

## The Cat in the Hat

Revelation 21: 1-5

05 23 2010 Sam Jones UMC

4<sup>th</sup> in series “*The Gospel according to Dr. Seuss*”

### Pre-Introduction

The New Testament contains four “**gospels**” that tell the story of Jesus’ life. In Greek, “*gospel*” literally means “*good news*.” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are evangelists who proclaim the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Over the centuries, others have retold the gospel story in a rich variety of ways. Jesus’ life has been portrayed through paintings, sculptures, frescoes, stained glass, operas, musicals, theological books, novels, and even animated cartoons. Although the medium might change, the message remains eternal.

In our post-modern world, Christian authors continue to seek new, fresh ways to recount the “*old, old story of Jesus and his love*.” Contemporary books include “*The Gospel according to Peanuts*,” “*The Gospel according to J. R. R. Tolkien*,” “*The Gospel according to Harry Potter*,” and even “*The Gospel according to the Simpsons!*”

In 2004, James W. Kemp published “*The Gospel according to Dr. Seuss*.” The Reverend Kemp is a retired United Methodist minister in Kentucky. In the *Introduction*, he wrote:

*“Dr. Seuss remains my favorite theologian. When I was a pastor, I found that I could find no better illustrations for biblical principles than I found in Dr. Seuss’s stories. His themes help us to understand what is truly important in life. His messages cause us to think about ourselves in new ways.”*

Dr. Seuss was born as **Theodor Seuss Geisel** on March 2, 1904 in Springfield, Massachusetts. He graduated from Dartmouth College and pursued a career in advertising. He created a series of popular cartoons for an insect spray by Standard Oil Company called **Flit**. Our older adults may remember the ads’ familiar line: “*Quick, Henry, the Flit!*”

In his late twenties, Geisel had time on his hands. His contract with Standard Oil prevented him from working on other ad campaigns. However, it did not prohibit **children’s books**. So in 1938 he published “*And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street*.” He used his middle name as a pseudonym because he planned to write “serious” books under his real name. He added the title of “Doctor” because his father had always hoped he would be a physician!

Geisel went on to write over fifty children’s books under the names of Dr. Seuss, Theo LeSeig, and Rosetta Stone. During his career, he received three Oscars, two Emmys, and one Pulitzer Prize. He died in California at 86 years of age in 1991.

Today’s sermon explores the book whose character became the symbol of all things Seuss: **The Cat in the Hat**.

**Scripture Lesson: Revelation 21: 1-5**

## Introduction

### PP4 CHILDREN: BUMP!

<p><i>“The sun did not shine So we sat in the house I sat there with Sally. And I said, “How I wish Too wet to go out So we sat in the house</i></p>	<p><i>It was too wet to play All that cold, cold, wet day. We sat there, we two. We had something to do!” and too cold to play ball. We did nothing at all.</i></p>
<p><i>So all we could do was to And we did not like it And then How that bump We looked! We looked!</i></p>	<p><i>Sit! Sit! Sit! Sit! Not one little bit. Something went bump! made us jump! Then we saw him step in on the mat! And we saw him! <b>The Cat in the Hat!</b>”</i></p>

The two children quickly regretted allowing the fantastic feline inside the house. Chaos and calamity soon followed. What began as a grand adventure turned into a great disaster. The house was completely destroyed. And then . . . the children saw their mother coming up the walk! What would they do?

### I. The Cat in the Hat

*The Cat in the Hat* was published in 1957. In an era of “*Dick and Jane*” books in schools, a publisher at *Random House Books* challenged Ted Geisel to write something new. Using 223 words from the basic Dolch Reading List, Geisel created a fantastic tale about a cat in a floppy top hat. The edition began a revolution in beginner’s books.

The **Cat in the Hat** is an intriguing figure. Like many of Dr. Seuss’s characters, the Cat is hard to typify and identify. His motives and intentions are ambiguous. The creature certainly makes a good first impression at the door. He seems harmless enough, even innocent. Yet trouble constantly tails him. The Cat has an incredible knack for making **messes**. He inadvertently gets himself—and others—into tons of trouble.

Is he a force for good? Not so good? It is hard to think of the Cat as evil. He just wants to have fun. He reminds us of an adorable cousin or irresponsible friend whom we dearly love. BUT we would never allow him to borrow our car or feed our pets. (*Note description of the Cat in the Hat is by James Kemp*).

The Cat in the Hat exhibits an amazing lack of responsibility. There is no looking before leaping. He never stops to consider the consequences of actions. The Cat is like an unsupervised three-year-old in a china shop allowed to run wild.

The results are predictable. The Cat in the Hat makes an unimaginable **mess**. Then midway through the book, he introduces **Thing 1 and Thing 2** who multiply the disaster. It is nothing short of a purr-fect cat-astrophe! I suppose you could say that the book gives one “paws” for thought! OK, no FURther cat humor!

The Cat in the Hat is a familiar figure. We know people like this. They have the Midas touch in reverse. Everything they touch turns into a mess. Actually, we *are* people like this. We make a mess of life. Then we must live with the chaos, clutter, and confusion of our bad choices.

## II. Living in a Messy World

The Christian faith certainly recognizes that we live in a **messy, fallen world**. This theological insight informs our most basic understanding of creation and humanity. The mess all began in the **Garden of Eden**.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the Lord declared that everything was very, VERY good. But as folk lived in this good creation, the trash began to pile up: an apple core, a torn fig leaf, a murdered brother. Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, and we have all sorts of messes: roadside litter, polluted rivers, denuded rain forests, hazardous waste dumps. Like children on Christmas morning, human beings have grabbed the gifts of creation and left piles of trash behind. (*Kemp, p. 24*)

And it's not just the world. We also make a mess of our lives and relationships. There is a self-destructive streak that runs deep within our souls. The theological word for it is "**Sin**" with a capital "**S**." **Sinfulness** is more than the sum total of the bad things we do and the good things we leave undone. Sinfulness means there is something fundamentally wrong with the human condition. Even our best efforts fall far short of God's goal.

