



Not Everyone Gets Into It

Mark 1:1-8

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It is official - the Advent season is here in Old Town! Last weekend, the Town Crier called the season to order and the Town Hall Christmas tree was lit, and yesterday the city celebrated and welcomed the season in with the Scottish Walk and the Holiday Boat Parade of Lights. We had a number of folks who joined together last Sunday to kick off Advent as we decorated this space – hanging the banners, the garland, the wreaths, and setting up this beautifully brand new Christmas tree. (Praise God, we have a tree that isn't weeping at the top!)

I don't know about you, but when I see the decorations being hung, the trees being lit, and the lights glistening through the evening up and down King Street, I can't help but to hear voices singing in my head – and that statement needs no Amen corner or retort – but the voices sing, "Fahoo forays, dahoo dorays. Welcome Christmas, bring your light. Fahoo forays, dahoo dorays, welcome in the cold of night!" It is the voice of the Whos down in Whoville, who welcome Christmas with song and with decorations of whoboohoo bricks and pantookas on the ceilings, fuzzle fuzz on the trees, and wuzzle wuzz on aunts and uncles. There's something energetic about the Whos as they prepare for the season that calls for our viewing pleasure every year.

While the book was first published in 1957, what made Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* famous was the television production, which first aired in the best decade ever for Christmas cartoon productions – the 1960s. Did you know the 60s were famous for holiday specials? First, you had *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, which aired in 1964, then *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which aired in 1965, then *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* aired in 1966, and then the decade finished off with *Frosty the Snowman*, which first aired in 1969. No, I wasn't here to watch them on their release date like many others, but I have seen them all.

The boys and I watched *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* last week – the original, not the Jim Carey remake – and they enjoyed it so much they made me start it over so we could watch it again. And then they watched it again the next night. There's something captivating about it; there's something about the short production that beckons one into the holiday spirit. It's such a fascinating story, in that, while it's not overtly Christian (I mean, there's no mention of faith, Jesus, a manger, or any of the birth narrative's characters), it has some close connections to the invitation of God in the advent of Christ. Truly, if one is to but open their eyes and ears, one can hear and see that in the midst of this children's book turned video, there is a not so subtle invitation to faith in the Advent season.

At the risk of ruining the movie for you, and at the risk of making it far more meaningful for you, we're going to spend some time with Dr. Seuss and the Grinch this Advent, and consider the not-so-subtle connections of the Who's story with the Biblical story of Christ's birth, and see that the Grinch isn't just a fun seasonal flick, but it's a reminder of the hard work of Advent.

Perhaps we should start there – “the hard work of Advent.” For many – perhaps for most – the season of Advent is little more than a time of preparation to ensure the house is adorned and the food is ready so that, come Christmas day, we can celebrate the feast of the birth of Christ. There is only one other day in the Christian year to elicits such celebratory feasting – the feast of Christ’s resurrection on Easter. But unlike Christmas, Easter doesn’t come with a 25-day calendar that elicits merriment in preparation. We may set up minimal spring-y decorations for Easter, and we may dye eggs and prepare a ham, but we don’t spend thousands of dollars on household decorations, lights and blow-up figurines for the yard, or take out pay-day loans to pack presents under a giant decorated egg with a bunny on top like we do the tree with the star.

If you know what precedes Easter, you may not think twice about why we don’t have such a celebratory season leading up to Easter Sunday. The season that precedes Easter is a 40-day period we call Lent. Lent is an intentional time of acknowledging our humanity and our *brokenness* in preparation to receive the gift of new life in the resurrection of Christ. While the Easter gift is well worth the celebration, focusing for forty days on our mortality hardly seems energizing enough for us to decorate the house. Not to mention, boiled eggs don’t quite have the same seasonal aroma as evergreens.

Yet, steeped in our historical tradition, Easter and Christmas have not always had such stark contrasts in atmosphere. Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the season of Advent did not begin as a time of celebration and merriment. And perhaps some of our Advent traditions make more sense when understood in the historical context of preparing for Christ’s birth.

As a dedicated season of preparation, Advent dates back to the mid-first century, just 400-500 years after Christ’s birth. The historical invitation of the church during Advent stems from the Biblical text, such as we read here in Mark 1:1-8.

In Mark’s Gospel, we don’t have the warm and fuzzy Hallmark narrative of Christ’s birth. There are no angels; there are no shepherds; there’s no manger or inn keeper; there are no farm animals. In Mark’s Gospel, we are given but one introductory line that tells us what is happening. This is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The introduction of Christ is grounded in the historical text of the faith. While verse two says “as is written in the prophet Isaiah,” Mark’s quotation is actually pulling from Isaiah, Malachi, and Exodus. Using a mash-up of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, Mark is grounding Christ’s birth in the historical promise of good news by God for God’s people. This isn’t just *some* good news, this is *the* good news – it is *the* fulfillment of the promise of those who have come before that assures God’s people that God will provide peace and an end to oppression. At Christ’s advent, this ancient promise, steeped in the faith tradition, is being claimed by a single voice – John the baptized.

John is a bit of a cook (I mean that in the most endearing way). John doesn’t live in the city among the people, but instead lives out in the Judean countryside. He wears camel’s hair, a leather belt, and eats locusts and wild honey. He isn’t exactly the person you want your child to bring home as a potential spouse.

