

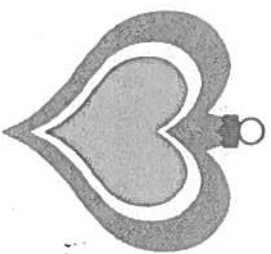
Hope is poetry, not chaos. It's not the Grinch stealing away the Whos' things in the night; it's the Whos waking up the next morning and singing just the same. Hope is the kind of language that inspires and builds and ignites change to the point when change is no longer needed. Hope is a destination when you finally discover that you don't need to build a God box anymore because you have finally realized that God is bigger.

A tree from the outside is indeed a beautiful and hopeful picture. What's even more beautiful is a tree that has no ornaments because our story has already been told and the needs of God's people are being met. And what's even more beautiful is not chopping down the tree at all and letting it flourish and grow right where it is, because the poetry of Advent hasn't brought the outside in, but the inside out to where the church itself no longer has walls because we have finally realized after building and destroying our God box over and over again, that God doesn't fit in a box. After all, our ultimate hope is that heaven and earth will be one. God will be with God's people—Emmanuel.

In what ways does Advent blur the lines we usually rely on to bring order to our faith and to our world?

When has the Holy Spirit disrupted your previous understanding of God? What did you learn, and how did your faith grow as a result?

When has your own sense of control and peace been challenged by Jesus?



CHAPTER THREE

WHEN LIGHT SHINES

When our children were little, our families lived between four to six hours away. For my wife, Christie, and me, Thanksgiving was less a day set apart to give thanks for God's blessings and more a weeklong tour of South Louisiana to visit family. Our first stop was Baton Rouge, and we knew that we were spending the night, so the first thing we did was to set up the children's rooms for the evening. One year, as we were setting the beds and plugging in the sleepy-time lullaby radio, we noticed that there was no night light in the room. If there's no night light in the room, you might as well give the kids chocolate cake before bed because they're not going to sleep. So, we feverishly searched the house for a night

light, and we thankfully found one just in time for bed. Light is important, often taken for granted, and children remind us of its beauty and security. When the bedroom is dark, just a glimmer of light will do to keep the monsters in the closet at bay.

In the middle of the night the Grinch is up to no good. He enters one of the Who's homes to steal away anything and everything that might have something to do with Christmas. The job seems easy enough. The stockings, the presents, and even the food is stowed away in the Grinch's sacks, and sent up the chimney with ease. There's no hesitation or remorse. He doesn't stop to second-guess or reconsider. Like a champion bagger at the checkout line during a holiday rush, the Grinch bags everything together, only momentarily leaving the tree behind, and he does it all in the darkness of night.

Darkness is an interesting thing. The absence of light can help hide things we don't want people to see and obscure the things to which we'd rather not call attention, but darkness isn't altogether bad. Our other senses are heightened when our eyes have to take a less dominant role. I love putting lots of candles on the table in the sanctuary, and I'd be lying if I said I always remembered to extinguish them at the conclusion of each service. It's hard to notice a single candle burning next to our copper-covered cross when the sanctuary lights are full. Sometimes I've come back to the church on Sunday evenings when everything is dark and quiet, and it doesn't take long for me to have a moment of panic when I notice a candle left lit in the sanctuary. After saying a quick prayer of thanksgiving that nothing caught fire, and that

our head of trustees didn't see it, I quickly blow the candle out and continue my meditation.

The only reason I notice the candle at times like this is because everything else is quiet, still, and dark. Maybe this is why Luke records that Jesus was born in the evening. "Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:8-9). There's nothing in Scripture that says Jesus had to have been born at night. It's not the fulfillment of any prophecy or demand from God. But maybe the glory of the Lord accompanying the angel seemed just a bit brighter and even more noticeable in the dark. Maybe this is what John means when he wrote, "The light shines in the darkness, / and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (John 1:5). It's not that darkness is necessary to see light, but darkness certainly makes light more noticeable.

When the Grinch begins shoving the Who family's Christmas tree into the chimney at night, he notices young Cindy Lou Who standing and watching him. She asks why the Grinch is taking the tree away. Without so much as a blink, the Grinch says that the lights on one side of the tree aren't working, and he's taking the tree to his workshop where he will fix it up and bring it back. I don't think it's an accident that the Grinch calls attention to lights not working. He lies so quickly to the young child, and when a lie is effortless, there's always a truth just under the surface. A Christmas tree with broken lights is like a Grinch with a heart two sizes too small. The tree can still hold ornaments and be a placeholder for gifts, but without the lights, there's something

missing. The Grinch still has a heart. It's just not big enough to be much good. There's something missing. The Grinch doesn't try to quickly scurry away, or yell angrily back at Cindy. He conceals the truth, and the only reason one tries to hide the truth is because you know the truth is powerful.

