



WHOs Singing

Luke 2:8-14

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It's Advent 4 – we're less than 48 hours from Christmas Day. I have a minor anxiety attack just saying that out loud. How many gifts am I tracking to make sure they arrive by tomorrow? How many things do we still have to wrap?

I feel like the fourth Sunday of Advent always gets a bad wrap. (No, that's not a bad Christmas joke.) This fourth Sunday of Advent is tucked in so close to Christmas, it seems like by the time we get here, we're already in the Christmas spirit. It's as if we have already departed from Advent and have begun the celebration of Christ's birth. With so many people travelling for the holidays to be with family and friends, sometime last week every person I saw started offering me a "Merry Christmas" because they knew they wouldn't be here today or tomorrow.

But it's not Christmas yet. And I don't know about you, but I'm not quite ready for it to be Christmas day. There's just a bit too much still to be done. And though there are plenty of things to be done around the house, I'm not talking about the presents, or the meal planning. I mean, there is still work to be done in the hard work of Advent – in preparing myself to welcome the Christ child. There's still some hard spiritual work to be done to really welcome the Son of God on Christmas Day.

To guide our Advent preparation this year, we've been relying on the sage advice of Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. For as odd as it may be, this story, which tells us of the Whos down in Whoville and their floofloovers, and whowhoopers, and tartookas, and gardookas, and their trumtookas, and blumbloopas, their slooslunkas, and their whowonkas ... this odd story of make believe characters and made up words offers some unexpected guidance in preparing ourselves for the celebration of Christmas that now lies just a day and a half away.

To recap – there will always be a Grinch in the mix. Not everyone gets into the seasonal preparation. In truth, the amount of wealth that is spent on presents and decorations is for many people a turnoff. There are people who see the decorations and noise of Christmas as nothing other than that – decorations and noise. They do not see the hope of the season in those who go extravagantly overboard in their preparation. That doesn't mean the preparation is all bad – but it certainly calls for us to wonder, for what are we preparing? For a feast, or for a Savior? For the best gifts, or for the gift of new life? For a perfectly cooked meal, or for a time to gather with loved ones to remember God's Son?

Second, Joseph is like Max (the dog) – he serves as the reindeer, leading the donkey on whom the pregnant Mary rides. At first sight, he wanted nothing to do with the story, and was prepared to dismiss Mary quietly. Yet, being filled with the truth of God's promise, and the knowledge of the child as Immanuel, he jumped into action and fulfilled his role as the one to name the child, connecting Jesus with the lineage of David.

And thirdly, Mary is very much like sweet Cindy Lou Who. She doesn't question what's told her in preparation for the event. She believes, indeed she *knows*, and she has great trust that Christ will be born of her and that her Son will save the nations and that at his birth the lowly will celebrate.

We pick up today with ending of the story.

Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem, Joseph's home town. They were required to return for a Census, which had been ordered by the Roman overlords. They were ready to welcome the child. The angel had spoken to Joseph in his sleep, and he was prepared to be a dad for Jesus. Mary had received Gabriel's promise, she had spent time with her Aunt, and she was now traveling with her husband-to-be and child-to-be. Final preparations were underway.

Things were ready for the celebration.

The Whos had trimmed the tree with Christmas stuff, like bingle balls and whofoo fluff. They had trimmed up the town with googoo gums and bizilbigs and wums. They had trimmed every blessed window and trimmed every blessed door. They had hung pantookas on the ceilings, and piled panpoonas on the floor. Final preparations were underway.

You know what they say about best laid plans?

But really, what's the worst that could happen?

It seems every year it happens – somewhere across the states a news story breaks on the evening news late on Christmas Eve. "A house fire has consumed the home." ... Last year, it happened to a family in East Peoria, Illinois. Over \$200,000 in damage in a house fire that began as they were returning from their Christmas Eve service, likely making the house a near total loss.

We prepare so long for this celebration, expending our time, our energy, any remaining disposable income, and (likely) our sanity ... and what would happen if it all were taken away?

Dr. Seuss imagines:

*"All the Whos were all dreaming sweet dreams without care
When he came to the first little house of the square.*

*"This is stop number one," the old Grinchy Claus hissed,
As he climbed to the roof, empty bags in his fist.*

*Then he slid down the chimney, a rather tight pinch.
But if Santa could do it, then so could the Grinch.*

*He got stuck only once, for a minute or two.
Then he stuck his head out of the fireplace flue*

*Where the little Who stockings hung all in a row.
"These stockings," he grined, "are the first things to go!"*

*Then he slithered and slunk, with a smile most unpleasant,
Around the whole room, and he took every present!*

*Pop guns, pampoogas, pantookas, and drums!
Checkerboards, bizilbigs, popcorn, and plums!*

*And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly,
Stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney.*

*Then he slunk to the icebox. He took the Whos' feast!
He took the Who pudding! He took the roast beast!*

*He cleaned out that icebox as quick as a flash.
Why, that Grinch even took the last can of Who hash!*

*Then he stuffed all the food up the chimney with glee.
"Now," grined the Grinch, "I will stuff up the tree!"*

Sometimes things don't quite go as planned.

