

## Transformation in Whoville

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on December 21, 2025*

Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of doing a question-and-answer session with about 45 residents of Newbury Court in Concord, MA, who had been doing my Bible study series for the past three years. One person's question presented me with a list of several places in the Bible where the details described are in conflict with each other. He wanted to know how I reconciled those "errors."

I was delighted with the question because it gave me a chance to get back on my soap box about how we should stop looking to the Bible for facts and focus instead on looking for truth, which is what the biblical writers intended to give us.

The Christmas stories in the Gospels differ considerably in their details, and Mark doesn't tell the Christmas story at all; but we're not meant to figure out which is the "correct" version or which ones have "errors." We're meant to put ourselves into the stories, however their particular authors constructed them, and find the particular truth that each version is trying to teach us through whichever details they have chosen share.

When we can start reading the Bible that way—using the "facts" within a story to help us engage with it and know the characters well enough to see through their eyes and be affected by their words and actions—then the "truth" the stories point to begins to emerge.

Whether it's the different Christmas stories or Easter stories or Creation stories or stories about the rulers of Israel, the truth behind all of it becomes like the theme that plays for a lead character in a movie score whenever that character appears. Like Princess Leia's theme in Star Wars or the character themes in Peter and the Wolf.

That "truth theme" in the Bible announces the appearance of God—in a wide variety of forms—and each time the theme plays, we see God's presence transform whatever it touches into something better, something sacred, something holy. The water becomes wine. "Let there be light." "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." "You will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name, Jesus." And we are told in no uncertain terms that the fundamental nature of this transformative power, by whatever name and in whatever place we find it, is love.

Any story where we can hear that same theme is, in my view, a sacred story—a gospel story, if you will. A good-news story, which is what the word "gospel" means. As evidence for that, I point to the Christmas stories that have become classics across the past centuries, all of which tell the same story and play the same transformative theme when the Spirit of Love arrives on the scene.

In "It's a Wonderful Life," Jimmy Stewart is transformed by experiencing what the world would have been like had his loving and sacrificial presence never been born into the world. Rudolph is transformed as he learns to love himself by experiencing the acceptance by other "misfits" and by the love of Clarice.

Scrooge is transformed by visiting his past and being reminded of the love by and for his sister, followed by the present reminder of the patient love of her son and the love of Bob Cratchit for Tiny Tim; 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.

Those stories are beloved across generations because they teach the same truth: Love is the sole agent of positive transformation in the world. And, for my money, the story that showcases that truth about the transforming power of Christmas with greater clarity than any other outside of the Gospels is The Grinch.

We begin the story with the Grinch, who hates Christmas so much that he wants to make sure nobody is happy on Christmas.

"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!"

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 with the same clarity. 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, mass shootings, ICE, and crimes against humanity notwithstanding. We are all in the story now. 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. 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. The world will be transformed.

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. Not by a Grinch; not by a Cross.

"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—if you pause for a moment and put your hand to your ear—you just may be able to hear the theme playing. 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.

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. Because it will.

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 the love theme.

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.