The Grinch still has a heart. It's just not big enough to be much good.

There's something missing.

We hear from Scripture that the "truth will set you free" (John 8:32), but that doesn't mean the truth is easy to hear. Deep down I think the Grinch knows what he's doing is wrong. It reminds me of when my oldest daughter was young. One afternoon I walked into her room, and anything that had been on a shelf was now on the floor. Her room was a complete disaster. I asked her what happened and why her room was so messy. Knowing that Daddy likes rooms to be tidy, she looked up at me without hesitation and said, "I was just looking for something beautiful." I replied, "Well, why don't you look for something beautiful while putting everything back where it belongs."

Light can provide comfort, security, and hope, but it can also bring about death and destruction. The prophet Jeremiah wrote both challenging and hopeful words with the aid of glimmering light, but this was not peaceful candlelight that lit his room. He was writing amidst the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The light flickering in the distance was that of a fire as the Temple

smoldered in ruin. The light he saw was the light of hopelessness. The Temple was gone, which meant that God and God's promises had departed. In the midst of ashes, his words communicate a resounding "No!" to the darkness surrounding him and his people. He writes, "The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah" (Jeremiah 33:14).

This is a stringing "No!" to the world. Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians years before, never to return. Judah saw this happen, and now it was happening to them by the Babylonians. They knew that destruction led to an end of the people and an end to their story with God. And now they are in despair because it's happening to them. "The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land" (Jeremiah 33:14-15).

Not long after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, my mother called me, and rather spur of the moment, asked Christie and me to join her and my father on a trip to Walt Disney World. I said, "OK, if I have to." While we were there, I asked my mother why she wanted to take the trip, why the sense of urgency? She said, "I needed to see something alive." When I finally made it to New Orleans after our trip, I knew what she was talking about. Everything was dead. Trees had fallen, grass was drowned, buildings were empty. I'm sure the scene was similar to what Noah saw when getting off the ark. The renderings we typically see when Noah is getting off the ark are of a green and lush utopia with

birds flying and lions grinning, but we tend to forget that anything and everything that wasn't on the ark had died. It must have looked like the Ninth Ward in New Orleans.

What amazing faith Noah had to get off the boat and begin rebuilding the world. An olive branch in a dove's mouth confirmed for Noah that dry land had begun to appear and that it would soon be safe to depart the ark. And when Noah and the animals got off the boat, God made a covenant with Noah and gave him a sign, a visible symbol of his faith. The sign was a rainbow, an effect of light in the sky. A branch and light were signs for Noah bringing hope for the future. In the same way, light in the sky signified the birth of Jesus, the righteous branch springing up from David. See, in the church we don't count down to Christmas. We count forward to a new hope, and new life given to us by the Messiah, the baby to be born on the outskirts of town. That's why the branch is such a beautiful symbol. It's not a stopwatch counting down. It is life itself growing and moving forward into fruition, the hope of God's promise being fulfilled.

On our way back from the great South Louisiana tour one year, we entered our neighborhood with the children cheering from the backseat. The houses on either side of our street were lit from top to bottom with Christmas lights. The lights were beautiful, and certainly a welcomed sight, but these lights are not just for decoration. Adults don't like the dark either. When it begins getting dark around 4:30 in the afternoon, we cover our homes in light. Christmas lights are one of the first glimpses of the changing season. When darkness creeps into our lives, we say, "No!" by turning on the lights. The same holds true in the church.

I suppose we could call attention to peace, hope, love, and joy by using berries on an Advent wreath, or a North Pole thermometer, but we choose to light candles. We have chosen light to be the way in which we celebrate the coming of Christ.

Recall a time when darkness, either literally or figuratively, helped you see or notice something more clearly than you would have otherwise.

When have you experienced light in the midst of darkness?

Think about how central light is to our celebration of Advent and Christmas. Why do you think this is the case?



TELLING THE TRUTH

Do you know the legend of the Belsnickel? According to German legend, the Belsnickel was a mysterious creature who would check in on children a couple of weeks before Christmas to see if they were behaving. He would rap on the window, throw candy on the floor, and if you jumped too soon to receive the candy, he would rap you with his walking stick. My grandmother would tell us a similar story, though in her version the Belsnickel would visit in the weeks after Christmas to make sure that you were still minding your manners after receiving your presents. If you were misbehaving, the Belsnickel would come in the middle

of the night, steal away your toys, and there was nothing you could do to get them back. It's a rather frightening tale when you're a child, but the message was clear: You cannot fool Santa. You may have been well behaved in order to get presents, but you must maintain your manners for the long winter break, or he will send his Belsnickel to take the toys back. As a parent, I fully understand why this story exists, and I'm not ashamed to tell you that my children know this folktale quite well.

