

Rediscover Christmas Joy3rd of 4 in Advent Series

John 15: 11

3rd Sunday of Advent

12-14-2008 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

How the Grinch Stole Christmas is one of the most popular children's books of the holiday season. **Theodore Geisel**—better known as **Dr. Seuss**—first published the whimsical tale in 1957. Chuck Jones later made the story into an animated TV special in 1966. Then in December 2000, Jim Carey starred as the title role in a feature film. Most of us are familiar with the story.

*“Every Who
 Down in Who-ville
 Liked Christmas a lot . . .
 But the Grinch,
 Who lived just North of Who-ville,
 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 that his head wasn't screwed on quite right.
 It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
 But I think that the most likely reason of all
 May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”*

I. Happy Holidays

The story appeals to children of all ages because Christmas can bring out the **Grinch** in the best of us. Although these days are supposed to be merry and bright, December may be dreary and dark. The **holiday blues** occur for a variety of reasons.

- Physical: illness—cold and flu season, fatigue, chronic disease
- Psychological: grief over loss
- Financial: overextend budgets
- Relational: magnifies broken or nonexistent relationships
- Spiritual: consumerism, materialism, and other “isms”

All these things and more can drain the “*Merry*” out of Christmas and the “*Happy*” out of Holidays. We may find our Grinch-like hearts two sizes too small.

In part, we all possess **unrealistic expectations** of the holiday season. We want a Norman Rockwell Christmas set in a Currier and Ives' print suitable for a Hallmark Christmas special. We envision chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at our nose, carolers on the stoop, cheerful children around the tree, stockings hung by the chimney with care, turkey and some mistletoe, and let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!

What we GET is a Homer Simpson holiday suitable for a National Lampoon movie. We wouldn't recognize a chestnut if Jack Frost DID nip our nose. The carolers

are off key while the children fuss and the turkey won't thaw. And for those of us who survived the Great Blizzard of 1993, we have seen enough "let it snow, let it snow, let it snow" to last us a lifetime.

When reality cannot measure up to our expectations of the holidays, people feel disenchanting and disappointed. They intuitively understand that something is missing in life. So a search ensues to find the REAL meaning of the season.

In the 2000 Hollywood adaptation of "**The Grinch**," a young girl sings a haunting song about the loss of the season's meaning.

*"Where are you Christmas? Why can't I find you? Why have you gone away?
Where is the laughter you used to bring me? Why can't I hear music play?
My world is changing, I'm rearranging. Does that mean Christmas changes, too?"*

Little Who Cindy Lu finally discovers she has been looking for Christmas in the wrong places. The season's meaning cannot be found in presents, parties, catalogs, malls or stores. Instead, it is found within our own hearts, minds, and souls.

II. A Joyful Christmas

When I was a child, everyone knew how to greet one another during the holiday season. We unabashedly wished one another a "**Merry Christmas**." The expanded version concluded: "*And a Happy New Year!*" Of course, that was back in the day before being "*politically correct*" was politically correct.

Today the semantics of seasonal salutations are much more challenging. We live in a diverse and disparate society. Many different ethnic and religious traditions form the colorful threads of our national tapestry. TV personalities and retail merchants know that wishing people a "*Merry Christmas*" excludes some and even offends others. Christmas shares December with the Hanukkah, Kwanza, the Winter Solstice, AND Festivus!

Various, value-neutral alternatives have been proposed to replace "*Merry Christmas*." Wishing someone a "*Joyful Winter Solstice*," however, just does not seem the same! The most popular greeting appears to be "**Happy Holidays**." Few are politically opposed to happiness; and people can fill in the blank with whatever "holidays" that they happen to celebrate.

A sanitized, sterilized, and inoffensive seasonal greeting seems to be a perfect holiday solution. Yet I find myself wishing for simpler days. A politically safe and generically acceptable "*Happy Holidays*" grates on my ears.

Part of the problem is the word "**happy**." The Bible never promises happy holidays or happy anything else. Happiness is a temporary emotion based upon our situations and circumstances. It is difficult to obtain and even more difficult to maintain. Ultimately, it is a futile pursuit because we cannot control the world around us.

