

Transformation in Whoville

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on December 20, 2020

Sometimes when I read the Bible, I come away Maybe it's just me, but this year I find myself especially drawn to the classic Christmas stories that are broadcast every year. Each one has something that makes it unique, but as I thought about my favorites, I noticed that all of them emphasize the truth that Christmas is a time of transformation.

In "It's a Wonderful Life," Jimmy Stewart is transformed by experiencing what the world would have been like without him. Rudolph is transformed as he learns to ignore bullies, embrace who he is, and find his true value. Scrooge is transformed by visiting his past and seeing his future, miserable end; and Charlie Brown's transformation is symbolized by the scrawny Christmas tree that turns into a full, perfect tree under the loving care of friends. I love all of those stories, but I believe there is one story that shows the truth about the transforming power of Christmas better than any other outside of the Gospels: The Grinch.

George Bailey, Rudolph, and Charlie Brown are all basically good characters with good hearts who learn to cope with life differently with love and support from friends. Scrooge, on the other hand, is nasty to the core, and his transformation comes through the fear of his own miserable death. But "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" by Dr. Seuss is the only classic Christmas story I know of where a completely nasty creature is transformed by witnessing the **Spirit** of Christmas. It's Christmas itself, stripped of all its trappings, that transforms the Grinch. Do you remember the story?

"Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot.
But the Grinch, who lived just North of Whoville, did not.
The Grinch hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season.
Now please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be perhaps that his shoes were too tight.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.
But whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes,
he stood there on Christmas Eve hating the Whos.
Staring down from his cave with a sour grinchy frown
at the warm, lighted windows below in their town.
For he knew every Who down in Whoville beneath
was busy now hanging a Holly Who wreath.
And they're hanging their stockings' he snarled with a sneer.
Tomorrow is Christmas! It's practically here!
Then he growled with his Grinch fingers nervously drumming.
I must find some way to keep Christmas from coming!"

We begin the story with the Grinch, who hates Christmas so much that he wants to make sure nobody is happy on Christmas. That's a step beyond Scrooge who didn't keep Christmas himself, but at least didn't actively interfere with anybody else keeping it. The goal of the Grinch is to steal

Christmas from the whole town—to make them as miserable as he is—and he cheers himself with the thought of their crying and wailing on Christmas morning. I mean, how twisted is that?

To accomplish his ends, the Grinch sneaks into town, dressed as Santa Claus, and steals everything associated with Christmas. He takes the presents, the Christmas trees, the decorations, the flowers, the food for Christmas dinner, and the logs for their Yuletide fires. Then he hauls the whole lot up to the top of a high mountain to dump it off a cliff.

But just before the Grinch goes to dump the sleigh off the mountain, he stops to listen. He won't be satisfied until he actually hears the sobs and cries of a town in misery—the signal that he has destroyed Christmas—the sign that the happiness of Whoville is under his control. But, to his bewilderment, that's not what he hears. Instead of wailing and crying, the Grinch hears the sounds of joy, as Christmas carols rise into the air, proclaiming the arrival of Christmas.

"He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming, it came.

Somehow or other it came just the same."

This is the thing that transforms the Grinch. He was not transformed by the love of friends—nobody even knew he was there. He was not changed by discovering that he was headed for a miserable end—he was quite pleased with what he had done. The Grinch was transformed by an encounter with something bigger than himself—something that could not be manipulated by human contrivance. Christmas was **associated** with a lot of trimmings, but Christmas **itself** was higher and deeper and more mysterious than all of that. And the Grinch's heart—the heart that had been too small for anything but himself—grew that day to encompass the world.

There's only one other Christmas classic I know of that sends that message. It begins, "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child."

The first century also thought it could steal Christmas. The religious leaders were too worried about competing religious factions to pay any attention. Joseph wanted to disown Mary and a child that was not his, and it took an angel in a dream to convince him otherwise. With the baby due any day, Mary and Joseph had to travel 80 miles to Bethlehem to pay their taxes. When they got there, there was no place to stay, they were too poor to bribe someone for a room, and Mary had to give birth in a stable—not exactly a safe and clean environment at a time when many women died in childbirth. And it didn't end there. Even after they were back home, some foreign astrologers came to King Herod looking for a new baby who would become King of the Jews. Herod went on a rampage, slaughtering every boy under 2 years old he could find, and Mary and Joseph had to grab Jesus, become refugees, and seek asylum in Egypt.

