

## **The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: How the Grinch Stole Christmas**

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Galatians 1:11-24**

So today we are jumping into what is probably the #1 most often-read book in my house. A couple of years ago, Julia took a special love to the story of the Grinch, and we have read it countless times ever since. It's probably the Dr. Seuss book that I can come closest to quoting, word-for-word, start-to-finish. I'm not quite there yet, but there is a distinct possibility that my 5-year-old has committed the whole book to memory by now.

In fact, when Julia first took a love to this story, I had about a 30-minute commute with her every morning. And so to pass the time, I managed to find a dramatized audio recording of the Grinch, performed by the Boston Pops Orchestra. Which we listened to. Every. Single. Day. For probably close to a year.

In fact, I'd say that for most people, the Grinch is probably one of the best-known Dr. Seuss characters, probably second only to the Cat in the Hat himself.

So, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is a story about this mean-looking, scraggly, snarly guy – I'm not actually sure *what* the grinch is supposed to be. He has some human characteristics, but he's covered in green fur. He looks almost monster-like, but he's more personable and more relatable than most monsters. He's basically a hermit. He lives alone in the mountains with his dog Max. There are no other grinches around, he seems to have no family; and he certainly has no friends.

And the mountains that the Grinch lives in overlook the town of Whoville. I don't know if this is the same Whoville that we see in the *Horton Hears a Who* book – I think that probably it is.

And the Grinch goes about his miserable, lonely life, fixated on the Whos down in the town below. The Whos seem always and forever happy. They laugh, and they get excited, and worst of all, they *sing*. The Whos *love* to sing. And the time of year that the Whos get the most bubbly and excited and happy is none other than the Christmas season.

Now, when you are isolated, and lonely, and have no friends and no connections, it's really easy to grow miserable. And the saying is true, that misery loves company. But the problem was, the Grinch didn't *have* any company, except for his little dog. And he would stare down at the Whos, day after day after day, and the Whos were basically this constant reminder to him of just how miserable he was. The happier they were, the more miserable he felt.

And so one Christmas Eve, the Grinch reached a breaking point and decided that he'd had enough of their happiness. He was going to steal Christmas. Steal all of their *presents! The ribbons! The wrappings! The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings!*

*Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,  
He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!*

But before he pushes all of the Christmas load over the edge of a cliff, the sun starts to come up. And the Grinch realizes that any minute now the Whos will be waking up to discover that Christmas – their favorite day of the year – is not happening this year. So he listens intently, just waiting for the sound that he has longed to hear for so many years. The sound of crying. Of despair. Of disappointment. Of pain.

Probably the sound that he felt within himself year after year, and just wanted to hear reflected in somebody else too.

And of course, as we know, that's not the sound he heard. Even when the Whos had lost everything, their Christmas song rose high. Because their joy, their happiness, their delight with life didn't come from a store, or from presents, or from Christmas trees. And their joy couldn't simply be taken by the likes of a miserable Grinch.

And that was all it took. A switch flipped inside him. *The Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.*" He whizzed back down the mountain to return everything that he had stolen, and he was welcomed with open arms. Welcomed into Whoville as the guest of honor. Where finally, for the first time in his life, he would discover that he was not alone after all. *He, he himself, the Grinch, carved the roast beast.*

This is such a beautiful story. I think probably, because in a way, this story is *our* story as people of God. It's kind-of the quintessential "conversion story" – the story of a lonely person stuck in their loneliness, going through the motions of life but never really *living* life, and growing angrier and angrier, more and more jaded with each passing day. For the Grinch, with every day that passes it gets harder for him to see glimmers of hope. Harder for him to remember what things like joy, and delight, feel like.

I think one of the geniuses of Dr. Seuss is that he never tells us *how* the Grinch got this way. Maybe he was born this way. Born with a heart two sizes too small. Or maybe life made him this way. "It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight." Did something happen to him to make him see the world this way? Or was this just the result of spending years all alone without friends and confidantes and loved ones? We don't know. But what we do see is that underneath all of that pain and anger and jealousy and underneath his gruff exterior, lodged deeply within him, stuffed so far down that you wouldn't ever be able to see or notice it, was a little part of him that always longed for something more. The part of him that came alive that early Christmas morning. The part of him that wouldn't let brokenness get the last word. We might call that little part,

hope. Or maybe a spark of divine light. The light of God's love that simply would not be extinguished, no matter how hard the Grinch tried. And that day, that spark began to burn inside of him. And it changed his whole life.

This may be a story written for children, but we see this story with different characters playing out over and over again in our lives. People who are hard to love, but who become dear friends once we manage to find a way in. People who, in the words of the 12-step community, have to hit "rock bottom" before finding their way out of painful and addictive cycles. People who live life one way, and then come face-to-face with Christ and their whole life is turned upside-down.

