

The Real Christmas Story: Peace Sunday, 12/2/18

1 Have you watched any of your favorite Christmas movies yet since December rolled around, like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? Some of our favorite Christmas movies are nothing more than nostalgic entertainment, but many of them convey at least something of the real spirit of Christmas. Hope, peace, joy, and love aren't just words that we use when we light the Advent candles; they're descriptions of the meaning behind the real Christmas. Today we continue our Advent comparison of the Hollywood Christmas stories we know and love with what we know of the true story and spirit of Christmas as revealed in the Bible.

2 It's amazing how well known the writings of Doctor Seuss are. His whimsical stories with made-up words and sing-song poetry aren't just for kids. Behind his stories are serious messages for people of all ages. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has endured the test of time. The 1957 book was first made into an animated television special in 1966, a full-length film with Jim Carey in 2000, and most recently another animated movie this year featuring the voice of Benedict Cumberbatch. Apparently, the previous Grinches were a little too scary for kids, so the latest Grinch was given a cuteness makeover. We'll be watching some clips today from the original television special.

Here's the plot summary in case you've never seen any of the films or read the book. The Grinch lives alone in a cave with his dog Max, high up on a mountain top, far away from where all the Whos live in Whoville. The problem is simple. The Grinch hates Christmas, everything about it, but especially the noise and the singing. We're not sure how the Grinch came to live there, all alone in a cold cave, or just why it is he hates Christmas with such a passion. As you watch this clip, listen to the vitriolic tone of voice that's given the Grinch by the voice actor, Borris Carloff. Have you ever met someone who despised Christmas so much that they were determined to ruin it for everyone else?

{Show Scene 4 of How the Grinch Stole Christmas (1:29)}

3 Have you ever really thought about the narrator's guess that the Grinch's heart was "two sizes too small?" We sometime describe people who are kind as "big-hearted," right? But I don't think the size of the Grinch's heart was his problem. I think he was lacking peace in his heart. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, The Arbinger Institute describes the difficulties we

humans have with peace, whether it's in a family or work relationship or even in international diplomacy.¹ Their core thesis is that before we can be peacemakers, we first have to choose to have a heart at peace rather than a heart at war. Clearly, the Grinch's heart was at war, so much so that he went to ridiculous extremes to ransack Whoville of all the festive decorations and presents while masquerading as Santa Claus. In the words of Doctor Seuss, "But whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes, he stood there on Christmas Eve hating the Whos. Staring down from his cave, with a sour, Grinchy frown, at the warm lighted windows below in their town." Beneath his Grinchy frown was a heart full of hate, a heart at war. What does a heart at war look like for us?

Paul gave us a few clues in the earlier reading from Ephesians. A heart at war lets anger fester and fuel dreams and plans for revenge. A heart at war justifies stealing from someone else in order to satisfy our own wants and needs. A heart at war reveals itself in the foul language that it issues from our mouth, words that injure others instead of helping them. A heart at war is one that makes no room for God's Holy Spirit, crowding the Spirit out through persistent backbiting and profane living. And lastly, a heart at war is eager to prosecute perceived wrongs, turning a blind eye to the forgiving grace God offers each of us.

One of the not-so-secret secrets of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, is that each of us has the capacity to wear that same Grinchy frown, choosing to make ourselves and others miserable rather than living in the Peace of Christ. Why do we do that, and how can we leave that behind us, becoming the peacemakers God wants us to be?

4 Our first step in wiping off those Grinchy frowns from our faces is to recognize that we choose to put them there in the first place. The Arbinger Institute points out that "[n]o one, whatever their actions, can deprive us of the ability to choose our own way of being. Difficult people are nevertheless people, and it always remains in our power to see them that way."² What the author is referring to is our tendency to treat others as objects rather than people, and to exaggerate their faults in order to validate ourselves- something they call "horribilizing!" So, in addition to failing to accept responsibility for his own heart, one of the basic problems that robbed the Grinch of peace was that the Whos, living way down in

¹ The Anatomy of Peace. The Arbinger Institute, Berrett-Koehler, 2006.

² Ibid, p 130.

Whoville, were so far away from the top of Mount Crumpit that he never took the time or initiative to form a relationship with them. Looking down on them, figuratively and literally, from his high mountain cave, it was easy for him to think of them as problems rather than people.

Let's do a quick heart check. Do you have a heart at war today? Remember, I'm not asking you if you know someone else who does! We're each responsible for our own hearts, and the first step to making peace is finding it in our own hearts. Who, or what is it that we're at war with? Have you so identified someone with a problem in your life that in your heart that person has become less of a person and more of a problem? Have you taken the time to come down from your mountain to sit with them and listen to their own story, their own heart? As long as you feed your heart at war, practicing your hate through that litany of unhealthy ways of living Paul listed, there simply won't be any room for the Peace of Christ and your long wait for Christmas day is going to be a disappointment.

5 I've encouraged you before to see each person you meet as an iceberg, with the things you can hear and see about them representing the tip of an iceberg above the water, a small percentage of the total person they are. The Arbinger Institute suggests we routinely ask ourselves some questions that might help us develop more empathy for others, especially those we're at war with:³ What are this person's or people's challenges, trials, burdens, and pains?; How am I, or some group of which I am a part, adding to these challenges, trials, burdens, and pains?; In what other ways have I or my group neglected or mistreated this person or group; What biases am I harboring that obscure the truth about others and myself and interfere with potential solutions?; and what am I feeling I should do for this person or group? How could I help?

Have you noticed that when you take the time and open your heart to form an authentic relationship with someone, that it's hard to remain at war with them? I have a friend and mentor in the Minnesota Annual Conference that's modeled this behavior for me, and I've discovered that some of the same people I used to frown at as we were having rancorous floor debates at Annual Conference, now bring smiles to my face. It is possible to

³ Ibid, p. 190.

know and love people with different theological perspectives and even different political persuasions! Other people are not our problems. Other people are simply other people, and nobody really deserves our grinchy frowns.

6 So let's come back to our movie. How exactly did Christmas change the Grinch? We're picking up near the end of the movie, just as the Grinch pauses at the top of Mount Crumpit with his sled weighed down with all the Christmas trappings belonging to the Whos.

{Show Scene 16 of How the Grinch Stole Christmas (1:19)}

What changed the Grinch was not a debate with the Whos on the merits of Christmas. It wasn't a twitter storm or Facebook flame war. It was the way that the Whos demonstrated that they had hearts of peace. It was when the Grinch saw them steadfastly cling to their hearts of peace, in the face of his horrible efforts to ruin their Christmas, that he finally became curious and began to wonder if "[m]aybe Christmas, perhaps means a little bit more." That, of course, led to other positive changes in the Grinch's life. Go home and watch the movie if you don't remember the ending!

Who is it that's watching you this Christmas, watching to see if you have a heart at peace or a heart at war, wondering if there might be more to Christmas than the tinsel and candy canes and presents under the tree? How you foster your own heart of peace might very well be how another person takes a step closer to receiving the peace that comes from living in the light of Christ.



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...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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