

Christmas Eve December 24 2020

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

I cannot tell you how strange it is to stand here on Christmas Eve and preach to an empty room. To not look out and see this space filled to overflowing with 200 plus people, all come to bear witness to the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. The Smiths, the Millers, the Horsfield's, The Graves, the Novak's, the Clefish's, the Kolker's, the Schwake's.

I cannot tell you how strange it is to not have the background murmur of your bodies and breath fill this space. How strange it is to try and imagine I see you through the camera lens. How much I miss the sight of you all.

But all of you know about how strange a Christmas this is. The things we usually do curtailed or non-existent this year. Family trips and Christmas parties cancelled due to concerns about spreading the coronavirus. Deep conversations about who we will gather with, where, and for how long, under what conditions.

A year when even those of us who have much to be thankful for feel that undercurrent of grief and trepidation that flows just below the surface of life. Fueled by the death from the coronavirus of 325,000 Americans including 3,700 Iowans. Fueled by the overwhelming need of our neighbors for the most basic assistance of food, clothing, and shelter due to the economy created by the pandemic and the derecho.

A year without many of the traditions that surround this holiday- of foods, when you open gifts, movies watched, songs sung, getting into our best warm clothes

going to church and singing those so familiar hymns. To light our candles and sing *Silent Night* together.

It doesn't feel like Christmas, does it?

But as I pondered this feeling, I heard a voice in my head. The voice of Boris Karloff from the original 1966 version of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

That voice from a scene, with the Grinch and his cart full of stolen Christmas toys and decorations, perched on the mountain over Whoville. The Grinch looking down eagerly...

"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!"

"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!"

"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,

Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!"

"That's a noise," grinned the Grinch, "That I simply MUST hear!"

So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.

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 Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Whoville, 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!"

The Grinch took away all the outer trappings of Christmas, the visible things that he thought made up the season. He took the presents and the trees. He took the music and the movies. He took the food and the fellowship. And Christmas came, anyway.

The Grinch that is the Year 2020 has taken many of the outer trapping of Christmas, the visible things that make up the season- our fellowship together, our traditions around meals and how we spend our time. Tucked them all away and carted them off. And, at least for a moment, we think, "Oh no! Without these things, Christmas won't come."

But Christmas came anyway. Now, I do not celebrate or like how this Christmas is this year. That traditions are left aside or postponed. Certainly not for the underlying reasons why this is so. But I wonder if it is not a gift for us.

Because we have too often made those traditions the reason for the season. Because even when Jesus shows up in those traditions, he is a Thomas Kinkade and Hallmark version of Jesus, who cannot save us.

Now, I like Thomas Kinkade's paintings, I like a good Hallmark Christmas movie as much as the next person, and there is value in them and what they can bring us. The warm glow of light on the snow around the comfy cabin. The comfort of knowing everything will come out alright, the momentary relief from a reality that pounds us every day with threats to ourselves and our loved ones.

But the Jesus of these softly lit scenes, surrounded by a warm glow can do nothing for us but bring momentary relief. This kind of Jesus, this kind of Christmas, is like putting a bandage over an untended wound. It looks good on the outside, but just festers underneath. Never really heals. Because it does not deal directly with the wounds inside us.

What we need, what can save us – from a pandemic, from sickness, from sorrow, depression, loneliness is not the Jesus who does not cry. The Mary with her hair done perfectly or at least creatively mussed. The remarkably clean looking stalls with the smell of fresh hay. God did not come down to give us warm fuzzies. To gloss over and clean up the ugly things in life.

God came down to forgive us, to bind together our broken lives, to reach into the open wounds in our hearts and souls and heal them. To enter into our broken world, experience the pain, heartache, joy and tears of this life and transform it.

And it is only the real Jesus who can save us. The one pushed into this world in pain and blood by the body of a young woman bent double in pain. The one crying out to clear his lungs of fluid and breathe the air for the first time. The one who has experienced the shock of that transition into life in this world. The same one who will leave this world in pain and blood. Who will cry out, his lungs full of fluid as he breathes his last on the cross, that same woman, older now, bent double in the pain of grief at his feet.

It is only this Jesus who has lived through the 2020's of life, who has embodied the breadth and depth of life with all that brings, and who has been raised by the God who loved him into being... it is only this Christ who can save us.

The Year 2020 thought it had stolen Christmas from us, but Christmas came anyway.

Because as much as we love them, as good as they are for our souls and spirit, Christmas is not those special cookies Grandma makes. Christmas is not singing *Silent Night* together in this building. Christmas is not binging on *Elf*, *White Christmas*, and *Die Hard* (yes, it is a Christmas movie).

Christmas is the God who loves us enough to enter into the uncomfortable, painful, messy physicalness of life. The stories that don't always have happy endings, the ambiguity of difficult decisions, the challenges of just living day to day. To enter into that and to bring us something that not even the best Thomas Kinkade painting, not the most excellently executed Hallmark movie can.

To bring us *Shalom*. The Hebrew word translated as peace, but which means so much more. It means wholeness, completeness, tranquility. It means all members of God's creation living in harmonious and life-giving relationship with one another. It means the in breaking of God's Kingdom into this world. And when we are claimed by that Kingdom, when that *Shalom*, that peace, that wholeness settles around us. Is embodied in us. That is Christmas.

That is the good news of great joy for all people. That on this cold and windy evening, a child was born for you. Come to you not because of your holiness, your perfection... but because of your need.

A child born to bring you light, and life. Fuller and more abundant. A child born to bring a peace, *Shalom*, that surpasses all understanding. That nothing on this earth can touch or shake. A child, God come in the flesh, God with you in this life. Who knows you in all your greatness and shame. Who loves you without reservation and without end.

On this awkward, awful, wonderful, healing, strange, and unique Christmas. May this be good news in your life. May the peace of God, the *Shalom* of God which surpasses all understanding be yours this Christmas Eve and always.