

“HIS STORY CAN CHANGE OURS!”

Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-18

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One of my favorite Christmas stories is “*How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*” In the wonderful tale by Dr. Seuss, a Grinch is annoyed by the merriment of the people of Who-ville as they celebrate Christmas. The decorations and celebrations disturb the Grinch because his heart is “*two sizes too small.*” Most of all, he is deeply bothered by the noise ...noise ...noise of all the Christmas festivities.

To counteract Who-ville’s Christmas joy, the Grinch dresses up like Santa Claus and takes all of the Christmas decorations, presents, and food from everyone’s home. He leaves nothing behind that would help them celebrate the Christmas holiday. On Christmas morning, as the sun is coming up, the Grinch looks down from his mountain home, hoping to see that Christmas in Who-ville has been ruined. But the Grinch is startled by joyous Christmas music! They sing, “Christmas day is in our grasp, so long as we have hands to clasp.” The Grinch can hardly believe his ears. The people of Who-ville have no decorations, no food, no Christmas trees, no presents. Why are they singing? The Grinch begins to get furious, but then he suddenly realizes that Christmas is about more than presents or decorations or a feast. He reflects, “*Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store; Maybe Christmas perhaps means a little bit more.*”

Although the story of the Grinch does not have baby Jesus or angels or shepherds, Dr. Seuss has captured a sense of the true meaning of Christmas. With the current economic situation, many companies cut back or did not have the traditional Christmas party this year. However, I haven’t heard of one family that doesn’t plan to celebrate Christmas. No matter what lights or trees or candles you have or have not put up at your house, no matter what your Christmas dinner is or is not, no matter what presents you do or do not unwrap tomorrow morning, nothing is more important than the Christmas message of how God has entered our world in Jesus, and no economic Grinch can steal that from us.

The first Christmas in Bethlehem did not have bells, ornaments, stockings or decorated sugar cookies. There was no glitter, no angels on the tops of pine trees, covered in tinsel. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in the census. Because of all the travelers the houses were full, and there was no room left for Mary and Joseph. They managed to find a place to rest in a stable. Mary gave birth to Jesus there and laid him in an animals’ feeding trough.

In the year 1223, St. Francis set up a live nativity scene in the town square in Assisi, Italy, because he wanted people to see the hardship the newborn baby had to endure, how he was placed in a manger, and how he lay in the straw between the ox and the donkey.

The first Christmas was celebrated in an unlikely place, in an unlikely way, with an unlikely cast of characters surrounding the baby. Yet no one could take away the spectacular good news that was proclaimed on that first Christmas Eve!

And what was that good news? *“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord,”* the angels said. The good news of Christmas is that we have already received the one gift that truly matters. No matter what you unwrap tomorrow — whether you find that iPod or those leather slippers you’ve been hoping for — nothing is more precious than the good news that God came in human flesh to our world. God dwelt among us out of love for us. We’re here tonight to celebrate that good news. No matter what happens tomorrow, Jesus will still be God’s true gift for our salvation.

From the time I was a boy, our family went tent-camping. Every summer we would trek to one of the state parks and pitch our tent and spend a couple weeks in God’s great outdoors. One of my favorite aspects of being a Boy Scout was the camping trips. I remember Polar Bear camp outs in January, where we shoveled snow to get down to the ground to pitch our tents. There was no floor in those tents. We would cover the ground with straw, and put our sleeping bags on the straw. Believe it or not, we were warm as toast. I am proud to say I never got frostbitten, although my mother would put on an extra sweater at home just thinking about her son camping in the cold!

My friends, I am told that in the Scripture lesson from John that we heard a few minutes ago, *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,”* the word translated as “dwelt” or “lived” comes from the Greek word which means “tent.” The word implies making a dwelling or pitching a tent. The sense of this word is that God not only came to earth, but that **God pitched a tent with us**. When Jesus became a human being, God was setting up camp with us. On that first Christmas, God pitched his tent among us! Most religions have stories about some form of divine being visiting humanity. But Christianity teaches that God does more than stop for a visit. God sets up camp — pitches a tent among his people, and becomes a real flesh and blood human being. God does not simply make a cameo appearance. God sets up camp with us, lives with us and dies for us. God has pitched his tent among us. No matter what happens, God will be with us. That’s the good news of Christmas!

I have heard the Christmas story ever since I was a child. I have shared Christmas Eve messages now for 34 years. Yet every time I study these texts another aspect of the story catches my eye and challenges my imagination. I never noticed until this year that when the angels appear, they do not tell the shepherds to go to Bethlehem. The angels announce that Jesus has been born, but they do not tell the shepherds to go and see. The shepherds decide that on their own. These unusual, ordinary people didn’t just accept that they had been given some information and continue sitting with their sheep. They took action. They went to see for themselves. Then they proclaimed the work of God as they had seen it.

I wonder what I would have done had I been on that hillside. I am challenged to ask what I do now when an announcement is made in my life. Do I pay attention to what is unfolding around me? Do I recognize the angel voices, the prophetic voices, the unusual voices, the hopeful voices that I hear? Like the shepherds, I am up to my elbows in daily chores and tasks. Do I allow the amazing moments of life to catch my attention? Do I speak about the miraculous moments I see, and do I hear the good news that is being proclaimed in the world today?

Brother Roger, founder of the Taizé community in France, asks, “*Where would we be today if certain women, men, young people and also children had not arisen at moments when the human family seemed destined for the worst? They did not say, ‘Let things take their course!’ Beyond the confrontations between persons, people and spiritual families, they prepared a way of trusting. Their lives bear witness to the fact that human beings have not been created for hopelessness.*”(1) Again, I ask myself, how I would have responded had I been on that hillside on that first Christmas Eve?

There is a beautiful tradition in the Hispanic community. On Christmas Eve a couple representing Mary and Joseph go from house to house looking for a warm place to stay until their baby is born. Tonight as you walk or drive home, pray that the people in each house that you pass will open the doors of their hearts to Jesus and his family this Christmas. Pray that the true gift of Christmas — the gift of God’s presence with us — will be received by every person.

The heart of the Grinch was **two sizes too small**. What about yours? What about mine? Is there room in our hearts for Jesus? It is my prayer that each of us will **let his story change ours**.

Note:

1. Brother Roger, *Peace of Heart in All Things*. Quoted in *Behold: Arts for the Church Year*. 2008, p. 2.