

Sunday December 12th, 2021

Advent III

Luke 1:39-46

“Jumping for Joy!”

Well, I have just recently made a disturbing observation, and with it, a conclusion. In fact, so upsetting is my observation that I am glad you are all sitting down, as I share it with you. Are you ready? Well, here it is. Not everyone is thrilled by the idea that Christmas is almost here. There, I said it. Not everyone is giddy with excitement that in 13 days Christmas will be upon us.

Some people are thrilled with this season. Merchants in particular, whether those of brick and mortar, or on the internet, love this season, and its over extravagant consumerism. Some depend on this season to make any profit for the whole year. Turkey farmers love Christmas, as millions of gobblers get snatched up for heavy laden tables. Many children are counting the number of sleeps until the big day, anxiously wondering if their letter made it to the North Pole, especially if they didn't put a stamp on it.

Others just enjoy the lights, and the music, and the best wishes that are evident everywhere. Still, there are some, maybe more than we think, who wish they could sleep through the entire thing. I mean, who really wants to fight with hundreds of other motorists for that last parking space at the mall? Who wants to endure long line ups at bored and overworked cashiers, just to get a gift card?

How can we take just one more terrorized, and screaming infant, forced onto Santa's lap for the all-important Christmas photo? I am as sentimental as the next person. I want the Currier and Ives kind of Christmas; with its fluffy snow, and eggnog, and carols sung by the fire, but I have never actually experienced one. And if we try and create one, or force one on others, it backfires and everyone is miserable.

How many of us experience this season in a way, more akin to Clark W. Griswold in *Christmas Vacation*, than Mr. Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. I love the scene near the end of the *Christmas Vacation* movie when everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong. Clark is at the end of his rope and has snapped at his family, and his father comes along, and lovingly tries to correct his angry, frustrated son.

He tells Clark, that he is too good a father to have snapped like that and the family all love him. Clark replies that he just wanted a perfect Christmas for everyone. Then he goes on to say that the Christmases of his youth were such a mess, and he asks his father how he could cope. His dad agrees that the celebrations were a mess, and he coped with a “little help from Jack Daniels”.

I was also drawn to something, in another familiar holiday story, that I had never noticed before. In the *Charlie Brown Christmas* story, Charlie brown is checking his mail box for Christmas cards. He discovers there is none, and laments the whole season, stating that “Nobody likes me. Why do we need a holiday season to emphasize it?” Why indeed? Later on, Charlie brown explains his feelings to his best friend Linus.

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“I think there has to be something wrong with me Linus. Christmas is coming, but I’m not happy. I don’t feel the way I’m supposed to feel. I just don’t understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents, and sending Christmas cards, and decorating trees and all that, but I’m still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.” (Charles Shultz, A Charlie Brown Christmas)

I too wish I wasn’t so cynical, so bored, so unimpressed with much of what passes for celebrating Christmas. I also know full well that I am not alone in such feelings. I hear it in people’s voices, as they lament the pressure to buy the gifts, book the airplane tickets, and prepare the feast. Grandparents complain about how to strategically make it to each of their children’s homes for the holidays without offending anyone.

At the heart of my season of discontent, and maybe yours as well, is the realization that at some point, all of us, despite our best intentions, use this season for our own self-gratification. We call this the season of giving, but is it really? Think about it. Why do we endure the mall crowd crush, but to buy that special gift, in the hope that our loved one will be pleased with us?

Why do we put on a big feast; but to meet expectations? Why do we tell our small children to be careful what they do at this time of year because Santa is watching? Why; to give us some peace for a few days. So, manipulating have we become, that we are as a society creating mythology to get what we want. Point of fact is a very disturbing creation called, “Elf on a Shelf”. It was written about in the Toronto Star, a few years back. Have you seen this thing, or know about it? There is even a cereal based on this elf.

The idea behind this plush toy elf (story book included) is that it has been sent from Santa to keep an eye on children. They are his spies, so to speak. Parents are instructed to move the elf around the house every night, to give the illusion that the elf is alive, and doing his work of spying. Frankly, I find the whole thing creepy, and it is manipulative, but it is selling like hotcakes.

My point is this; where is the joy in this season? Sure, we express some happiness, at giving and receiving things, and seeing friends and family, but where, is the pure joy that should be behind it all.

If Christmas is the celebration of Christ’s birth, should there not be great joy. Even before he was born, those who were in contact with him were expressing joy. Take our gospel lesson today, where we read that Mary went to see Elizabeth. We further read that when Mary greeted Elizabeth, John the Baptist, still a fetus himself, leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. Jesus, even before he was born, brings joy.