In today's scripture reading we hear the Apostle Paul re-telling his own story of conversion. His own story of coming face-to-face with Christ and experiencing his own heart growing three sizes in one day.

Most of what we see of Paul in the New Testament is in his letters, and we see a deeply-faithful follower of Christ. But he was not always that way. Before he converted to Christianity, Paul – formerly known as Saul – was a Jewish religious leader who considered himself "very zealous."

Now, in the world of the New Testament, zeal, or zealousness, or the role of a zealot, had a very specific meaning. We today might think of zeal as a sort of deep passion for something. A quality to be admired. But in the New Testament, the terms "zealous" and "zeal" referred specifically to a kind of passion for preserving Jewish religious and ethnic purity by whatever means necessary, including violence.

People who fancied themselves as zealots would look toward the Old Testament stories like Elijah in the book of 1 Kings, after he had called upon God to rain down fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice in the presence of all of the prophets of Baal, he doesn't just stop there but he then takes his sword and slaughters every single one of the prophets – which is what leads Queen Jezebel to put a price on his head. And later, when he is hiding out from the queen, Elijah complains to God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts."

Or later on, between the Old and New Testaments, we have reports about when the evil king Antiochus IV Epiphanes ordered a pig to be slaughtered on the Jewish altar – basically a huge slap in the face to every Jewish person in existence – a man named Mattathias witnesses a fellow Jewish man preparing to perform this pagan sacrifice. And so Mattathias, in his zeal, kills the man on the altar instead.

So when the Apostle Paul is talking about his zeal for his religious traditions, he's not just talking about being a passionate person. He's saying that before he knew Christ, he was *so passionate* about preserving and protecting the Jewish law and customs that he would be willing to violently kill anybody who appeared as a potential threat to those customs. We're not just talking about a run-of-the-mill Scribe or Pharisee who would

maybe make some noise and cause some problems. We're talking about an extremist. Paul was to the Jewish community what Westboro Baptist is to the Christian community, or what Jihadists are to the Islamic community. And when this little Jewish Christian community started to grow and spread, proclaiming that Jesus had been crucified and risen, and when they started talking about things like a "new covenant" and "salvation," Paul was reared and ready to rise up and stomp out what he perceived as a huge threat to Jewish teachings.

"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming," the Grinch named Paul proclaims. Well, different words. But same sentiment.

And just as he is really starting to gain some momentum – he stood as witness, giving his thumbs-up while Stephen was being stoned in the street – he stuffed the Christmas tree up the chimney with glee – something happens. It's not the sound of Whos singing on Christmas morning, but it is the sound of Jesus calling out to Paul after striking him blind on the road to Damascus.

And right then and there, something starts to burn inside of him. That same divine spark that burned deep in the heart of the Grinch and made him turn around and go back down that mountain with all his presents. That same spark that burns inside our hearts and grows our hearts, making us kinder, more compassionate, more generous, more loving than we ever would have been otherwise. The Spirit of God takes hold of us and makes us a new creation, giving us the grace and strength and power to set our old selves aside and step into the new life that Christ has created for us. Gives us a new birth and a new hope.

That spark of God's spirit starts to burn brightly and Paul is brought to his knees. Quite literally. His old life is gone. His zeal for traditions and customs, gone. His thirst for violence and bloodshed, gone. His shoes that are too tight and his heart that is two sizes too small, gone. His passion for persecuting the church, gone. And instead, all of that is replaced with a deeply-flawed but nevertheless passionate, charismatic, and gifted apostle who will start churches and champion the spread of the gospel into the whole entire world.

Paul, the persecutor. Paul, the zealot. Paul, the one who the whole Christian church had been afraid of. Paul would be the one to carve the roast beast. The one to write the very words that we read now, 2000 years later.

"Oh, Galatians," Paul writes. "You have people saying to you that the law is the most important thing in the whole entire world. People are saying that you can't even *be* a Christ follower unless you cross this T and dot this I. But let me tell you, I walked that life. I killed for that life. Literally. Killed for it. Killed for a life of impossible standards. And I can tell you, because I've been there. That life is no life at all. It is a life that is completely devoid of grace, and love, and hope. But the life that I am here telling you about right now – life in Christ – *this* is where our hope lies. Not in laws and codes and

customs, but in the grace of the God who poured himself out for us. It lies in the joy of knowing that we have a God who will go to Hell and back again for us. It lies in the depth of the love that God has for us, and the capacity that God has given us for love.

Our hope doesn't lie in following ancient laws and empty rituals. Our joy doesn't lie in presents and Christmas stockings and food for the feast. So rather than searching in all the wrong places to have that divine spark inside of us light up with the love of God, may we instead take today to notice how God is already working within us, growing our hearts three sizes today, so that we can turn around yet again and find ourselves transformed.