The interaction between the Grinch and Cindy Lou Who is like an ironic Belsnickel tale. The Grinch is stealing away all of the children's toys, but his theft is for his own sordid enjoyment. Cindy is like the mysterious Belsnickel figure urging the expression of a moral compass, but instead of rapping the Grinch with a walking stick, she asks a simple question: "Why are you taking our Christmas tree?" It's a fair question. Cindy Lou Who is like this tiny spark of light twinkling in a rather dark portion of the story. Children tend to ask the kind of questions we grown-ups neglect or have forgotten how to ask, like, "If God is big enough to create the mountains, how can God also live in our heart?" As we age, sometimes it's as if our vision becomes increasingly narrow. We often grow into a particular worldview and live by assumptions according to the way we think things should be. In a way, we develop blind spots as if our peripheral vision disappeared with our childhood.

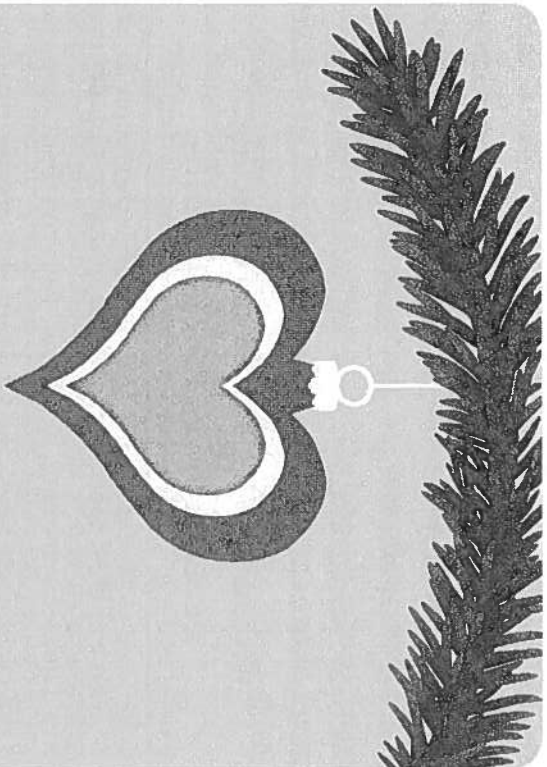
It takes a moment of humility to recognize that we have blind spots. It's a part of our human condition. It's not a sin to have blind spots, but not correcting for them just might be. The reason we have mirrors on our car is because we don't have eyes in the

back of head. If we didn't have corrective mirrors, we and those around us might get hurt. The same holds true for the cultural blind spots we carry with us, the assumptions we hold in our day-to-day lives. Without growing in faith and correcting for our falsely held assumptions, we cannot live into our fullest selves.

**Without growing in faith and correcting...
we cannot live into our fullest selves.**

Jesus had blind spots. It may sound strange to consider that Jesus didn't see everything, but like us, Jesus also didn't have eyes in the back of his head. The Christian faith teaches that Jesus was fully human and fully divine—not sometimes human and sometimes divine, but indivisibly human and divine. This is a difficult teaching to wrestle with. In a worship setting we have a very easy time talking about Jesus's divinity, but if we aren't careful we begin to lean away from Christian teaching and lean into a heresy called "Docetism." Docetism refers to a belief and teaching by some in the early church, refuted as a heresy in the early fourth century, that Jesus only *appeared* to be human. He only *appeared* to hunger and thirst, only *appeared* to get frustrated, only *appeared* to suffer and rise from the dead. If this were the case, the early church concluded, then Jesus only *appeared* to save us. The truth is that Jesus was fully human.

The Christmas mystery is that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, but how human is that exactly? The letter to the Hebrews says, "because we don't have a high priest who



GOING ALL OUT

The production team spared no expense with producing the Grinch television special. An average episode of the popular *The Flintstones* primetime cartoon used roughly 2,000 individual drawings for 30 minutes of screen time; the Grinch special used over 25,000 drawings. Maurice Noble, who was rather starstruck when meeting Geisel, was hired to complete the picturesque backgrounds for the special. Geisel constantly told Noble to make the backgrounds enriching and schmaltzy, to which Noble replied, "You don't argue too long with God." Eventually Noble created 250 backgrounds for the special, which is more than twice the amount for a regular thirty-minute program.

can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was remped in every way that we are, except without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). How does all of this work? Let's think about our blind spots for a moment. If you are celebrating Christmas in Hawaii this year, you may think twice about getting into the water out of fear of a shark attack, but you probably don't worry about walking near palm trees. But statistically speaking, falling coconuts are much more likely and much more deadly. As a different example, maybe you're hanging garland on the chancel rail, but you forgot your ruler and you don't know how much you'll need. You know that your backyard fence is about thirty feet, and you can make a quick eyeball judgment by comparing what you know about your fence to what you don't know about the chancel. Let's say you're checking the weather forecast from your favorite news source and they predict that you'll be having a snowy Christmas Eve, so you make sure to put a coat in the trunk of your car before you head out to worship.

