

Do you guys realize today is December 21? That means there are only four days left until Christmas! And then 3 days for you to make all your returns and hit the after-Christmas sales, then New Years parties and then school starts back up!

Why are you here?! You've got *way* too much to do!

Kidding. Well... I'm kidding about you not being here. I'm glad you're here. But this *is* a crazy time of the Christmas season, so I thought rather than do a sermon, I would invite you all to take a big, deep breath and relax, just for an hour or so. Ready? (Deep Breath)

In fact, why don't you enjoy this bit from one of my all-time favorite Christmas movies (no, not *Die Hard*).

["You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch"]

[Image of the Grinch, maybe the book cover?] Fantastic, right? Not just because Brad's awesome, but that movie is so great! The evil Grinch, who we learn suffers from a rare cardiac condition - his heart is two sizes too small. And so he sets out to steal Christmas from all the Whos in Whoville, who are all so cute and precious it's frankly pretty disgusting.

Growing up, I always put myself in the shoes of the Whos. The Grinch was outside, in the cold, isolated, alone, far from the joy of Whoville's holiday festivities. As a kid, I just loved the film because it has a classic happy ending - the Whos get Christmas back because the Grinch has a change of heart.

But as I've gotten older, I've begun to appreciate the layers of the story more. See, according to Dr. Seuss, what the Grinch hated about Christmas was the Noise! Noise! Noise! and the Feast! Feast! Feast! and how they Sing! Sing! Sing!

So he dresses as Santa, and then, in an inversion of Christmas stories, he climbs down the chimney and *takes* presents rather than *giving* them. Convinced he's stolen Christmas, the Grinch returns to his mountain top Fortress of Solitude gleeful.

But the next morning, [Let's do these with the graphics on the page if we can]

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He *hadn't* stopped Christmas from Coming! It *came*!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And that of course leads to the big revelation that's the heart of the story:

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "*doesn't* come from a store.
"Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!"

The reason this story resonates with us is *not* because it's cute, or it rhymes and it's neat. And not because in the end, the Grinch carves roast beast.

No the reason we read this story again and again is because we see ourselves in the Grinch. We get distracted from the true meaning of Christmas. We get caught up in the craziness of the season and we forget to look past the parties and presents. We get tired of the Noise! Noise! Noise and the Feasts! Feasts! Feasts! and we'll scream if we eat one more bite of roast beast!

If we're honest, it's right about now - just a few days before Christmas - that our inner Grinch begins to peek his ugly green head out and leer at the festivities around us.

We need to pause, to be reminded that "Christmas, remember, *doesn't* come from a store. "Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!"

What's fascinating about this story is how completely the Grinch is isolated. Aside from one brief conversation with Cindy Lou Who, the Grinch doesn't talk to anyone. In almost every story, the main character has to resolve his narrative problem with help from other people. But in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Grinch comes to his realization purely through witnessing the Christmas joy of Whoville.

For the Grinch, Christmas was parties and presents, but for the Whos, Christmas was something more. And when the Grinch gets the smallest glimpse of that *something more*, it swells his heart three sizes, completely transforming him.

Once his heart has swelled, the Grinch rushes to Whoville to join in the festivities and he's welcomed with open arms.

The Whos in Whoville make an enormous impression on the Grinch. He has thought Christmas is all about parties and trees and presents, but he learns Christmas is about community, friends, relationships. If you'll forgive the homonyms, the Grinch learns Christmas isn't about presents, but presence.

[This presents/presence thing is the key. Maybe use the illustrations from Seuss? The Grinch with his over-packed sled and the Whos around the tree?] And that's why I can see myself in the Grinch. I can easily get so caught up in the trappings of Christmas that I miss the people in my life. I can get so busy trying to be GOOD at Christmas that I miss Christmas entirely.

I see myself in the Grinch. I'm grinchier than I thought. I need to be reminded like he did that Christmas is about so much more than things, stuff, presents, that Christmas is about relationships, about the life that God brought into the world to rescue and redeem us and that at the bottom of it all it's *relationship*. It's God's presence, God with us, Immanuel.

We can excuse the Grinch for getting Christmas wrong, can't we? We're sympathetic. We know where he got the idea that Christmas is all about earning and achieving. That is the American Christmas story.

[A nice Santa Clause] If you grew up in America, you grew up with Santa Clause. Santa who brings boys and girls presents, who sneaks benevolently into your house, eats the food offerings you leave him, leaves presents and flies away.

Except that's not the *whole* Santa story, is it?

Not everyone gets presents. Some boys and girls get lumps of coal in their stockings. The deciding factor, the difference between gifts and coal, is your behavior.

We sing songs celebrating this: "You better not pout. You better not cry. You better watch out, I'm telling you why: Santa Clause is coming to town." It has a nice tune, but that song is flat out creepy... and it only gets worse as we go along.

[Image of Creepy Grinch Santa] He sees you when you're sleeping... He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness' sake!

Yup... we tell kids that Christmas depends on their behavior. When we take them to see Santa, and they sit on his lap and tell him what they want, what does Santa ask them? "Have you been good this year?"