However, the Scriptures do talk a great deal about **joy**. Joy flows from a vital relationship with the living Lord. In Christ, we find contentment, fulfillment, meaning, and purpose. There is a tremendous difference between happiness and joyfulness:

- Happiness is a temporary emotion based upon external circumstances. Joyfulness is an everlasting reality based upon an internal relationship.
- Happiness is temporal, joy is eternal.
- Happiness is human based, joy is divinely given.
- Happiness turns up more or less where you would expect to find it—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation, a nice home, a satisfactory paycheck. Real, lasting joy is never found in this world but only in God.

Today is an opportunity for us as our heavenly Father’s children to discover *and* rediscover the joy of the Advent and Christmas season.

III. The Candle of Joy

The Advent Worship Series is entitled “*Rediscover Christmas.*” Each week the sermons have corresponded to the different candles on the Advent Wreath. The candles symbolize important attributes of the Holy Days: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Advent Wreaths originated from pagan traditions in northern Europe. During the darkest days of winter, people lit candles on round bundles of evergreen. The green branches, circular shape, and glowing light symbolized ongoing life and the promise of spring. During the Middle Ages, the church adopted and adapted the tradition for its own use. The circle symbolizes eternal life. The evergreen branches have their own meaning. The five candles represent Christ as the light of the world and help us count down the Sundays until Christmas.

Originally, the four-week season of Advent was a somber time of reflection. The **purple or violet candles** in the wreath symbolized Christ’s royalty and human penitence. Like Lent, Advent was a time of conviction, confession, and repentance.

Yet at some point a **rose candle** was added for the third week in Advent. Scholars do not agree on when and why. In one legend, the Pope decided the season had become too dark and somber. So he began giving a rose to penitents after pronouncing absolution and forgiveness. The rose symbolized the joy of forgiveness and salvation. The midpoint of Advent became a time of rejoicing. Later the Protestant church began using a Rose or Pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent to symbolize **Joy**.

IV. Finding and Keeping Joy

A. Finding Joy

If we want to find joy in the Advent and Christmas seasons, then we need to hear the Christmas story with new and fresh ears. And in the hearing, realize that the Christmas story IS the gospel story. And the gospel story can be my story. When we accept the Babe of Bethlehem as the Savior of my life, then joy is found.

Theologically and Scripturally, we do not find joy—joy finds us. The first and last words of the Gospel are **grace**. Grace is God’s unearned and unmerited love and salvation in our lives.

We come today to rejoice in anticipation of Christ’s coming into the world. We can claim God’s gift of joy in our lives. In John 15: 11, Jesus told his disciples: “*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in your, and that your joy may be full.*” It

is our Lord's plan and desire that we are filled with joy. In one of the most familiar and favorite Christmas carols, we sing:

*“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
let every heart, prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing!
Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy.”*

Here is the everlasting Joy of Christmas—Christ has come into the world. God's joy becomes our joy when Christ comes into our hearts. We know who we are and whose we are.

B. **Keeping Joy**

Once we have been found by God's joy, then we must order our lives so that the true joy of the season remains in our hearts. This occurs through an ongoing, living relationship with the Lord. Like any healthy relationship, we must spend time with our Savior through Bible study, prayer, worship, meditation, and more.

Jesus offered the woman at the well *“living water”* that would quench her thirst forever. Christian joy is like an artesian well where the water bubbles naturally to the surface. Regardless of circumstances, a deep, abiding joy is present in our lives.

Conclusion

If your heart is feeling two sizes too small, then today's sermon is for you. The joy of the Christmas season is not found in the world around us. Instead, it is found in our hearts where we make an altar and kneel before the nativity's manger.

Even the **Grinch** discovered a new truth on Christmas day. After his night's work, he listened for the sounds of sorrow and grief arising from Whoville.

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

But the sound wasn't sad!
Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so!
But it WAS merry, VERY!
He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook!

What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!
IT CAME!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?
 It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
 It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
 and 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!"

PP9 GRINCH'S SMALL HEART GREW THREE SIZES THAT DAY

And what happened then . . . ?
 Well . . . in Who-ville they say
 That the Grinch's small heart
 Grew three sizes that day!
 And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
 He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light
 And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
 And he . . .
 . . . HE HIMSELF . . . !
 The Grinch carved the roast beast!

Rediscover the true joy of the Advent and Christmas seasons today. Joy to the world—the Lord is come—in our world and in our hearts—now and forevermore.