All of these are examples of different biases or lenses through which we interpret the world. We make mental shortcuts, assumptions, based on what we already know. We assume that sharks pose a threat because we saw *Jaws*, and there isn't a movie series to put a fear of coconuts in our heart. We assume that length measurements will be roughly the same at our house and in our sanctuary. There is nothing wrong with making assumptions like these; it is part of what it means to be human. These examples might sound simple and silly, but they illustrate just how many assumptions we make on a daily basis. If we are unable to recognize the extent of them, we might find ourselves

believing our assumptions to be unwavering truth. Let's say that it doesn't snow on Christmas Eve as your favorite weather forecaster had predicted. It might be easy enough to simply accept that the forecast wasn't quite right, but there is sometimes a great temptation to squint and peer out into the darkness and think we see a few flurries because we cannot accept that the information we received wasn't quite right.

Lots of lenses affect the way we understand the world. Our emotions sometimes cloud our decisions, or our love of the status quo makes us hesitant to take calculated risks, especially since we tend to feel loss as being more powerful than gains received. I often have to remind myself that the 4 percent of negative emails don't outweigh the 96 percent of positive feedback, but that's easier said than done.

The point is, we have blind spots. We don't see everything as clearly as maybe we should. Here's the wrestling: Jesus had blind spots too, because blind spots are fully human things. For example, the parable of the good Samaritan makes little sense if Jesus wasn't fully aware of the ethnic hatred between Jews and Samaritans. How does Jesus explain how the prodigal son hit rock bottom? Well, he said that he was a pig farmer, and as a Jewish person, being a pig farmer is probably the worst profession there is. Jesus got angry, making a whip and driving out the money changers from the Temple. Jesus became frustrated, telling the disciples, "How long will I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17). Jesus didn't know everything. The Gospel of Luke says that after Jesus was in the Temple as a twelve-year-old, Jesus grew in wisdom and favor, and the only way you can grow in wisdom

is if you don't know everything at the outset. When is the end, Jesus? He answered the disciples saying, "I don't know. Only the Father knows" (see Mark 13:32). Jesus was emotional, weeping over Lazarus's death and lamenting over Jerusalem. Jesus faced all of the same challenges and limitations that characterize human life, including incomplete knowledge about his world.

We have blind spots. We don't see everything as clearly as maybe we should... it is not a sin to have blind spots, but not correcting for them just may be.

Again, it is not a sin to have blind spots, but not correcting for them just may be. The humble message of Christmas is that God put on flesh and entered into our humanity—blind spots and all. This is why Cindy Lou Who's question is so important. "Why are you taking our Christmas tree?" If the Grinch had taken a moment to consider Cindy's question, he may have realized one of his own blind spots. He may have understood that he wasn't seeing everything he needed to see. Unfortunately, his vision was too narrow. In a manner of speaking, the lights on the tree indeed were out.

Do you have any Christmas traditions that others might find peculiar or unfamiliar, as some may find the legend of Belshazzel?

Why do children tend to ask big, fundamental questions more readily than adults? What can adults learn from this?

How do you respond to the idea of Jesus having blind spots? Do you find it hopeful or challenging that he had to learn and grow in the same way we all do?



EVEN THE CRUMBS WERE TOO SMALL

The Grinch sends Cindy Lou Who back to bed with a glass of water and then begins to empty out their home of anything and everything that has something to do with Christmas. It's not enough that he stole away any hint of Christmas; the Grinch leaves only crumbs behind, morsels too small even for a mouse. House after house, the Grinch sneaks down the chimney, and takes almost everything. The Grinch may despise the Whos' excessive celebration, but the Grinch seems to have a compulsion all his own. Why does he leave nothing behind? Wouldn't just taking the presents make his point loud and clear? It'd be one thing if the Grinch were stealing the gifts so that he might horde them for himself; that sermon is easy to write. Instead, he plans to dump everything off the side of a cliff. It's like that great scene in *The Dark Knight* where the Joker burns a huge mountain of money. When asked why he's doing it he replies, "It's not about the money. It's about sending a message." What message was the Grinch trying to communicate?