That's not a random, abstract question. There's a subtle threat beneath it, an implication that this whole holiday shebang depends on the child's ability to be good (which if like me you were not a rule-following kid, pretty much made the six weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas one long stress-headache).

And then, a few years ago, when the threat of Santa with one trip to the mall to see him each year wasn't enough, parents: what did we do? [Picture of Elf on the Shelf] We introduced Santa's Little Snitch.

So yes, we can understand where the Grinch got the impression Christmas is all about decorations and parties and presents and cheer. That's how we prepare to welcome Santa and his eight flying reindeer.

[Scripture Slide] But there's a better Christmas story, one that's not up to us. This is, of course, the story of Jesus, the story of God coming among us. If you have a Bible (or a Bible app), turn with me to Romans 16. If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the back table on your way in, you can find Romans 16 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one; consider it an early Christmas gift from us.

As you're finding Romans 16, this is a letter written about 60 years after the first Christmas, about 30 years after Jesus died and rose from the dead. It's written by Paul, who is Jewish. Paul is part of the People of God, the people who had been waiting centuries for God to come among them.

Paul realized that first Christmas meant God had come not just to the Jewish people, but to the whole world (Jews called everyone who wasn't a Jew a 'Gentile'). And so after Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus, he spent the rest of his life going all over the world announcing the Christmas good news: that God has come into the world to rescue the world, to offer new life.

This letter we call Romans was written to a church in Rome. It was a church Paul hadn't started, but was planning to visit. And it was a church that was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. We're reading the very end of the letter, and Paul has spent the whole letter working out how Jews and non-Jews can live together, worship together, celebrate this new life Jesus brought them together. He ends with something called a doxology, which is basically a song of celebration and praise.

You know when you're watching musicals and everyone bursts out into random song and then you think, "No one does that in real life." Well doxologies are sort of like that. Paul will be writing about how awesome God is and then he has to stop and write in a few sentences where he just says, Oh man, God is *so awesome* you guys!

So let's read the last few verses of Paul's letter together, and listen as he breaks out in doxology. We're starting in verse 25:

Now all glory to God, who is able to make you strong, just as my Good News says. This message about Jesus Christ has revealed his plan for you Gentiles, a plan kept secret from the beginning of time. But now as the prophets foretold and as the eternal God has commanded, this message is made known to all Gentiles everywhere, so that they too might believe and obey him. All glory to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, forever. Amen. -- Romans 16:25-27

[Leave the Scripture up during this section] The word "doxology" comes from the Greek for "glory", which is why it starts out "All glory to God..." At the heart of a doxology is a celebration of God's glory.

Now, I can't think of a more churchy word than "glory". What does it mean? It's positive... but specifically, what does it mean to say God has glory? Or "All glory to God"?

The word originally meant "heavy" or "weighty". Something that's glorious has weight. Importance. It leaves an impression.

So important people are glorious. They leave an impression. And Paul says that God is the most glorious, the weightiest, the most important. God leaves the biggest impression. Why?

Because of Christmas: "This message about Jesus Christ has revealed his plan for you Gentiles, a plan kept secret from the beginning of time, but now... made known to all Gentiles everywhere."

Paul says, in the Christmas story, in Jesus finally appearing, God makes the biggest impression of all human history. All glory to God.

[Manger on a Scale?] And that's a strange thing for Paul to say. Especially at this moment. Because 60 years ago, a baby was born in a manger in a little town no one outside of Palestine had ever heard of. And the people Paul is writing to, if you asked them where Palestine was, they'd act like we do when someone asks us about Eastern Europe - uh... Kazakhstan? Uzbekistan? Stanististan? Those are... somewhere, right?

60 years later, there were maybe a few thousand Christians in the world, gathered in major cities in the Roman Empire. They were nearly all extremely poor. A few we might consider middle class. Perhaps a very few elites.

And Paul says this is how the Creator of the Universe came into the world. That in that manger, this God has made the biggest impression on the world we've ever imagined.

That thanks to this god-baby, people everywhere can be free from sin and death. That they can know a life that is so rich and full and vibrant and overflowing it makes what they had before look like death in comparison.

That in the Christmas moment, God placed his hand on the rudder of human destiny and *pushed*, and now instead of rushing headlong into death, we can step into life.

And we didn't have anything to do with that. We didn't seek out God. God came to *us*. This is the Christmas miracle: God *is with us*. We have been given a great gift, an incomparable gift: the mystery of the ages, the secret to life and human flourishing has been revealed and we did nothing to earn or achieve or deserve. The Christmas Story is God with us, God's presence among us. Humanity, restored to God and vice-versa. No wonder Paul breaks into song!

[Bring back the Grinch side-by-side] Compare that to the Grinch's assumptions about Christmas, to the doxology we sing about Santa. Christmas is about parties and presents? He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good so be good or the elf will snitch on you!?

That's... that's not actually a very good story. Hey! You can have all this stuff as long as you earn it! "Good news: I hope you made the cut" isn't actually very good news.