But they couldn't stop Christmas from coming, it came.

Somehow or other, it came just the same.

Christmas without trimmings. A babe in a lowly manger with only a few shepherds paying attention. And the encounter transformed the world.

Christmas is coming...Christ will be born. The Christmas story of all time has begun, pandemics notwithstanding, and you are in it. What part are you playing? What is **your** Christmas story? Are you so depressed that like Jimmy Stewart you want to remove yourself from it all? Or perhaps you're Clarence, the frustrated angel trying to help someone else. Have the bullies convinced you that you're worthless and you're hiding on the Island of Misfit Toys? Maybe you're Rudolph's father, wanting to take back angry words or his mother, worried about his safety. Are you so tired from remembering your past that like Scrooge you are in danger of sleeping through Christmas? Maybe you find yourself with the Cratchits this year, wondering how to put food on the table while trying to care for a loved one. Have you gone as far as the Grinch? so angry with the world that you're ready to burn the whole place down? Or are you in the valley with the Whos, singing carols under the light of a single star? What is **your** story?

Whatever your situation, both the Grinch and Luke have a message for you. No one can steal Christmas. No matter how powerful you are, you can't take it away from someone else; and no matter how poor and weak you are, no one can take it from you. Not even a pandemic can steal it. The Christ Child will be born. There may not be room in your particular inn. It might be too busy in your end of town for you to notice, or you might be too afraid to step outdoors to see a star. There might be a Grinch looking at your loving preparations and resenting your joy enough to try to spoil it. The message of the Christmas story both in Luke and in the Grinch is that Christmas will come anyway. Christ will be born.

It won't matter if you don't have a Christmas tree. It won't matter if there are no presents. It won't matter if there is no food and no fire, if you are with others, or if it's just you and the dog. It won't matter that you're finding warmth in the hay of someone else's stable. The setting cannot be too lowly; you cannot be too poor or too sick, too young or too old. It doesn't matter whether anyone notices or whether anybody cares. Christmas can't be stolen and it can't be stopped.

"He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming, it came.

Somehow or other, it came just the same."

But if, just by chance, you happen to be looking. If you stop what you're doing, whether it be important or trite—if you pause for a moment and put your hand to your ear—you will suddenly find that the air is full of music. There are angels in the unseen, singing all around you. There are hearts overflowing with love—even if they are flowing through Zoom or through prayer. There are Whos down in Whoville, the tall and the small, who are singing—without any presents at all. Are you among them?

Christmas is something bigger than all of us put together. It's God being born into the world—the Word becoming flesh because the Word becoming just words had us confused. It's God saying, you're never alone; I have come to live among you, to struggle with you, and to show you how to find peace when it all goes terribly, terribly wrong.

We don't have to deserve that gift, in fact, we can't deserve it. But we do have to allow it into our hearts; and our hearts may have to expand several sizes to make room for such a vast amount of

love and grace. We do have to pause with our Grinch feet ice cold in the snow, puzzling and puzzling how could it be so? Yet it is so. Just as surely as the Grinch heard singing instead of crying, so Jesus is born to us—in us. Where we believed we would hear words of judgment and condemnation, instead there was a baby's cry and the words, "Father, forgive them."

If we will pause our anxieties and frantic struggles for just a moment and realize what Christmas is really all about...

"What happened then, well in Whoville they say
that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.
And then the true meaning of Christmas came through,
and the Grinch gained the strength of ten Grinches, plus two.
And now that his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
he whizzed with his load through the bright morning light.
With a smile in his soul he descended Mt. Crumpit,
cheerily blowing WHO WHO on his trumpet."

Christ will be born. So if you have faith, sing.
Sing without ribbons, sing without tags,
Sing without packages, boxes or bags.
Sing for your loved ones, present and past,
Sing through your pain, sing through feast and through fast.
Sing for the Glory of God come to earth,
Sing for the gift of our dear Savior's birth.
Let your songs fill your house, over Zoom let them roam.
Let your voices be heard both abroad and at home.
Let them ride on the winds up the side of Mt. Crumpit
Where a Grinch might be taking his Christmas to dump it.
If he pauses to listen to your Christmas song,
What will he hear? Will he have to wait long?
Will yours be a song that tells Jesus is born
Or will it just cry you are lost and forlorn?
The Grinch in the story was saved by the Whos.
What would he hear if he listened to you?
Amen.