One of the gifts the wise men bring to the Christ Child is gold, symbolizing Jesus's kingship (Matthew 2:11). Have you ever

considered what Jesus, Mary, and Joseph did with this precious gift? There are several traditions, including one in which the gifts were used to pay for Jesus's education and another in which the gold financed the Holy Family's escape into Egypt. The real answer is that Scripture doesn't tell us, but Scripture does tell us that Jesus had a very particular view of how we should treat the treasure in our possession: "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Not to store up treasure for yourself is easier said than done. One year when my family was moving to a new church, we called a local moving company to come to the house to assess how big a moving truck we would need. Unsurprisingly, the representative made a reservation for the largest truck in their fleet. It's not that our items were precious, valuable, or expensive, but we had lots of furniture handed down to us from friends and family, and with young children we had high chairs, walkers, mini trampolines, dollhouses... you name it.

The truck arrived and the movers started loading all our belongings. When the truck was about halfway full, and it appeared that they had barely made a dent with all our boxes, I asked the driver when the next truck was coming. His confused look made my stomach turn. "There is no other truck," he replied, looking at me as if I had been dressed as a circus clown. "What happens if this doesn't all fit on the truck?" I asked, while wondering why I

would even have to ask such a question. "I don't know. Probably rent a U-Haul or something. Do you have a buddy with a truck?"

Do I have a buddy with a truck?! That's your answer?! First of all, I do have friends with trucks, but we were moving five hours away. There's not enough pizza and beverages on the planet to convince someone to take a quick ten-hour round trip to help cover a bad professional moving company estimate. Secondly, we were living in a parsonage, which means that the next pastor's family was on the way later that day to move in. We started calling everyone we knew who wouldn't be offended with such a crazy ask. Thankfully one of my friends found an available rentable trailer about an hour or so away that would get us closer to containing all of our things, but my Toyota Camry is ill-equipped for hauling. Another friend just happened to have been traveling from New Orleans to Shreveport later that afternoon and was willing to help us out. At the end of the day we called in every favor we had available and managed to successfully move everything to our new home.

Store up treasures in heaven is easy to say, but when you are potentially leaving a quarter of your belongings behind, it's more difficult to believe. We almost seem hardwired to collect things, whether they be souvenirs marking fond memories, or items in the workshops you just know you're going to use one day. There's something like 2.3 billion square feet of rentable self-storage space in the United States, which means we often have so much stuff that we don't have room for it. If you've spent any time in the church, you know that following Jesus is a life centered on simplicity. Our Lord didn't have a coin in his pocket when asked

about taxes, didn't own a home when threatened by Herod, and seemed always to be on the move, teaching his followers not to worry about what you will wear or eat, because God will provide.

Jesus taught about money more often than we might care to admit. Eleven of Jesus's thirty-nine parables are about money, and if we took the time to do the numbers, one out of every seven verses in Luke's Gospel has something to do with money. Jesus also taught that we shouldn't worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34), should sell all that we own and give to the poor (Matthew 19:21), and called for people of faith to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to give to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21).

**It seems that Jesus wants to change our focus
from what to collect or not to collect and turn
our hearts toward what we truly treasure.**

I'm not exactly sure what Jesus meant when he asked us to collect treasure for ourselves in heaven, but my hunch is that the treasure to which Jesus refers has more to do with memories and fulfilled promises than the items in our closet. In other words, it seems that Jesus wants to change our focus from what to collect or not to collect and turn our hearts toward what we truly treasure. I treasure seeing my son share a new funny face just before bedtime. I treasure experiencing the first moment when Scripture makes sense in a new Christian's life. I treasure the humbling and amazing calling of being a pastor. Of course, my son having a bedroom, having a place to hold Bible study, and having a car to

get me to and from the church all play a role in experiencing these treasures, but they aren't the treasure itself.

Did the wise men's gifts have some kind of effect on how Jesus understood the role of treasure in our life? It's hard to say. Late in Jesus's life, when Mary anointed Jesus's feet with expensive perfume, he neither dismissed her nor encouraged the other disciples to follow suit. When Judas became perturbed with what he assumed to be a waste, Jesus replies, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me" (John 12:7-8).

Maybe the real mystery of these treasures that bookend Jesus's earthly life is that they unapologetically point to Jesus's death. Myrrh from the wise men and nard from Mary. It isn't about the treasures themselves, but what they mean. Why do we offer gifts this time of year? Are these gifts a means of thanksgiving? Are the gifts we share a means of making sure all around us have what they need? Maybe the gifts we wrap and place under the tree have more to do with our own affluence and need to be accepted and desired?