Now: my point is not to dismantle our Christmas traditions. They're fun and cute and kids love them. I don't think it would be the *worst* thing in the world to teach our kids that gifts come with no strings attached. After all, the original Santa Clause, St. Nicholas, *did* give kids stuff without any conditions. But anyway...

Who in here, as a child, didn't go bananas about Christmas? Who doesn't remember rushing to see what was under the tree, tearing open presents? For kids, Christmas is largely about presents. And that's fine. They're kids. We were all kids once.

But if you're anything like me, now that you're an adult, you barely remember the vast majority of the presents you got as a child. I'm willing to bet what you remember are the relationships. Those special times with your family, pauses from the normal routine. As you've grown up, you've realized that Christmas is about the relationships those gifts celebrate, not the gifts themselves. The gifts *point to* the people you love.

This is why *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is a cartoon, a children's book. The Grinch got the impression that Christmas is about presents and parties, not presence and relationships. That's a fundamentally childish way to look at Christmas. But the Grinch got that picture of Christmas from *us*, from what *we've* turned Christmas into.

As I've gotten older, I see myself in the Grinch too often for my own comfort. My problem (and I'm willing to bet *our* problem) is that I fall back into that childish way of thinking *every* year. In the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, I *forget* that Christmas is about who I'm with, not what I'm getting (for others or for myself). I find myself growing grinchier and grinchier, my heart shrinking two sizes at least, until I can't even enjoy my tenth Christmas feast.

I think it's easier for us to believe the universe is quid pro quo. That God is essentially a cosmic Santa Clause, treating us like we treat each other - do for me and I'll do for you.

It was hard for the Grinch to believe Christmas could be about something more. The true meaning of Christmas was something that eluded the Grinch. Not because it was hidden, but because he hadn't looked for it. So too, it's hard for us to believe what the Christmas story tells us: that God is with us, that God isn't angry, that God has removed every barrier to life with God and all we have to do is say Yes. Yes to God's presence in our lives, yes to the free gift God has given us.

What the Grinch needed was to see Christmas, the celebration of relationships, of presence at the heart of the Christmas story. So too with us. We need to see the true meaning of Christmas: when God came into the world, he left an impression of grace. God is *with* us. God is present. The Christmas story *is* that good.

Which story will you live this Christmas season? *Will you fall back into the childish Christmas of quid pro quo, the grinchy celebration that comes from a store? Or will you remember Christmas means a little bit more?*

In these last few days before Christmas, what imprint are you leaving? Is your legacy going to be, "Gosh, they really *tried hard* to be good at Christmas!" *They bought and fought and tried and tired, and in the end they left Christmas feeling not so inspired.*

Or is it going to be a celebration of who God is, of what God has done for you? Will you leave an imprint of grace on this Christmas, one that echoes that first Christmas, when God came to us as a child?

Will the hustle and bustle be ends to themselves, a relentless, unending, suffocating press? Or will they point you to the God came to us on that first Christmas?

Will you get lost in the parties and presents and baking and cheer? Or will you let Christmas mean a little bit more this year?

We have our songs of the kids Christmas, the grinchy Christmas. The "better watch out" Christmas.

But Paul wasn't content with a present or token. So he thought about Christmas till his thinker was broken. The he thought some more until he thought something better. And he burst into song, even in the midst of a letter.

So today, let us celebrate the First Christmas that reminds us of what this Christmas is truly about - *not stuff from a store like roast beast or a present, but the God let us all in on the great, eternal secret.*

The appropriate way to respond to the glory of Christmas, to the imprint God leaves on our lives, is song. As the great theologian Buddy the Elf said, "The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loudly for all to hear."

Let's sing together, loud and proud!

[Songs of Celebration]

Communion SetUp

Now that we're all full of Christmas cheer, we approach the Communion Table. This table is the reminder of the imprint God left on the world. That the same God who came to us as a baby, who made his impression through weakness and surprise, continued that path by dying for us.

Christmas is the beginning of the story that continues at the Cross, and this meal remembers the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was crucified. That night, he broke bread and passed

it to them, telling them it was his body, broken for them. His body, given over to their sinfulness, their selfishness. Broken for them, by them.

So too we take wafers to represent our own grinchiness, our own inability to love well, the smallness of our own hearts.

Later in the meal, he passed around a cup of wine. He told them it was his blood, spilled to create a new relationship between them and God. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to represent that God is the one who grows our hearts three sizes. God is our source of new life, and it is through this meal God imprints himself on our lives.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive this meal. If you recognize your own grinchiness and crave God's imprint on your life, if you're willing to let Christmas be about a little bit more today, then you're invited forward.

Everyone does Communion differently, so here's how we do it at Catalyst: I'm going to pray for us, and then as you're ready, come forward by the side aisles. Take a wafer and dip it in the juice, then eat it and return by the middle aisle.

Let's pray!

Benediction

You are the Church God placed here in Rowlett.

Your presence is the best present your people could get.

As you leave here be mindful of the impression you're leaving

That all you encounter might leave richer this season.

This has been a chance to pause and reflect

Now go in the grace and peace of the Father, Son and Spirit!