

Community Context: Church of the Good Shepherd, Nashua, NH- 8am & 9:45am Services

Liturgical Date/Readings: First Sunday after Christmas-All Years RCL/John 1:1-18

Date: December 26, 2010

Homilist: The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

This week, listening to New Hampshire Public Radio, I heard an interviewer speaking with Donald Pease, a Professor of Literature from Dartmouth College. Professor Pease has been officially named NHPR’s “Grinch-ologist.” He is a bona-fide Dr. Seuss Scholar who has recently written Seuss’ biography.

At dispute was the meaning of invoking the word “Grinch” to describe people who lack Christmas Spirit or are otherwise grouchy without any holiday cheer. The Grinch is the personification of every person’s unChristmas-like mood, who cannot get into the Christmas Spirit. The Grinch has to go through a change of heart before entering into fellowship with others on Christmas. Let’s not forget that there are 12 days of Christmas afterall!

What was fascinating to me was Pease’s description of why Dr. Seuss wrote the “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” Seuss, having experienced the economic devastation of his family which marked him for life, was looking for family and connection as a student at Dartmouth College. Dr. Seuss originally wrote the story of the Grinch in response to his own lack of Christmas Spirit. On December 26th, 1925 he woke to find the Grinch looking back at him in the mirror. His own lack of Christmas spirit disturbed him so much that he wrote “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” to address his gloominess.

The Grinch is a character with a heart problem, which is linked to a seasonal disorder similar to ‘cabin fever’ because he’s gone through so many dark days. Winter is a season in which the dark days come to a standstill eventually giving way to a new day.

Christmas is part of a season in which light and peace, fellowship and mutual understanding overcome the forces that prevent these things from being possible. The Grinch is a seasonal tale about a figure who emerges from a cave at a decisive turning point in both his life, as well as the calendar year, in order to experience a transformation.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

The story of the Grinch reminds us this time of year that light is a precious thing, and without some exposure to light, we feel physically diminished. Our bodies need light to thrive.

Today’s Gospel reading from John speaks to the need of all people yearning for the light. Just as our bodies need light to thrive, so too our souls need light. The light we experience in our Gospel feeds the need for light in our souls just as much as recognizing light as a physical source of life this time of year.

On the heels of Christmas Eve and Christmas day, we are reminded that God sends the light we are in such desperate need of into the world through Jesus Christ, God's only begotten son.

As Pastor Charles said in his Christmas Eve blessing, when Jesus is born his skin is as new and radiant as sunlight at dawn and his soul is as old as the cosmos. Jesus our Savior, Jesus the Word of God, *is the light of the world.*

The first line of John's Gospel mirrors the creation story of Genesis. John has no use for mangers, shepherds or wise men following a star. He cuts to the chase, addressing the foundation of our faith: God entering into all of human history, making a new creation. John addresses how God is faithful to us even though we are broken, living in darkness.

God chooses to send Jesus, the light of souls, into a broken world, into a world in need of healing, so we too might come to testify to the light like John the Baptist.

The gift of Jesus' light is that all who receive him, become children of God. By opening our hearts and lives to Jesus' light we are born of God.

When we allow Jesus into our lives, inviting him to take an active role in shaping our lives, we are transformed. Our darkness, our shortcomings, our resentments, jealousies, hurting hearts and broken relationships are not the end of the story.

Later in his life Dr. Seuss received a letter from two brothers with the last name "Grinch" who were being harassed by other children because of their name. Seuss wrote the brothers saying, "I disagree with your friends who harass you, can't they understand that Grinch in my story *is the hero of Christmas?* Sure, he starts out as a villain, **but it's not how you start out that counts, its what you are at the finish.**"

When we open ourselves to relationship with God through Jesus, through the amazing gift of the Word made flesh, we who have lived through the darkest days are invited to prepare a place in our hearts where light overcomes darkness.

Nothing we have done, nothing we have thought and nothing we have suffered is beyond the transforming power of Jesus' light, life and love.

We are given a gift this Christmas to end all gifts. Think of the best present you ever received in your life. Think of that gift with all its thoughtfulness, with all of its meaning and generosity. That gift is just a glimmer of the gift we've been given by God through Jesus' light coming into the world.

When we receive this gift, we open our eyes anew we experience the light of Christ surrounding us everyday. When we see the abundance we have, blessed with a warm place to rest our heads, having our physical hunger satisfied, recognizing we have enough to share with others and in that act of giving we receive, we experience the light of Christ.

One of the essential things for us and the Grinch is that we don't let the darkness overcome us. We may encounter the darkness but we are called to a different place, we are called to God's light.

When we encounter God's grace in our lives—when we feel beyond redemption, healing and love—the gift of grace appears to help us transform to another place.

In the story of the Grinch, this moment of Grace happens when he realizes stealing all the presents doesn't stop Christmas from happening, the Whoville's joyfully sing their song *anyway*. Their song is one of deep fellowship With their hands clasping hands as a sign of the light and fellowship of the community. Their song is the sound of human welcome, which transforms the Grinch's heart.

When we let God into our hearts, through community, relationship and love, we make good and plenty room for the transforming power of Grace.

This Christmas season let us live with confidence that “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Sources: WorkingPreacher.org/Textweek.org/NHPR.org ‘Word of Mouth, ‘Taking back the Grinch's Good Name’ interview by Virginia Prescott’