When the Grinch takes the Whos' presents, food, and decorations, he isn't motivated by greed. He doesn't have a personal problem with hoarding earthly treasure. But within the story, his actions do call attention to the temporary nature of earthly things. He is the thief who breaks in to steal. Had the Whos placed their trust and hung their whole Christmas celebration on these things, Christmas would indeed have been stopped from coming. But as they sing on Christmas morning, surprising the

Grinch on the top of the mountain, they demonstrate the value of heavenly treasure, which no thief can take away and no earthly threats can destroy.

If the Grinch wasn't motivated by greed when he stole the Whos' Christmas presents, food, and decorations, what was his purpose in doing so?

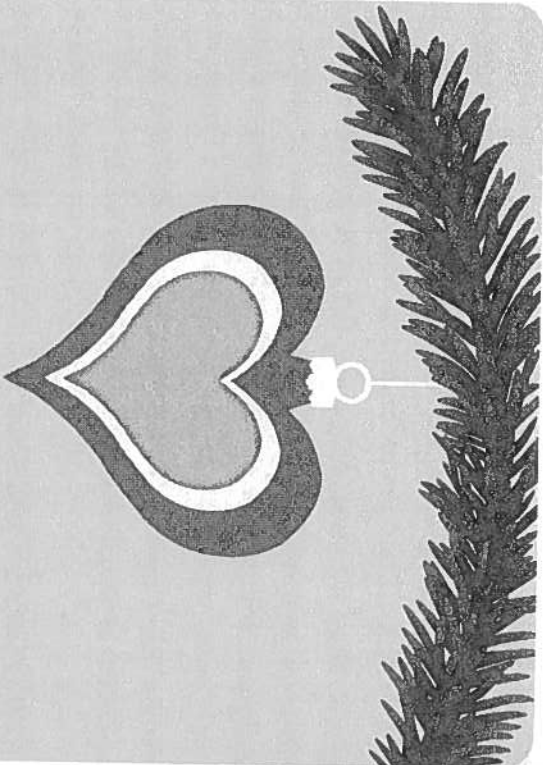
Do you collect anything, or know someone who does? If so, what is significant or special about the items you or they collect?

What do you think Jesus meant by "treasures in heaven"? What can you do to store up heavenly treasure for yourself?



WHEN YOU'RE SURE YOU'RE RIGHT

The Grinch stands at the precipice of Mr. Crumpir with a sleigh full of all the Whos' holiday fare. His sleigh teeters on the edge, ready to disappear into the abyss along with the Whos' hopes of a merry Christmas. The Grinch doesn't steal away Christmas for personal gain, power, or influence. At worst, it seems that he's causing harm for the sake of causing harm. It's like Saint Augustine who in the *Confessions* described his feelings about stealing pears from a neighbor's tree: "I was in love with my own ruin... not with the thing for which I was falling into decay, but with decay



MORE MAX!

The average time it takes to read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* aloud is about twelve minutes. In order to fill the television special time slot, the length of the story had to double. Geisel was concerned about the story feeling artificially padded, so when Chuck Jones, coproducer with Geisel, suggested they spend much of the extra story time needed by focusing on the Grinch's dog, Max, Geisel eagerly agreed, describing Max as "both observer and victim, at one with the audience...[an] Everydog—all love and limpness and loyalty!"² Incidental music and songs fill the remaining time needed for the 30-minute special.

itself."³ He wasn't hungry. He didn't want the pears in order to sell them at the market. He was in love with the act of stealing itself. It's true that the Grinch is bent on punishing the Whos for their love of Christmas, but does his dastardly deed go deeper? With a heart two sizes too small, why would we expect anything less than a love for wrongdoing? Regardless of his motivation, as he's pushing Christmas off the edge of a cliff, he cups his ear to hear the Whos' weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. He's convinced that what he's done has worked. He is certain that his assumptions are right.

It's true that the Grinch is bent on punishing the Whos for their love of Christmas, but does his dastardly deed go deeper?

Google is my father's nemesis. Before we carried tiny computers in our pockets with the wealth of human knowledge at our fingertips, my dad was a walking search engine. There was no trivia question too tricky. With the rare exception of the occasional "I don't know," an answer he's never been ashamed to convey, my dad had a working knowledge of just about everything. One Sunday afternoon while watching the New Orleans Saints play the San Francisco 49ers, my father left the den to refill the chips and salsa. While he was away the announcer mentioned that Steve Young, the current quarterback of the 49ers, had gotten his NFL start with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. When my dad returned I was so excited to share with him the new trivia factoid that I had

learned. “Dad, did you know that Steve Young got his NFL start with Tampa Bay?” My dad paused for a moment, undoubtedly searching his mind palace to either confirm or deny this new bit of information.

