

The year was 1957. A country music singer by the name of Bobby Helms had a Christmas hit single: Jingle Bell Rock. Two new children's books written by Dr. Suess were published just in time for Christmas: The first one was The Cat In The Hat. The second one was The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. Is it one of your favorite Christmas Classics?

"Every Who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot.... But the Grinch, who lived just north of Who-ville, did NOT!"

Not since "Twas the night before Christmas" has the beginning of a Christmas tale been so instantly recognizable.

Sixty three years later, for many, the holiday season is not complete without the Grinch, Max, Cindy-Lou, and the residents of Who-ville in this heart warming story about the effects of the Christmas Spirit on even the smallest and coldest of hearts.

For me, when I read the book, watch the cartoon, or the movie, I always get goosebumps when Grinch hears the Who's singing even though he had stolen what he thought Christmas was all about.

"And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

Our advent candles remind us of that little bit more.... the first candle was Hope. Last week we lit the candle of Peace. Next week is love. Today is joy.

If there is a single word that describes what Christmas is all about, it's the little word "joy." Several of our favorite carols mention it: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," "O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant," "Shepherds, why this jubilee, why your joyous strains prolong?" "Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice," "Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies, with th' angelic host proclaim, 'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'"

In the Bible, we read about the angel who said to the shepherds:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you; you will find the baby wrapped in cloths lying in a manger."

Luke also tells us that when the shepherds found the baby, they rejoiced. Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel we are told that the Magi were overjoyed when they saw the star.

When Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, met with His disciples in an upper room the night before His death, his parting words were about joy. I think it took them by surprise as

joy often does. As they heard what was about to happen, they also heard Jesus say to them, “You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy... Now is your time for grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy... I have said this to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

With those words, Jesus was saying to them and to us that joy can be ours even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Regardless of what is happening around us and to us, we can still know the joy of Christ.

Much has been written about both the presence and absence of joy in our lives.

C.S. Lewis was a British author who wrote the beloved childhood classic *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He is also well known in many Christian circles for his books about the Christian faith.

In his autobiography, he shares that his search for God really began as a search for joy. There were moments in his life when he had experienced joy, and he mentions specifically the delight he experienced in reading books and discovering poetry. For him, experiences like that whetted his appetite for more joy. His search for joy eventually led him to a search for God who he eventually discovered was the source of all joy.

Listen to what he wrote about that spiritual discovery and its connection to joy:

“In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else... it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again.

For Lewis, the way we get joy is by finding God. Or better, by being found by God. He wrote: “It’s a divine gift that comes our way only through God. However, I’ve come to believe that joy isn’t just a gift; it’s also a choice. You get happiness in all sorts of ways, chiefly from favorable circumstances. But biblical joy comes from the presence of Jesus Christ in your life.”

Lewis sums up his thoughts about joy with these words: “The Christian life is an invitation to choose to enter into the joy of God through our relationship with Jesus Christ and to experience intimacy with the One who is joy itself. Our experience of joy often comes as a result of delighting in God and sharing in the wonder of having a personal relationship with Christ.”

This year, in particular, your heart might feel like the Grinch's two sizes too small. It has been a difficult year and there are challenging months ahead. I have no doubt that each and every one of us have had moments of not feeling too joyful. We are weary of this pandemic, lock downs, stay at home orders, and social distancing. We just want to put our arms around our loved ones, greet our friends with a hug, and see smiles on the faces of those we care about.

God promises to be present with us no matter what we are feeling. God promises to be a trustworthy and helpful companion who will help us to meet challenges and enable us to experience joy.

Draw near to God in this season to find much needed peace for your soul and refreshment for your spirit. Seek out opportunities to extend God's gracious generosity so others experience the warmth of God's unfailing love. May you experience joy knowing that this baby born into a manger into turbulent times still holds our anxious world in his hands.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.