

Advent Letter: November 25th, 2020

The other day I was reminded of the ending of the Dr. Seuss book, "How the Grinch stole Christmas," by my father. As you know, the Grinch, whose heart is three times too small, hates Christmas and everything to do with it. To stop it from coming, the Grinch concocts a plan to steal Christmas away from the Whos down in Whoville and on Christmas Eve he puts his plan into action. While the whole town is asleep, the Grinch steals the presents, ribbons, and bows. While the Whos' dream of the Who equivalent of sugar plums, the Grinch takes the Christmas trees, wreaths, and mistletoe. Every morsel of food is packed away tight and loaded onto his sleigh, not even a crumb is left for a mouse and it is all carried off in the night. Before the "stuff" of Christmas is cast aside, the Grinch turns his ear to the town as Christmas morning's first light breaks over the horizon. He thinks he will hear sobs and cries, but instead the Grinch hears joy. The Whos had all gathered and joined hands to sing. They sang songs of peace, hope, and love and the notes lifted into the mountains and rested upon the Grinch's ear. The Grinch then realizes something that changes his life, "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store." "Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

During World War one, something much like what we read about in the story of Grinch took place in the trenches of France in 1914. It seemed that the war had stolen Christmas away and yet on Christmas Eve soldiers on both sides of No-Mans land discovered that Christmas meant so much more than the war they were fighting. Soldiers from each side of the conflict, came up out of the trenches for a one-night, unsanctioned truce. They laid their weapons down and greeted their foes. There are accounts of soccer games, hymn sings, even Christmas trees decorated with candles, shell casings and tin can lids fashioned into stars. Food was shared, gifts were shared, peace was shared. In the grips of war, the message of Christmas would seem to mean little, but as Dr. Seuss wrote, "Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

This week we begin the season of Advent and as we do, I wanted to lift these two different yet similar stories of the light of Christmas shining through against all odds. Advent, as you know is a time of preparing for Christmas; a time to prepare ourselves anew for the arrival of Christ. We sing hymns like, "O come, O come Emmanuel," words that remind us that God is with us. We mark these Advent days by lighting a candle each week to signify the growing light of God's love coming into the world. We prepare ourselves by praying for and focusing on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. Our preparations extend beyond our church practises as well. In our homes we decorate beautiful Christmas trees and play music that brings us joy. We fill our homes with the scents of delicious treats. It is a beautiful season in the church and in our homes, one we look forward to and anticipate.

This year though, Advent and Christmas feels different; in some ways it feels like its slowly being stolen away. The pandemic we are currently in has changed how we will celebrate this season quite substantially. Rather than singing the songs we love to sing together at church, we listen to others sing them on Zoom and join our voices in the quiet of our homes. Rather than greeting one another with good cheer, we stay at a distance, our mouths and noses covered, our eyes expressing our longing to be close to one another. We desperately want to share a drink, a hug, a meal, but to do so moves against the health regulations that are in place. We want to share in the love and joy of this season, but it feels odd, almost like Christmas is not coming; like it could just slip on past without us even noticing.

I have noticed over the last couple of days that more and more people are turning to social media to express a longing for what was and sharing the worry that this year, being so different, will make Advent and Christmas less than what it should be, or in some cases eliminate it all together. This is why I began with those two stories and which is why I now say this to all of you; regardless of whether or not Christmas feels like it normally does, regardless of whether the songs of peace are sung, regardless of whether or not we share in a big meal with those we love, regardless of whether or not there are gifts under our trees and in our stockings, the promise of Christmas means so much more than we can imagine and bursts through that which seems to hold it back or steal it away.

In times of great famine, Christmas has come. In times of war and violence, Christmas has come. In years of plenty and peace, Christmas has come. In years when we were alone filled with grief and worry, Christmas has. In the years when we have felt great and love, Christmas has come. Even in the years when it feels like something outside our control is trying steal Christmas away like the Grinch, Christmas still come. The reason it does, is that Christmas is so much more than what we can make of it. Christmas is more than our traditions in the church or in the homes. Christmas means more than the gifts under the tree and in our stockings. Christmas is about God's love coming into the world in profound and tangible ways; the presence of the Holy in our everyday norms, is the promise of Christmas.

The word Emmanuel means God is with us. That means that our preparation in Advent is not about decorating a tree for God to sit under. It is not about building a gingerbread house for God to live in. It is not about ensuring that there is a big meal ready and waiting for God to eat; preparing in Advent means preparing a place in our hearts for God's light of love to reside. It means making ourselves ready, to be the vessels where God's hope, peace and joy can take root and blossom.

Every year Christmas comes, whether we are ready or not. Christmas comes whether we have all the decoration up or not. Every year, regardless of wars, famine and yes even pandemics Christmas comes. It comes because Christmas is about the reminder of God's presence, hope, peace, joy, and love in this world. Christmas is about sharing that love and joy in relationships with other, whether that is with those in our immediate families or with our extended friends on zoom. All we need to make ready, is ourselves to receive that wondrous reminder anew

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," those words of Jesus remind us that no matter what God is always with us and what more do we really need? Yes, Advent and Christmas will be different, but the message of these season remains unchanged; God's everlasting and present love, remains the same regardless of anything else.

May you embrace that promise fully and may you know just how loved and cherished you are.

Sincerely,

The. Rev. Adam Hall