After a moment his lips started pursing, eyes began to squint, and his head started leaning slightly to the right. We knew at that point that Dad’s mind palace was coming up empty. He said, “I don’t think that’s right.” I told him that I had just heard the announcer mention it while he was refilling the snacks. He still didn’t believe me. Several minutes later the announcer again mentioned how Steve Young got his NFL start as a Buccaneer, but this time my dad was in the room to hear it. I looked back at him with an “I told you so, but I’m not going to say it, but I’m feeling it with every fiber of my being” kind of expression. Now, anytime someone in my family starts to purse their lips, squint their eyes, and cock their head to the side questioning whether or not something is true, we call it “Steve Young Face.” Of course, having a search engine in one’s pocket, it is a dangerous affair to meet a fun fact with “Steve Young Face,” which is why my father will never live this moment down.

Sometimes we just know we are right. In fact, I’ve never met someone who didn’t agree with his or her own position or opinion. The Grinch is sure that he will be successful in his attempt to ruin the Whos’ Christmas. He momentarily stops pushing the gifts off the mountaintop in order to hear the lamenting wails he is sure are about to radiate from the town below. I wonder if Herod opened the palace windows to hear the faint wailing all the way from Bethlehem.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,

wailing and loud lamentation,

Rachel weeping for her children;

she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

(Matthew 2:16-18 NRSV)

Herod was convinced he was doing the right thing to preserve his power and influence over the Jewish people. The very next verse in the story begins with, “When Herod died...” It’s a poignant statement of how poisonous our thirst for power can become, especially if we confuse earthly influence with eternal life. Not even Herod in all his efforts can escape the inevitable. His murderous rampage may have temporarily secured the throne, but this stark neighboring verse unveils how barren our quest for power becomes. This prophecy from Jeremiah is one I wish had gone unfulfilled, but it reveals that it’s relatively easy to imagine a future full of sorrow.

But there’s something startling in the Grinch’s story. His curious listening momentarily stops his awful idea. As he intently listens for the disappointed Whos, he forgets to nudge the gifts over the mountain’s edge. It’s like the stereotypical villain in a hero’s story. It appears that the villain has won, but just before pressing

the big red burton to destroy the world, he details his entire plan to the main character, and then he has the audacity to be shocked when his plan is eventually foiled. The Grinch's own sureness of success leads to his own failure to erase any sign of Christmas. Or could it be that somewhere, deep down in his small heart, he's unknowingly looking for a reason not to follow through? It reminds me of when Abraham was climbing Mount Moriah to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. I imagine that as he lifts the knife into the air, he is praying for there to be some kind of sign or revelation to stop him from doing the unthinkable. After all, before he traveled up the mountain he told his servants, "the boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you" (Genesis 22:5). Thankfully in Abraham's case, an angel of the Lord did swoop in to stay the knife. Could it be that Abraham carried just long enough for divine intervention to take place?

Could it be that God is at work even in the Grinches of our lives, even in the Grinch within each of us?

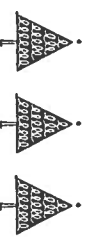
Maybe this is why we wait during the season of Advent. We pause and ponder the mystery that is about to take place. In our silent and pensive waiting, we make room for certain prophecies to go unfulfilled. We take the time to reconsider, or maybe weigh for the first time, the magnitude of what it means for God to take on flesh and become vulnerable in our selfish and power-hungry world. Could it be that God is at work even in the Grinches of our

lives, even in the Grinch within each of us? When they wait just long enough to validate their own justification, they leave room for the Holy Spirit to keep the toys on the cliff's edge, the gifts that will eventually become the vehicle through which they find peace and reconciliation.

What assumptions did the Grinch make when he came up with this his "wonderful, awful idea"? Which of these assumptions proved true, and which did not?

Why did the Grinch pause at the top of the mountain before flinging the Whos' possessions off the cliff? Was it just to savor his success, or do you think there was something else behind it?

What is the role of waiting in the season of Advent? What do we hope will happen as we pause for a moment and ponder what God is doing?



THE MANGER OF LOVE

We must be at peace with ourself, our neighbor, and our God. This peace offers a framework through which our holy imaginations can envision a godly hope, a hope that begins to blur the lines that we like to draw in the world, but then love... love begins to turn things upside down. Have you seen *Frozen 2*? You should. There is a great song that Queen Elsa sings called "Into the Unknown." One of the things I most love about the song

is the driving orchestration that makes the song sound like it's constantly on the move. I think most of us might add a question mark in the title—"Into the Unknown?"—and the orchestra for us might not be as gracious in its tempo and drive. At least for me the music would be much more tentative as I hesitate at the threshold of the unknown. Queen Elsa, however, sings it with boldness as if she can't wait to step out and experience whatever lies in store.

