



The Grinch: A Little Bit More

Luke 1:57-58, 62-79

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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It is the Advent season that we celebrate this time of year;
A season with a message that offers hope and good cheer;

For into the darkness there comes a great light;

Given by God on that first Christmas night.

We'll explore the meaning of the birth of the Son
Through Scripture and movies – doesn't that sound fun?
Today's film is the Grinch, what a sad, sad guy –
He stole the presents, the trees, even the Christmas pie;
But there's a message for us, as we prepare for the King –
Do you know the story – just listen to the Who's sing:

Fah who foraze! Dah who doraze!
Welcome Christmas, bring your light!
Fah who foraze! Dah who doraze!
Welcome in the cold dark night!

Yes – today we are continuing our Advent series, *Christmas at the Movies*. To help us in this season, a season that provides an intentional time to prepare our lives to welcome once more the birth of Christ, we are going to spend some time digging in to pop culture to find a word of promise – even hidden as it may be – that does not skip out on the hope of the scriptural texts that guide our paths to the manger on Christmas Eve.

Last week, we studied the most comedic of the movies on our list, *Elf*, as Buddy the Elf taught us how the Code of the Elves calls us to be more faithful in our lives as Christian disciples journeying toward welcoming Christ on Christmas morning. Today we turn toward the old short movie, first published in 1966, a Dr. Seuss classic running only 25 minutes long, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. How many of you have seen the movie, or perhaps have read the book?

In Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Grinch, the aged looking green man who lives in a cave at the top of the mountains that overlooked the local village was fretting the upcoming Christmas celebration by the Who's down in Whoville. He was terrified at what the coming day might bring. As the story tells us, the Grinch growled:

"I MUST find some way to stop Christmas from coming!
For Tomorrow, he knew, all the Who girls and boys,
Would wake bright and early. They'd rush for their toys!
And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the Noise!
Noise! Noise! Noise!

That's one thing he hated! The NOISE!"

The noise he hated was the noise we were advised to sing last week from Elf, who offered us that the greatest way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear. The Grinch, he couldn't stand the noise.

It's inevitable, when one is overcome by the power of God's love and filled with the gift of the Spirit, one can not help but proclaim the good news of great joy. This is not a new phenomenon. The Scriptural texts are filled not only with example after example of the voice of instruments and believers singing out in great song at the love of God, but it is a command by God to sing before the Lord. Psalm 100 says to us, "Make a joyful noise before the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness, come before him with songs of praise." Our text today describes for us such a situation where a faithful believer lifted up his voice in a song of praise.

Just a bit of back story to the scriptural text to ensure we're all on the same page regarding what is taking place in this passage in Luke:

The mother Mary had received news from the angel Gabriel that she was to bear a child, whose name was to be Jesus. The angel also told Mary that her relative, a cousin, Elizabeth had also conceived a son, even though Elizabeth was much older in age. Mary, now with child, goes to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Upon meeting, the child Elizabeth is carrying leaps in the womb – an odd but clearly divine motion by the unborn child.

Prior to speaking with Mary, the angel Gabriel had visited and spoken with Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. The angel let Zechariah know that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, whose name was to be John. Zechariah argued with the angel, refusing to believe such an unexpected and unlikely message. When Zechariah left the sanctuary where he had encountered the angel Gabriel, because of his disbelief in the promise of the angel, Zechariah was unable to share this news with those around him – the angel had made him mute; he wasn't able to speak. His voice was not to return to him until after the birth of his son.

John was born about three months after Mary visited Elizabeth. Following the birth, there were a number of neighbors and relatives offering Elizabeth assistance and care with the newborn son. On the eighth day after his birth, the customary time for dedicating the child to God and the common time for naming the child, the relatives and neighbors inquired if the child was to be named for his father, Zechariah. Now, keep in mind, Zechariah was still unable to speak. As the text tells us, Elizabeth shared with those who were gathered that the name of the child was to be John.

The scriptural text regarding the back and forth between Elizabeth and the relatives is short, but I'd argue that it's short only in printed narrative. It seems like an argument that would have been much longer in actuality. See, the family is present, the relatives are there, and Elizabeth has just shared that her son, the newest member in the family lineage, will NOT be named in the customary practice, which would mean taking the name of the father. Elizabeth's indication

that his name would be something other than a family name, that his name was to be John, was not a welcomed response by the family. What followed, but is perhaps not fully recounted in the text, is the family argument to end all family arguments. Perhaps you know how much fun family arguments can be.

The text provides for us only one rebuttal offered by the family to Elizabeth who isn't changing her mind. Still in disagreement with her, the family calls on Zechariah to solve the matter. Thinking Zechariah, even though he couldn't speak, to be more of sound mind than the mother who was trying to name the son with a name that had no family connection, the family looked to Zechariah to confirm that the child's name would in fact be, Zechariah, Jr.

Unable to speak, Zechariah asked for a tablet, and they brought him an iPad ... or the 1st Century equivalent that he might offer his perspective and end the discussion. On the table he wrote, "His name is John."

I want to note two things about Zechariah's response. First, Zechariah's response was different than Elizabeth's. When asked for the name, Elizabeth said, "He is to be called John." Zechariah's response was much more definitive as he wrote, "His name is John." After his argumentative disagreement with the angel who foretold the birth and gave a name for the son to be, Zechariah seems to have no more disagreement remaining. He is all in, and he seems to no longer doubt the word of God as told him by the angel.

