyfully to the Lord.*” And she knew the writer of Psalm 98 said we should “*praise [God] with songs and shouts of joy!*” So she made the choice to let joy be her song and let the Holy Spirit take that choice and turn it into the song of joy that would be known - and sung by others - throughout the ages.

As we gather together today the need to let joy be OUR song stands starkly in front of us. That is because 21 months after we first had the word “pandemic” enter our daily vocabulary, we still find ourselves in dire circumstances. Covid has not only failed to magically disappear, it has mutated into more transmittable strains. Political divisiveness has not only continued, but has intensified. And the sin of discrimination has not only persisted despite decades of work to eradicate it, but has remained stubbornly present even in the hearts of people who say they believe the Apostle Paul was divinely inspired when he wrote that to God “*there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female.*” To make the choice to let joy be our song so that our heart grows three stories and we not only find faith in the story of the Grinch but also in - and through - the words of God in the book we call the Bible, it might be helpful to hear the story of a boy named Paul.

Paul’s family was one of the first in their neighborhood to get a wooden box on the wall that allowed them to talk with people in far away places. Paul listened with fascination as his parents used it. And he was especially pleased to learn that inside that magical device was an amazing person named “Information Please.” There wasn’t anything “Information Please” did not know or couldn’t do. Paul’s first personal experience with “Information Please” came when he was home alone and hit his finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, and he didn’t know what to do to make it stop hurting. Then he thought of the box. So he grabbed a stool, climbed up on it, took off the receiver, and said “Information Please” into the mouthpiece.

A voice replied, saying “*Information.*” “*I hurt my finger,*” Paul wailed. “*Is your mom home?*” “*No,*” Paul cried. “*Can you open your ice-box?*” the voice asked. “*Yes,*” Paul cried. “*Then get some ice and put it on your finger.*” Paul did. And it helped. After that Paul called “Information Please” a lot. And she helped him. With his geography. With his math. And with what to feed his pet chipmunk. And when Paul’s canary died, she gently told him “*Always remember that there are other worlds to sing in.*” But when Paul was 9 years old, his family moved to Boston.

Years later he was on his way to college, and his plane had a stopover in his old hometown. So he went to a phone booth, picked up the receiver, and said “Information Please.” A familiar voice replied. And from somewhere deep in his memory, he said “*Could you tell me how to spell the word ‘fix?’*” There was a long pause. Then the voice replied “*I hope your finger is healed.*” Paul laughed. “*Do you have any idea how much you meant to me when I was a boy?*” he asked. “*I wonder,*” the voice said, “*if you know how much your calls meant to me! I never had children and I used to look forward to your calls so much.*”

Paul told her how much he had missed her and asked if he could call again when he was back in town. *“Please do,”* she said, *“just ask for Sally.”* Three months later, Paul was back in town. So he dialed the operator, and asked for “Information Please.” But a different voice answered. So he asked for Sally. *“Are you a friend?”* the new voice asked. *“Yes,”* Paul said. *“I’m sorry to tell you,”* the new voice said, *“but Sally died 5 weeks ago.”* That news saddened him. But before he could hang up, the new voice asked *“Is your name Paul?”* *“Yes,”* he said, curious at how she could know his name. *“Sally left a message for you. It says the next time Paul calls tell him ‘There are other worlds to sing in.’ He will know what I mean.”*

There is indeed another world to sing in. It is called heaven. And God wants us to one day be able to sing for joy in that world. Which is why it is so important for us to make the choice to let joy be our song. For when we make that choice even in the dire circumstances that can come upon us in this fallen and sinful world we are preparing ourselves - as Psalm 33 instructs - to *“sing for joy”* in that world. We are preparing ourselves - as Psalm 68 instructs - to *“shout joyfully to the Lord”* in such a way that we can join those who already have gone before us to that place. And we are preparing ourselves - as Psalm 98 instructs - to *“praise [God] with songs and shouts of joy”* not only so we might benefit, but also so those around so hear God’s joy in the song of our lives that they feel invited to receive the blessings God wishes to bestow upon them by making the choice to let joy be their song by entering into relationship with God. So let’s make the choice this day to let joy be our song.