They had been travelling for days – it was a 90-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Imagine riding a donkey or walking for what was likely a week long journey, stopping just to sleep at night, all while 9 months pregnant. Can't you just hear Mary, "Joseph, avoid the pot holes!" ... Sounds like a lot of fun.

Perhaps they had been delayed because of the frequent bathroom stops (I mean, a donkey's got to go), but when they arrive to Joseph's family house, they're told there's no room in the guest house. There's no room in the inn. Instead, they are offered a stable in which to make final preparation for the birth.

Things don't always go as planned.

You know the thing about giving birth? At least, you know what I've been told about giving birth (because, let's be honest, that's not my role in this family)? The moment of birth imposes itself upon you. There's no real magic formula in choosing when it will happen. I know you can eat spicy tacos while walking around the mall, making sure to stop for multiple restroom breaks to speed it up, but at the end of the day, it's gonna happen when it's gonna happen.

So it was with the birth of Christ. Mary had not planned to do this in the animal's sleeping quarters. She hadn't even had time to find a midwife in Bethlehem – at least not one her insurance covered. Joseph didn't have time to go into the house to get a fresh baby blanket. They would wrap the child in bands of cloths – perhaps scraps of cloth they found lying around the barn. The Ikea crib was proving difficult to assemble because they couldn't find a flat head screwdriver, so they used a manger - a

feeding trough - for a bed.

See, ready or not, Christ comes. Ready or not, God is sending his Son. Ready or not, Christmas day will arrive. And if you're not careful, you'll be caught off guard. If you're not prepared, you'll find yourself in a miserable place like the Grinch because you won't quite be ready when it arrives.

And I don't mean that the decorations won't be hung – or that you won't have the food prepared – or that the gifts won't be wrapped.

See, when Christmas comes, when we receive the gift of God in the presence of Jesus Christ, the preparation that matters isn't any of those things.

*"It was quarter of dawn. All the Whos still a-bed,
All the Whos still a-snooze, when he packed up his sled,*

*Packed it up with their presents, their ribbons, their wrappings,
Their snoof and their fuzzles, their tringlers and trappings!*

*Ten thousand feet up, up the side of Mount Crumpet,
He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!*

*"Pooh-pooh to the Whos!" he was grinchily humming.
"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!*

*They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!
Their mouths will hang open a minute or two
Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry boo-hoo!*

*That's a noise," grinned the Grinch, "that I simply must hear!"
He paused, and the Grinch put a hand to his ear.*

*And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low, then it started to grow.*

*Fahoo forays, dahoo dorays
Welcome Christmas! Come this way
Fahoo forays, dahoo dorays
Welcome Christmas, Christmas Day*

*Welcome, welcome, fahoo ramus
Welcome, welcome, dahoo damus
Christmas Day is in our grasp
So long as we have hands to clasp*

*But this sound wasn't sad!
Why, this sound sounded glad!*

*Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing without any presents at all!"*

There's a joy in the coming of Christmas that we simply cannot escape. Presents or not, decorations or not, a hospital bed and LDR nurse or not, Christ comes just the same, whether we are prepared for him or not.

And prepared or not, the gift of God in Christ leads us to the joy of proclamation. The Whos sang like the Angels and proclaimed the good news of great joy in song. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors." I think that's what *Fahoo foorays, dahoo dorays* means in the Who language.

The preparation of Advent, the hard work of preparing ourselves, it doesn't lead us to worry if the physical preparation is quite right. No, the hard work of Advent questions not if our *physical* space is ready, it questions if our spiritual self is ready to welcome the one who says nothing you do will be enough. The one who says, no matter how hard you try, you'll always fail. The one who says, no matter how much effort you put into it, it will never be just right. The one who says, try all you want, you'll never be perfect. And the one who says, none of these things matter, because I am coming to be with you. Immanuel – God with us.

That's why the Whos sing amidst the ravaged Christmas decorations. Because they knew, no feast would ever be big enough; no decoration would be pretty enough; no tinsel would be shiny enough. They sang none-the-less because none of that mattered – what mattered is that Christ is born.

That's why the angels sing. Because they knew, no matter how broken we may be; no matter how lost we are in the darkness; no matter that we may never be enough. They sang none-the-less because none of that matters – what matters is that Christ is born.

Christmas is just a couple days away – and I hope that you will join the angels and the Whos in singing, because Christ is coming, and is yet among us, to be the light in our darkness, the peace in our turmoil, the hope in our dismay, and the love which binds us all as one with the Almighty.

Glory to God in the Highest Heaven - Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Amen.