



## WHOs Coming to the Manger?

Luke 2:8-20

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December 24, 2018

### Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

### WHO?

Have you ever considered what it means to live in a land of deep darkness?

Over the past four weeks of Advent leading up to this night, here at Washington Street we've been preparing for Christmas using Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. It's a classic storybook turned cartoon video that tells the story of the angry green Grinch who tried to steal Christmas from the Whos in hopes that their boisterous celebration would never come.

As we end Advent and celebrate Christmas, it seems fitting when considering *the Grinch* that the prophet claims this story, this birth, this gift of a child is for people who lived in a land of deep darkness. I don't know that there's a better character to exemplify living in deep darkness than the Grinch himself. Seuss describes the Grinch, offering:

*"You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch. You really are a heel.  
You're as cuddly as a cactus. You're as charming as an eel.  
Mr. Grinch! You're a bad banana with a greasy black peel!*

*You're a monster, Mr. Grinch. Your heart's an empty hole.  
Your brain is full of spiders. You've got garlic in your soul.  
Mr. Grinch! I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole!"*

He's the kind of guy you just want nothing to do with. It's hard to imagine someone living in deeper darkness than the Grinch. He has not only been separated from everyone else, living ten thousand feet up the side of Mount Crumpet, but he is in such a deep darkness that he wants to ruin the joy of others. It's not enough to just not participate, he wants to make the lives of others miserable.

Again, Seuss ensures we know how bad he is:

*"You're a vile one, Mr. Grinch. You have termites in your smile.  
You have all the tender sweetness of a seasick crocodile.  
Mr. Grinch! Given the choice between the two of you I'd take the seasick crocodile!*

*You're a rotter, Mr. Grinch. You're the king of sinful sots.  
Your heart's a dead tomato splotted with moldy purple spots.  
Mr. Grinch! You're a three decker sauerkraut and toadstool sandwich with arsenic sauce!"*

*He's the king of sinful sots.* Make no doubt, this man does bad things. As such, it would be easy to write the Grinch off, to despise the Grinch, to hold animosity in your heart towards the Grinch – he's an outcast who intends to hurt others.

It is exactly this kind of person who Isaiah writes about. Isaiah offers that it is for such people who live in deep darkness that this great light has shined. It is for people such as this – such as the Grinch – that Isaiah prophecies the coming of the child of God.

Good for them, right? We all know someone like the Grinch who needs the gift of new life, the gift of salvation, the presence of light in their life because they are in such darkness. God is doing for them in Christ what they could not do for themselves. Praise God!

But we should not be so quick to pass on the rest of what Isaiah is offering. Yes, the light shines for those who live in such darkness. But after making this proclamation, after saying the child comes for people *such as this*, the prophet goes on to say that a child has been born for *us* ... that a son is given to *us*.

After declaring that the light shines for them – the other – the outcast – the Grinch – Isaiah says, but we are all *that* person. We are all living in deep darkness. We are all *one* as a broken humanity. Isaiah lumps us all together, and says it is for *us* that the child is given. It is for the brokenness in each of our lives, and for our shared brokenness, God gifts this child. And his name shall be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

#### **Luke 2:8-14**

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of

David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.<sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

### ***Good News***

The shepherds are just like the Grinch.

They are probably not quite so green, and they don't really live up on a mountain, but they are about as respected in the first-century community as the Grinch was in Whoville. Shepherds in the ancient near-east society were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. To be a shepherd you had to have exhausted all other job opportunities, and have been kicked out of the community. Shepherds were nomads who had no place to call home. Just look at how Luke introduces them, “In the region where the shepherds were *living* in the fields.” They weren't just taking the sheep out for an evening stroll – the fields were their home. These were not civilized people living among the community, they were outcasts who were told they had no capacity but to care for the livestock.

Into the dark of night, the heavenly host appeared and announced “good news of great joy.”

Rightfully, the shepherds were terrified. People who know they are unwelcome do all they can to avoid detection – often for their own safety. In the early days of the Christian church, meetings of the faithful were held in private homes to avoid detection by the state. Jews in the 1940s hid in basements, closets, and attics to avoid detection by the Nazis. The underground railroad kept African-American slaves out of visibility in an attempt at reaching a free state. Refugees seeking safety try to avoid detection in their escape from a life threatening national crisis.