I think we are in real danger, of letting our efforts to celebrate this season, actually steal away from us the true gift of the season. Jesus was concerned about this, for in John 16:22 he said “You will be joyful, and no one shall rob you of your joy.” So, maybe it’s not actually being stolen from us, but rather the joy is being smothered by everything else. If we consider the joy Elizabeth and Mary experienced, and even John, we recognize that Christ’s joy is not dependent on circumstances.

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Mary was a young, unmarried peasant girl, willingly accepting her role in the incarnation. It was not going to be easy for her. Simeon said as much to the young couple in Luke 2:34. “Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, ‘This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.’”

The joy of Christmas is much deeper, and is so much stronger than any circumstance in this world. As I hope I clearly showed earlier, sometimes popular culture, either intentionally or unintentionally provides us a modern parable to communicate the deep issues of faith. Well, here is another to consider.

Are the following words at all familiar to you?

“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!”

(Dr. Seuss-How the Grinch stole Christmas.)

Many people don’t realize, despite seeing the little animated television special every year, that Theodore Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss (Seuss was his middle name) was a man of deep and abiding faith. Many of his quirky and beloved stories, are actually modern parables about the Christian faith. Nowhere is this more clearly portrayed than in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

Dr. Seuss made sure the message was clear that the Grinch, despite all his planning and deviousness, was truly out of his depth. He had misjudged the nature of Christmas and what it truly meant. (The Parables of Dr. Seuss, by Robert Short) There is one thing though that the Grinch got right. At the end of the story, when he realizes he cannot steal away the joy of the people of Who Ville he decides to join into the joy.

Christ has given us his joy, his spirit, and nothing can take it away from us. Furthermore, we are called on to let the world see this precious gift. And here is the critical point; we want the world to see our joy, not to gloat over them, or to make ourselves look more special than they are, but to spark a deep desire in them to join into the joy.

When people see the joy, we have without ribbons and tags, they will want what we have, and join in. They will quit, pursuing things, that in the end never make them truly happy, and start following the one thing that can bring them true peace and joy; namely Jesus. The bible has several calls to us to extend such an invitation. We all know the parable in Matthew 5:15-16 about being lights, not hid under bushels, but placed on a stand.

Then there is the apostle Paul who wrote “In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing, so that no one can speak a word of blame against you. You are to live clean, innocent lives as children in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your light shine brightly before them.” (Phil. 2:14-15)

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So, one wonders, how we know if someone has truly joined in to the joy. Well, “In Who-Ville they say that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day! ...And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feasts and he...he himself...The Grinch carved the roast beast!”

When a person has entered the joy of Christ, they stop being a taker, as the Grinch was, and they become a giver as the Grinch became. More than that, you not only return the roast beast, you carve it, and become a servant, offering it to others.

Acts 20:35 reads, “We should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, “Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving.” As a WHO, who sits at the community feast, I am there not only to be served, but to also serve others. We need Jesus not only so he can give himself to us, but also so we can give ourselves to him. We are called on to dwell among the Whos.

And as Robert Short points out, we need to ask for the identity of these Whos. To answer that, Dr. Seuss has these mysterious Whos appear in another of his famous stories. “Horton Hears a Who”. Seuss believed that Whos were little people, the humble of this world who leave lots of room for God. Whos surely sound like Christians. “Every Who down in Who-Ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without presents at all!”

In Isaiah (57:15; 66:2) we find the biblical description of those God longs to dwell with. “I dwell...with him who is broken and humble in spirit...The one for whom I have regard is oppressed and afflicted, one *who* reveres my word.” The Apostle Paul writes, “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Jesus even makes a promise to the Whos of this world. “God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.” (Matthew 5:5) The true people of God are the Whos, the big and the small; people of grace and faith despite material loss. They are people, who eagerly assemble as one, to sing the songs of praise. They are people who know that “As long as we have hands to clasp” they can face anything.

When the Grinch observes their demeanor, and their faith, in the face of devastating loss, he puzzles and puzzles until his puzzler was sore, then he concludes. “Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “doesn’t come from a store, Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!” I wonder if the world’s puzzler is even used, let alone get sore, to contemplate us as we welcome this season; as we welcome our Lord.

I wonder if any hearts swell because of the joy we express. The joy that Mary and Elizabeth and John experienced is what is lacking in most of our Christmas celebration. We hunger for the Whos’ optimism, and unconquerable faith and love. Where did it come from? The simple answer is Christmas, Christ coming to us. His coming means, first and foremost, a message of the unconquerable love of God given to all of us.

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It also means an invitation to all of us to enter into Christ's joy; to actively being among the Whos. To participate in serving, loving and extending God's grace to all people. This is the gospel message.

Dr. Seuss never hinted the full extent of what was in the hearts of the Whos that day, but perhaps Luke 2:10-11 resounded in their community. "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."

And is this not enough to make anyone joyous?