

The Heart That Grew Three Sizes: Great Expectations

Isaiah 61:1-8

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He is the ultimate in Christmas nastiness - even Ebenezer Scrooge pales in comparison. The adjectives applied to him capture just how nasty he is - mean, vile, foul, and nauseating. His heart is variously described as an empty hole, full of dirty socks, and, perhaps most indicative of all, a dead tomato splotted with moldy purple spots. Now, there might be several different people who come to mind when you hear these words, but they were written by none other than Dr. Seuss himself about the Grinch who stole Christmas.

Though the Grinch made his first appearance in a poem published in 1955, the well-known, much-loved story, "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" appeared on the scene in 1957. It is everything a Christmas story isn't supposed to be. Lest you need a quick reminder, Dr. Seuss tells the story of this nasty, vile grinch as someone who hates, and I emphasize hates, Christmas. He lives on a mountain above the charming village of Whoville, where the happy Whos are excitedly preparing for their festive celebrations of the holiday. The Grinch seethes as he watches them putting up Christmas trees, decorating their homes, wrapping presents, and otherwise joyfully engaged in Advent anticipation. He is so disgusted by all the hoopla that he comes with a "wonderful, awful idea". On Christmas Eve, after all the Whos in Whoville are sound asleep, he sneaks down the mountain and steals every bit of Christmas he can find - Christmas trees, stockings, presents, cookies, the whole shebang. In the morning, he expects to hear the Whos crying and wailing, broken-hearted to find Christmas has been taken from them. But, instead, he hears them singing. Gathered around the village center, they hold hands and sing songs of joy and hope, peace and love. And despite his every intention, the Grinch is moved by their Christmas spirit, his heart fills with all that Christmas truly means and then grows not one, not two, but three sizes.

This Advent, our worship theme comes from the ending of the Grinch's story. We're calling it "The Heart That Grew Three Sizes" based on the book by Matt Rawle of the same name. As with our study of Adam Hamilton's *The Walk*, people of all ages - children, youth, and adults - will be learning about faith through the story of the Grinch. We'll also be showing the original television special of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" in Connections next weekend, and we'll have a special edition of Tuesdays Together that is an Advent storytelling night on December 9. You are invited to come enjoy dinner and then stick around after to tell a story of a time when your heart grew three sizes.

All of that said, we are, of course, a church, and the story at the center of our faith is not the Grinch but the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So, I'll be offering the Grinch's story as another lens through which to understand Advent and the stories leading up to Christ's birth from a more contemporary perspective, starting today with our theme of "great expectations".

As the story of the Grinch begins, the Grinch clearly has expectations of what Christmas will bring. He anticipates that the Whos, annoyingly cheerful as they prepare for the holiday, will only seem interested in the superficial trappings of the holiday - mistletoe wreaths and gifts

wrapped with ribbon, mantels with stockings, and roast beast of all things! In the Grinch's eyes, all of this is meaningless and just leads to what he hates the most - the noise. The noise. Noise. Noise. The Grinch is sure he knows what's coming. There can be no doubt. His hate of Christmas and his wonderful, awful idea to stop Christmas from coming, all start with his expectations. It's just the opposite of what we experience. We enter the season with such high expectations. There will be picture perfect decorations, warm gatherings of friends and neighbors, the best ever Christmas cookies, a stunning tree, joyful Christmas shopping, beautiful holiday lights, and a Christmas Eve service that brings tears to the eyes. As Christmas morning approaches, we anticipate a visit from Santa, gifts under the tree, something special from someone who loves us, the joy of overstuffed stockings. We look forward to seeing the smiles on the faces of our children and grandchildren, hearing squeals of delight, and possibly even shedding a tear or two of appreciation for a gift so perfectly chosen.

That is a lot of buildup. A lot of anticipation. A lot of hoping for what Christmas will bring. A lot of potential for disappointment. The question is what will you do when disappointment comes? When something goes wrong? The tree falls over. The kids have a fight. The cookies get burned. A bag of gifts gets stolen at the mall. Everyone gets the stomach flu. The child you haven't seen in years decides not to come home. The expectations you have held in your mind and your heart are suddenly not fulfilled.

This tension between expectations met and unmet is right at the heart of the Christmas story. This is what our scripture reading from Isaiah is all about. The book of Isaiah has three distinctive parts. The first 39 chapters, written by the prophet himself, take place before Judah is overrun by the Babylonians and all of her most prominent leaders and thinkers were sent into exile. The prophet warns of these coming events unless the people, who have rebelled against God, return to God's way. Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, was written by followers of Isaiah during the exile and are full of hope that one day God will redeem the people and restore Jerusalem. Finally, third Isaiah, also written by the prophet's followers, takes place after the exile when a faithful remnant of God's people return to Judah filled with expectations for redemption and restoration only to be oppressed by rebels within the Jewish community. In these chapters, the focus is on a much bigger picture of redemption and restoration - the promise of a Messiah who will usher in God's reign, a kin-dom including not just the people of Judah but people of all nations, a kin-dom in which there is peace, good news for the poor, freedom for captives, comfort for those who mourn.

Isaiah 61 prophesies the Messiah's words as he describes what God has sent him to do. And for more than five hundred years, the people waited expectantly for the Messiah to come. And for more than five hundred years, they found themselves in the no-man's-land of unmet expectations.

Yet, as Matt Rawle writes, "the Christmas story is a story about how God seems unconcerned about our expectations". God works in God's own way through the power of God's spirit. Who would have expected that the Messiah the people were waiting for would not be a Divine Warrior but a brand-new baby born to an unmarried, teenage girl in the backwaters of Bethlehem? Who would have expected that his arrival would be announced by a baby born to an elderly, barren couple who had given up on ever having a child of their own? Who would have expected that God would come and live among us, taking on both our flesh and our burdens and saving us through the unrelenting power of love?

Sometimes, the unmet expectations, the disappointments, even heartbreaks of our lives, end up opening the door for God to bring something or someone we never knew we needed - if we are prepared to see it. That is what makes these Advent stories so hopeful, so beautiful. Despite all that could go wrong, Mary and Joseph and Zechariah and Elizabeth remained open to the unexpected. Open to the possibility that God was doing something totally new.

As we enter into this Advent season, what expectations do you have? Are you ready for some expectations to be unmet? How will you respond? Do you have faith that even if you don't see it, God is still working to bring something good, some surprise, to your life, to the world? Isn't that what the hope of Christmas is all about?

Rawle writes, "Sometimes our expectations (especially those unmet) humble us and make us question everything. Sometimes we fight God in our disappointment. Other times, we are surprised by the love we find at the end of our efforts. When have the unmet expectations in your life changed you?"

On Christmas morning, the Grinch expects to hear the wailing of heartbroken Whos in Whoville when they discover that every piece of tinsel, every gift bow, every twinkling light, every roast beast is gone. He anticipates his own dark glee in knowing that he has caused their disappointment. He has stolen Christmas. He has taken away what means the most to them. Yet, on that special morning, all those nasty, vile, just plain mean expectations go unmet. There is no wailing. Not a tear is shed. Rather, the Whos are singing. Singing their joy arm in arm, hand in hand. Because the Whos know that no matter what you might expect, you can't steal Christmas away. The Whos sing because Christmas isn't really about the decorations and the presents, the trees and roast beast. Christmas is about this unexpected child born in an unexpected place to unexpected parents for the purpose of embodying God's love in the world.

And Advent, these weeks before Christmas Eve, is about preparing ourselves and our lives for the unexpected in however God chooses to reveal that love to us!

May it be so. Amen.