

December 24, 2017—Christmas Eve
Christmas (I)
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Here we are on Christmas Eve. I would say “Merry Christmas!” but, as I was reminded by someone just before the service started, it’s still a little too early for that. Remember, Jesus isn’t yet born, though Mary’s birth pangs have begun. She is in labor, far from home, and far from the midwife who delivered *her*. She is in sketchy accommodations and must trust a man she barely knows. I imagine her, with each contraction, replaying in her head the words of the Angel Gabriel: “Do not be afraid.”

One of my earliest memories is Christmas Eve midnight mass at my family’s Roman Catholic church. The last time my family attended, I must have been only five or six years old, so the details are fuzzy. But I do remember very clearly the excitement of dressing up and leaving the house at a completely outrageous hour. I remember sitting in the pew, struggling to stay awake ... and then being lifted. Having fallen asleep, I roused only partially as I was carried to the car, into the house, and to bed.

That’s a simple story, but for me, that memory carries the essence of peace and security. The truth is, during my childhood, those feelings were hard to come by. But for fleeting moments, the arms of my church and the arms of my family united. That memory has stayed with me, evidence of the possible at times when I needed it. I’m not particularly nostalgic, but every Christmas, I think about being a child at midnight mass. I think about those feelings of peace and security. I think about what it’s like to have them, and what it’s like not to have them. I think a little about myself, and I think a lot about others. .

One of the other things I remember about the Christmases of my childhood is how much I loved the original cartoon film of “Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” In those low-tech times, you got one chance a year to see it, so its broadcast was a big event. I was 4 years old the first time it was broadcast, in 1966. You might say I’m a member of generation Grinch. I don’t remember a time before the Grinch, so the Grinch has always been a part of my Christmas.

As the story goes, the green meanie with a heart two sizes too small hates Christmas. Fed up with those annoyingly cheerful Whos, the Grinch plots to “stop Christmas from coming.” Dressed in a homemade Santa outfit, he sleds down to Whoville with his faithful dog Max.

At “the first little house on the square,” he drops in via the chimney and begins raiding the family’s Christmas treasures. As he stuffs the Christmas tree up the chimney, decorations and all, a spherical glass ornament falls off and rolls across the floor. The sound rouses Little Cindy Lou Who, who arises and glides off in search of its source. The fake-Santa lies, saying that he is taking the tree to his workshop for lighting repairs. As he puts it, “I’ll fix it up there, and I’ll bring it back here.”

Little Cindy Lou Who believes him. He soothes her with a pat on the head and a drink of water, sends her back to bed, and finishes ransacking her house and then rest of the village. Having loaded his sled with every token of Whoville Christmas, the Grinch returns to his mountain hideout.

I may have always been a Grinch fan, but it's only this year that I realized just how realistically adult the storyline story is. For that realization, I have to credit the members of Congress who voted for the tax overhaul bill. It's as if the Grinch has sneaked in, packed up our treasures, offered empty promises of eventual return, patted us on the head, and headed for the hills. Only this time, he's not coming back. Safety and security are beginning to seem like a luxury that few can afford. What would Jesus do?" I feel certain that Jesus would oppose almost everything that tax bill will effect.

Still, do not be afraid. Fortunately, it's Christmas, and there's hope. Mary is about to give birth to Jesus the Christ, the second person of the Trinitarian godhead, both fully divine and fully *human*. The Word made flesh, love made flesh, holiness made flesh—and flesh made holy.

When it comes to peace and security, the message seems to be that some bodies just don't matter. But that just can't be. On every spectrum of measurement, from one end to the other and everything in between, every body is perfect in its own way: from the youngest to the oldest, from the tallest to the shortest, from the most usually abled to the most unusually abled, from the female to the male, from the darkest-skinned to the lightest-skinned. Every body is perfect, and every perfect body deserves peace and security. Every perfect body is worthy of our care and concern.

I feel pretty certain that conservative Christians have gotten so much all wrong. For too long, they have been the voice of all Christians. But it doesn't have to stay that way. Progressive Christians now have the chance to seize the opportunity, and to make this moment ours. To do that, we have to claim the Gospel, more *deeply* than ever before—and to proclaim its Good News, more *loudly* than ever before. If we take a pass ... then shame on us. It will be yet another indication that the church decline we lament is actually well deserved. I think we're up to the challenge. Do not be afraid.

Near the end of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," the Grinch hears the Whos, gathered on Christmas morning, holding hands and singing. Christmas came despite his dastardly deed. "Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store; maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more." The Grinch's heart grew *three* sizes that day.

During the celebration of Holy Eucharist, just before distributing the bread and wine, the presider says this: "The gifts of God for the people of God." They may add this optional sentence: "Remember that Christ *died* for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving." During the service tonight, I'm going to try this instead: "Remember that Christ was *born* for you, and *nurture* him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving."

Remember that Christ was *born* for *you*, and *nurture* him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving. If we do that, maybe *our* hearts will grow three sizes this Christmastide. Maybe our extra-large hearts will pump our bodies with new energy. Maybe we will confront the Grinches of our time with songs of love. And maybe the result will be peace and security, for ourselves and others. These days, we seem to have a lot of small hearts to make up for. With God's help, we will.