In one of his songs, Billy Joel wrote:

*"We didn't start the fire, it was always burning since the world was turning.  
We didn't start the fire, no we didn't light it, but we're trying to fight it."*

Well, sometimes we're trying to fight it. Other times, we're throwing gas on the flames. And then we act surprised at the destructive conflagration that follows. To quote C. S. Lewis, we are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, living with the mess of original sin.

- Self: self-destructive behavior that includes low self-esteem, lack of integrity, irresponsibility, procrastination, promiscuity, infidelity, tobacco, alcohol, drugs,
- Others: hateful words and hurtful deeds. Break trust and betray love. Abusive relationships. Sometimes take relationships that have taken years to build and toss them away like yesterday's trash.

## III. Salvation

The good news is that it does NOT have to stay that way. God has acted once and for all to straighten out the mess we have made of our lives and relationships. In Christ, we can enter into a new and right relationship with God, self, and others.

Romans 3: 23-24: "*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*"

Cross and empty tomb.

God says “Yes” to the mess. Cleans up the mess we have made. Does what we cannot do for ourselves. Offers us forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. We are able to begin afresh as new creations in Christ.

In *The Cat in the Hat*, a mess has been made beyond the children’s ability to repair. With their mother coming up the walk, they are only moments away from discovery and judgement. But then the Cat pulls one last trick out of his bag. He jumps on a fantastic picker-upper machine that miraculously puts everything right. He rode out the back door as mother entered the front.

In 1968, Seuss published a sequel to the book entitled *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*. Once again a mess is made. But this time twenty-six smaller cats named A through Z arrive to “help;” but they make an even bigger mess. Finally, **Cat Z** takes charge. He is what Dr. Seuss calls a “**voom**.” Although the voom is small, he has the power to transform everything back to its original state.

Jesus Christ is our divine voom who saves us and restores a right relationship with God. Those who accept God’s amazing grace by faith are saved from the mess we have made of everything. In Christ, fresh starts and new beginnings are always possible. The Holy Spirit creates us anew.

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”* Revelation 21: 3-5:

*“In Christ, we are a **new creation**. The old has passed away and the new has come.”*  
2 Corinthians 5: 17:

#### **IV. Sanctification**

Romans 8:29 says that God’s ultimate goal is to conform us into the likeness of God’s own Son. This process is both event and process. Salvation is made up of dramatic moments of change and a lifelong process of transformation. There are moments when God’s grace comes flooding into our lives; however, we also recognize that we are on an enduring pilgrimage from this world to the next.

In Methodist theology, this journey is called “**sanctification**” or “**perfecting grace**.” The Holy Spirit takes us from where we are to where we ought to be. We are slowly “*changed from glory unto glory, till in heaven we take our place.*”

Today is **Pentecost Sunday** in the church calendar—a time when we remember how God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to the New Testament Church. They were all gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem when God’s presence filled them. They were empowered to go forth and proclaim the gospel to the entire world.

The same Spirit continues to work in our lives and world. And at the risk of stretching the analogy, sometimes the Holy Spirit acts like the Cat in the Hat of our ordered lives. We can

become too comfortable and complacent in our faith. We need a little chaos to kick-start the process of transformation. God is constantly about the business of “*making all things news.*”

This is a two-part process as the old passes away and the new comes. There are some old habits of our former lives that we need to leave behind. And there are some new habits of holiness that God’s Spirit needs to cultivate within our lives.

### **Conclusion**

The author of *The Gospel according to Dr. Seuss*, **James Kemp**, says that the Cat in the Hat is one of his favorite characters. In an interview, he said: “*Through him we see that something good can come out of bad circumstances; we are never hopeless.*”

Kemp’s statement is all the more remarkable when you know his circumstances. After fifteen years as a United Methodist minister, he was forced to take early retirement in his because of severe multiple sclerosis. At 48 years of age, he is now a quadriplegic. He dictates his writing to his mother, and his wife handles interviews.

Yet Kemp can say with a proven conviction: “*There is always hope in the unlimited richness of God. Most of our problems are trivial.*” Wow. A quadriplegic with MS can say: there’s always hope—most of our problems are trivial. What an affirmation of faith!

Indeed, there is always hope in God’s grace and love. No matter how big a mess we have made of life, our Lord can clean us up and forgive us for the past. He provides order in the midst of chaos and purpose in the face of meaninglessness. Then Christ restores us to right relationship with self, others, and God.

*The Cat in the Hat* concludes with the lines:

<i>Then our mother came in</i>	<i>And she said to us two,</i>
<i>“Did you have any fun?</i>	<i>Tell me. What did you do?</i>
<i>And Sally and I did not know</i>	<i>What to say.</i>
<i>Should we tell her</i>	<i>The things that went on there that day?</i>
<i>Should we tell her about it?</i>	<i>Now what should we do?</i>
<i>Well . . . What would YOU do</i>	<i>If your mother asked YOU?</i>

I would answer the last question with an enthusiastic “Yes!” It IS our privilege and duty to share with others the wondrous things that God has done in our lives. The Spirit continues to make all things new.

It is not Seussian rhyme, but another poet put it this way:

*“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,  
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”*

And all of God’s people say, “Amen.”