Second, immediately following his written exclamation of the child's name, Zechariah's voice returns. Receiving his voice, the text tells us that Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, and he offers this prophecy, a Biblical text that is known as the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah which spans verses 68-79. Filled with belief, filled with the Spirit, filled with awe at God's love, Zechariah is filled with a song that proclaims the truth of God's love. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," he sings. He praises God for continued faithfulness and he names the role his son, John, will play in preparing the world for the advent of Christ.

The back and forth between Elizabeth, the family, the neighbors, and Zechariah is an interesting snapshot of what can perhaps be defined as the interplay between those who are seeking to be faithful and those who do not know faithfulness. For those who did not know the message of the angel – for those who did not know of the promise of God for the child to be born – for those who were unsure of the promise of the angel who had named the child already, the decision to name the child John seemed like a mistake or perhaps a bad decision. The neighbors and family saw the decision to name the child using a non-family-based name as a failure because it broke from the accepted and normalized cultural traditions.

"The entire episode [of the interplay between Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their surrounding community] reminds us of a situation in which many faithful believers stand [today]. They are called to do the unexpected, and perhaps the culturally unacceptable. The pressure of friends and family – which in Elizabeth's and Zechariah's case also represents all kinds of cultural and traditional pressures – conflicts with what they known to be the will of God."ⁱ For Elizabeth and

Zechariah, the conclusion to name their child John isn't a simply making a decision – which is a hard decision to make anyway, naming a child – for these parents, the conclusion to name their child John is a choice to be obedient. Their naming of the child was just their faithful following of God's will, as promised and foretold by the angel.

Now, I know you're likely sitting there wondering, how in the world does this story of Elizabeth and Zechariah connect with the story of the Grinch? We've gone a long way from the rhymes of Whoville, let us return.

The Grinch, looking down upon the village, saw the customary Christmas practices of the Who's as that which defined the Christmas celebration. He saw the decorations, the toys, the trees, the bows, and the food as that which made Christmas happen. So he thought if he could remove the tangible and physical manifestation of Christmas in the town, he could in practice remove Christmas. So the movie offers us what the Grinch decided to do:

“Pop guns! And bicycles! Roller skates! Drums!
Checkerboards! Tricycles! Popcorn! And plums!
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 their last can of Who-hash!”ⁱⁱ

The Grinch, in all his efforts, expected the Whos to wake in the morning to a feeling of darkness. He thought that by taking the items from around their homes that marked the Christmas season, he could take away the joy of the season. He knew the cultural norms that defined the Christmas season for the people, and felt that by taking away the visible traditions, he could in fact take away the celebration which led to the great noise of Christmas that he hated so much.

It's not too hard to understand why the Grinch would think such a thing. Even here in Alexandria and in Northern Virginia, truly in our entire nation, not just in Whoville, those who know the reason for the season often get mixed up in the cultural confusion that identifies gifts, food, decorations, and vacation with the joy celebrated this time of year. If the gifts aren't just right – the ornaments aren't hung correctly – the food is over cooked – or the vacation goes awry – we get into a flurry that shows that our focus is not on the Christ child to come, but affirms the Grinch, that it is the goods we care for most. We given in to the cultural practices – the expected seasonal traditions – far too often as people who claim to believe in a Bible and a Lord that offers a message that is very anti-commercialism and anti-materialism.

In this way, we are *not* like Elizabeth and Zechariah – we are like their community, who bickered at the name of the child. We are too often a people who proclaim a message of God,

people who identify as faithful, but yet a people who do not really exhibit faithfulness. We focus too much on the traditions to be prepared to welcome and participate in the work of God who calls on us to make the love of God as witnessed in Christ known to the world. The work that is represented in Christ's birth is represented in a lowly manger with the shepherds, the outcasts, being those who were invited to be present for the birth of the King.

And then we look at how the story ends – the Whos wake in the morning not skipping a beat.

“Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
was singing! Without any presents at all!
[The Grinch] hadn't stopped Christmas from coming! It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Grinch represents the darkness that is surrounding us – in many ways it represents those who don't know faithfulness because they see as the focus of this season the Christmas tree, and the wreathes, and the bows, and the food, and the jolly old man from the North Pole – but they don't know faithfulness; they don't know that there is something greater that makes this season so special other than commercialized materialism.

The truth of the Grinch is that in the midst of the celebration of Christmas, in acknowledging the purpose and meaning of the birth of light into the darkness, the Grinch went through a transformation. Dr. Seuss tells us that hearing the voice of the Whos singing, the Grinch's heart grew three times that day as he acknowledged that the celebration of the Whos that he despised was not a celebration of simple commotion, but it the result of a deep gratefulness and hope that rooted in the peace and joy of the birth of Christ.

That is the purpose of the Advent Season: we go through this season in expectation of a transformation in our lives. We can be like the Grinch, and believe that the joy and hope is a fading fashion dependent of Christmas decorations – or we can experience the same transformation as the Grinch, and allow the joy of God in the birth of Christ to lead us to be part of the reconciling work of God's grace in the world.

When he woke up that morning and he heard the joy of the Whos in song, when he realized he had not stopped Christmas from coming:

“He puzzled three hours, 'till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
“Maybe Christmas,” he thought, ‘doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas ... perhaps ... means a little bit more!”^{iv}

ⁱ Justo Gonzalez. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Seuss. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* New York: Random House, 1957.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.