The third week of Advent offers us the grace and space to ponder Mary, Jesus's mother. Mary is thrust into the unknown, not unknown in the sense that she wasn't aware of what was being asked of her; rather, as is often the case with love, Mary is given few guarantees. I often chuckle when I hear the song "Mary Did You Know?" Mary, did you know? Yes! Mary knew a great number of things after she was visited by the angel Gabriel. Of course, she didn't know everything, which is a testament to her faithful response to what God was calling her to do. This journey into the relative unknown happens in three scenes: Annunciation, Affirmation, and Proclamation.

In the first scene, Annunciation, Mary is presented as a prophet in God's story.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might

be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

(Luke 1:26-38 NRSV)

Understand that when an angel says, "You have found favor with God," it does not mean wealth, prosperity, and the easy life. Mary, like the other prophets, is called to offer God's word, but unlike the other prophets, this calling asks for Mary to offer her entire self. Even today pregnancy can be dangerous. In the ancient world, mothers often quite literally gave their life for the child's. Mary was given no guarantees.

In the second scene she travels from the hill country in the north to meet with Elizabeth in the south, and when she arrives,

she finds that what the angel said about Elizabeth was true. There is Affirmation, but this affirmation doesn't solely rest with knowing that Elizabeth is pregnant. God is doing something remarkable in the background that we must understand. Israel had been a divided kingdom—Israel in the north and Judea in the south. When Mary and Elizabeth meet, it is a sign that God is uniting a divided people. Theologically, the kingdom is being restored. Not only that, Elizabeth is married to Zechariah, a priest and keeper of the law. Mary, as we have seen, is being presented as a prophet in her own right. So, not only is the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth a unification of the old kingdom, it is a coming together of the Law and the Prophets. Not only that, but God is doing this through two women who had no children. In the ancient world a woman's value was centered on her ability to bear children. Elizabeth was old and thought to be barren. Mary was not yet married and was a virgin. Yet through these two women and their miraculous children, God is unifying the kingdom, uniting the Law and the Prophets, and bringing hope for God's people into the world.

In this third scene, Proclamation, Mary offers a prophetic word commonly known as The Magnificat.

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
(Luke 1:52-53 NRSV)*

Mary did you know? Yes! But what Mary didn't know is what was in store for her. The angel said that she would be overshadowed

by God, but how dark would the shadow be? When Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the Temple eight days after he is born, the prophet Simeon says, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too" (Luke 2:34-35). Recently one of my church members wrote a beautiful reflection on the day before her son left to join the Marines, saying, "Our job as parents is definitely not an easy one... He has nine months before he leaves for basic, which is kind of fitting. I had nine months to get ready for him to arrive, and now I have nine months to get ready for him to leave."

**Love doesn't mean that everything will work
out the way we plan. Love doesn't mean
that there won't be suffering, hardship, or
guarantees of the "good life"; but love never
tires of making sure that we are valued and that
we are precious and that we are God's own.**

Annunciation, Affirmation, and Proclamation. Mary was moving into the unknown indeed, not because she didn't know who Jesus was or would be; rather she was given very little guarantee about herself, and she said yes to God anyway. That's the thing about love, isn't it? Love doesn't mean that everything will work out the way we plan. Love doesn't mean that there won't be suffering, hardship, or guarantees of the "good life"; but love never

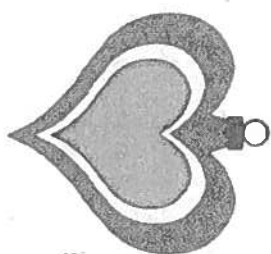
THE HEART THAT GREW THREE SIZES

ties of making sure that we are valued and that we are precious and that we are God's own. Peace helps us build a framework so that we have the holy imagination to hope for a better tomorrow, but love is disarming. Love is the dismantling. Love believes all things and bears all things. Love never ends. "How can this be?" Mary asked. Because nothing is impossible with God.

Think about Gabriel's message to Mary. What did she know after the angel spoke, and what remained unknown?

When have you followed God's call on an unknown path? What did you find as you ventured forth?

Can there ever be any guarantees in love? Why or why not?



CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN JOY IS OUR SONG

So, here we are. The Grinch has succeeded. None of the Whos have any presents or decorations or even food for Christmas Day. The Grinch is sure that his wonderful, awful idea worked, and he has every reason to believe that it had. He has this image in his mind that all of the Whos would wake up, and their mouths would be open for a minute or two before they begin weeping and wailing as they notice what had happened. Well, the Whos and wailing were open early in the morning, but they weren't weeping and wailing; rather they began to sing. What happened? Why were they not wailing? We might understand a melody of lament or a rallying cry encouraging the Whos to storm the mountain,