Yet, for as odd as John dresses, and as little as you may want to join him for dinner, John is the one whom God sends to prepare the way of the Lord. John is the one who invites us into the very first season of Advent. John *initiates* Advent for a people of faith who will celebrate and worship Christ as the Lord.

But notice, John's invitation into the season of Advent is not to a time of merriment and joy. John isn't running through the streets of Jerusalem throwing up wreaths, or hanging garlands, or setting up oil candles in the olive trees. Instead, "John the baptized appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John didn't invite people to joyous celebrations, he invited them to repent and to name all the places in their lives where they had failed God and one another. John's invitation to this season of preparation is not to organize for a celebration with great feasts and gifts galore, but to the personal acknowledgement that we are broken and in need of God to do something on our behalf that we might have new life.

In its historical context, Advent (our time of preparing for Christmas) was very much to mimic the season of Lent (our time of preparing for Easter) – it was an invitation to acknowledge how broken we are as humanity, and how much we need God to enter into our lives to bring healing.

And look what Mark says – at the invitation of John to repentance and preparation, the people flocked to the Judean countryside. Perhaps it's hyperbole, maybe not, but Mark says, "all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." The people weren't flocking to some prosperity gospel preacher who was promising great riches and God's eternal blessings – they were flocking to a crazy man dressed in camel's hair who said you are broken, and if you will confess your brokenness, God will bring you healing. How's that for an invitation as we prepare to welcome Christ into our lives?

Though we hardly practice this invitation in our societal norms today, as our cultural celebration of Advent is kicked off by Black Friday and massive holiday shopping, the invitation to repentance is structured into our lives of faithfulness in the church. The idea that we are empty and need to be filled, that the world is a dark place in need of light, these are the foundational tenants of Advent that lead us to the Advent Wreath. When we began this morning, there were no candles lit. Now, thanks to Tim and Tracy, we have one candle lit, and we will continue to light the candles each week until Christmas Eve when we light the Christ Candle. From the Christ Candle we will then spread the light throughout the congregation. From what will have been a dark room, we will see a great light, all due to the entrance of Christ.

We need the light, because we live in a dark and broken world. You're an educated people, I don't need to run through the litany of problems we are facing today. I don't need to open up a Fake News source to tell you all things that are concerning regarding our nation. But perhaps we aren't too dissimilar from the first century Jews who flocked to John the Baptist. When you're in a world that's being dominated by voices that don't seem to represent you – as the Jews were with the Roman government lording over them – you flock to the one who promises a new beginning. There's a reason John the Baptist was so popular (and it wasn't his looks or his stench). John offered a promise that no one else was promising. He offered baptism, which no

one else was offering. He told of the one who was coming who would bring new life, a story no one else was telling.

The reality of the season of Advent is that it is a season where in we are to acknowledge our *need* of a Christ – of a Savior – of the Son of God – who is coming and has come to bring light into the broken world.

In many ways, the decorations, the candles, the garlands, the wreaths ... these are all distractions that seek to mask the brokenness. It's as if we know that we can't fix the brokenness ourselves, but we sure can divert our attention from it by busying ourselves with other things deemed "holiday traditions."

It's interesting in the start of the movie, the Grinch is sitting up in his mountain top cave, looking down upon the city of Whos. They were decorating, singing, and preparing foods. As he looks down, he had no clue why they celebrating. Their decorations did not speak to the rationale behind their busyness. He hates what their doing, because to him it seems like meaningless chatter. And it certainly makes me wonder, for how many of *us* are the seasonal decorations, the baking, and the busyness just meaningless chatter that is used to drown out the sorrow of the world? When people look at how over extended we are, how worn out we are, or how broke we are because of the amount of money we've invested into décor, do they see us like the Grinch saw the Whos? Do they question what can be so worth celebrating, when so many people are hurting in our communities, in our nation, and in our world?

Perhaps the person who is most in touch with reality in the movie isn't the Whos, but the Grinch, who rests in the pain of the truth that the world is broken. And when we face the reality of the brokenness of humanity, it's hard to want to celebrate, and sing, and decorate. But we do it anyway – we decorate, and spend, and shop, and cook – almost as if we can block out the reality of how broken the world is by dressing it up.

But here's the joy of the story – here's the good news that Mark speaks of – even when the decorations are gone ... even when the food has been taken ... even when we remove the fanfare of the seasonal preparations, come the Advent of Christ, we still have a reason to gather and to celebrate with another. Even in our brokenness, even with the pain of humanity, a voice in the wilderness still cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Perhaps the best way to understand the invitation of Advent is to look past the decorations and gifts and foods; it wasn't until all that was removed that the Grinch saw the significance of Christmas for the Whos. Perhaps what may be best is to find the time to get out of the city, to head to the countryside, and to be reminded by the crazy man in the mountains that we need to repent, and acknowledge where and how our lives are broken. Because in our repentance, we can name that the One is coming who will bring with him new life, and a new way, and a great light to outshine the darkness of the world.

So I invite you in this season of Advent to find time to pause amid the frantic and joyful preparation to be reminded that God is with us. God is working through us. The story of good news continues among, and in, and with us. The messenger has spoken, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Amen.