To such a people as this – to people who know what is best is for them to remain undetected – the host of angels appear and the glory of the Lord shone, and an angel proclaimed, “Do not be afraid.”

Do you know how good the news has to be for this group to *not be afraid*?

For people who are hiding – whether from community at large, or even hiding within their own skin – do you know how good the good news has to be to *not be afraid*?

In order for the news to be *good* news for such as these shepherds, it has to be news that differs from the normal news of society. These are the jaded, the scared, the outcast, and the fearful. These are the unwanted, the wandering, and the homeless. For the news to be good news, it has to speak a promise that does not mimic that of the society that has already labeled them and stigmatized them, that has run them off and sent them out.

“The heavenly host sings of peace, that wholeness of life which God grants to persons and societies through a restoring of balance in all the forces in creation which influence our lives.”<sup>i</sup> This promise of eternal hope, which is proclaimed by the angels, is said to be fulfilled in the birth of a new king – in the child, Jesus. This is what makes it good news – the *good* is in the ears of the hearer, who are being welcomed and invited to share in the joy of the blessing.

And the promise of the good news that the shepherds – the Grinches of society – hear is a proclamation of the goodness of God, and peace to all who God favors. It is a promise of healing for all – a promise of liberation for all – a promise for the freedom of sin for all – and the promise of eternal life for all. It is the good news of Christ that brings light into the darkness for us all.

It is only the news of God’s peace, joy, hope, and love in Christ that produces *good* news for all.

### **Luke 2:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

### ***WHOs Coming?***

There’s something about the celebration of the birth of Christ that is inescapable. The shepherds and the Grinch, they were people who avoided others. They stuck to themselves, and were content in their little corners of the world.

But they both respond to the singing proclamation of the good news the same way. At the news of Christ’s birth, the Grinch to the singing of the Whos, and the Shepherds to the singing of the angels, both have their lives changed. Upon hearing the proclamation, they immediately seek the joy of the celebration of the birth of Christ. The Grinch’s heart grew three sizes, and he immediately turned the sled down the hill to share in the celebration with the Whos. The shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to see the child, which the Lord has made known to us.”

The invitation of the proclamation of Christ’s birth is powerful because it offers the good news of great joy that we all desire – it extends the invitation to new life we all need – it promises the light to shine in the darkest spaces of our lives. This is news we all desire to receive. Like the news of a doctor who says the surgery went well or that the cancer is gone; like the HR personnel who says you’re hired; or the partner who says ‘I love you.’ Only this good news, the good news of Christ doesn’t just elicit personal happiness, it’s news that speaks good news to

all. God's gracious word produces joy and comfort to all of humanity. And at this good news, who can help but to respond with seeking affirmation.

Yet, this story isn't just about the Grinch or the shepherds.

This story is about all of God's created. This story is about the shalom – the peace – the well-being – the wholeness of the world. This story is about a Child who comes to set us all at peace with one another across boundary and division.

Have you ever noticed that when the Grinch, the one who stole everything from the Whos, returns, the Whos welcome him into town? They don't ostracize him for having been a horrible being, they welcome him and set a place at the table for him.

The shepherds weren't physically changed by the angels – they still reek of the pasture – but they are welcomed by Mary and Joseph in the hospital room. They shared the good news of the angels with the family of Christ. Then, having spent time with the holy family, they then went forth, glorifying and praising God.

When we welcome Christ into our world, not only are our personal lives changed – like the Grinch and the shepherds, not only is the darkness of our lives filled with light – but the pain of humanity is healed. The brokenness and animosity we have toward others as a people is removed. The walls that we have constructed between ourselves and others are torn down.

See, this is the good news of great joy to which the chorusers professed. The great joy of God in the gift of Christ proclaims that whoever you are, regardless of what you've done in the past or will do in the future; no matter how piously you've lived or how many commandments you've broken; no matter if you come from economic prosperity or struggle to pay the bills; no matter who you may be, the proclamation of the angel's clarion voice is that there has been born into this world a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

When this promise is realized, the Whos and Grinches commune together; the shepherds are welcomed into the family; and we each – no matter where we have been or where we will go, no matter how right or wrong we are, no matter how left or right we be – we each share in the glory of the eternal One as one body in Christ, who makes new life possible for us each and for us all. For there has been born to us a child, a Son given to us. So let us rejoice for this day is born a Savior, a Messiah, the Lord.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.