

Christmas at the Movies 2021

The Grinch

December 5, 2021

Good morning everyone!

Whether you're here on campus or watching online, I'm so glad you've joined us today.

And I'm so glad that it's finally time for my favorite series of the year ... *Christmas at the Movies*.

I love this series because I get to use all the creative and technical genius of Hollywood to illustrate and demonstrate the points I'm trying to make in my messages.

And what's not to love about that, right?

Of course, if you're new to North Heartland, you might be thinking, "hmmm ... I'm not too sure

about that. I thought preachers are supposed to use *the Bible* and not movies as the source material for their teaching.”

“So, what’s this guy doing? What’s he up to?”

... which is a fair question and one you should ask about any church: “why are they doing whatever it is they’re doing?”

So, let me explain why, for the next three Sundays, we’ll be using Christmas movies as our source material.

Bottom line, it’s because *that’s what Jesus did*.

Not literally, of course, because movies hadn’t been invented yet.

But what Jesus did so often and so well was to tell stories; stories about people and things that everyone could relate to.

And He did that so that his teaching would impact his listeners much more deeply – *at the heart level* – than just spouting facts and truths and principles.

I mean it's one thing to just say, "God loves even the people who turn their backs on him and reject him" ... which is true.

It's quite another to tell a story about ...

- A son who leaves home and squanders his share of his father's wealth ...
- Who then, when he returns broken and empty-handed ...
- ... is met *not* with the judgment and shame and condemnation he deserves.
- But instead – surprisingly, shockingly – encounters grace and mercy and

celebration ...

And then, after you've told that story, to add – as Jesus almost always did:

- *That's* what your Heavenly Father is like.
- *That's* what the Kingdom of God is like.
- “*That's* what it's like when you become part of the realm where He is King and Ruler; when you begin to live by *His* ways instead of *your* ways.”

... which is why I think if Jesus was walking among us today, He might say something like ...

“Hey, did you see that 2018 movie *Dr. Seuss' The Grinch*? You know, the one with Benedict Cumberbatch as the voice of the Grinch?”

“The Kingdom of God is like *that*.”

And then He would go to explain ... which is what I plan to do over the next half hour or so.

So, would you pray with me as we begin?

Holy Spirit, I ask right now that you empower these clips and my words in a way that would impact each of us deeply so that ...

- We can know You better ...
- And become less like ourselves, and more like You.


I ask in Jesus name, amen.

So, let's get into it.

First of all ...

1. How many of you have actually read the

book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas?*

2. How many of you have seen the made-for-TV version that came out in 1966?
3. How many of you actually saw it in 1966?

4. Who has seen the Jim Carrey version?
5. Who has seen the version we're using today – the 2018 production?

What I love about this most recent version of the Grinch story is that it goes a lot deeper into *why the Grinch is so grinchy* as well as what ultimately leads to his transformation.

Basic Storyline

But, before we get to that, let's do a quick review of the basic storyline.

And the story begins by making one thing very, very clear: *what Christmas means to the Grinch.*

In this first clip, there are only a few days left until Christmas, and with each passing day the Grinch has become more and more ...

Well, let's watch ...

***Video Clip ***

The Grinch hates Christmas so much that he can hardly even say the word!

And he's been so upset about it that he's literally out of food from "eating his emotions" ... which means he has to go down the mountain to Whoville for groceries ... which means he'll have to encounter the Whos.

Now, what Christmas means to the Whos is completely the opposite of what it means to the Grinch.

They are *into* it.

And they want everyone else to be “into it” right along with them ... as this next clip vividly illustrates.

Check it out.

Video Clip

One of the things I love about the way they made this movie is that they didn't shy away from the *spiritual* significance of Christmas.

By no means is this a “Christian movie” nor are they trying to evangelize, but it's clear that the Whos are celebrating the birth of “Christ our Savior” (as the song puts it).

And, about that song ... there are lots of traditional Christmas carols they could have used, but I suspect they chose *this particular one*

for a reason ...

... because the Grinch is ...

- Someone whose entire life is one big dumpster fire of dismay
- And someone who *needs* to hear tidings of comfort and joy.

In fact, I think that even the way the song is presented by the carolers is significant to the story.

But ... I'm getting ahead of myself.

Anywho ...

While the Grinch is in Whoville on his shopping trip, he discovers that the mayor of Whoville has requested that the Whos make this year's Christmas celebration *three times bigger and*

better than ever before ...

... which, predictably, irritates the Grinch three times greater than ever before ... so much so that he decides it's finally time to do something about it.

Something drastic like pretending to be Santa and *stealing Christmas* from the Whos ... which he does on Christmas Eve.

Let's watch.

Video Clip

That's some incredible animation, isn't it?

I really envy people who can "see" those kinds of things in their imaginations and then actually produce them. It's amazing.

Anyway ... the Grinch is almost finished with his "steal" of Christmas. There's only one house left

to go.

But, in this particular home, he is surprised by – actually, he’s trapped by – Cindy Lou Who ...

... a little Who-girl who doesn’t want *presents* for Christmas.

Instead, what she wants is for “Santa” *to help her mom* because her mom is worn out from *always helping everyone else*.

As we watch this scene, pay close attention to the Grinch’s reaction to her request and to Cindy Lou Who herself.

Here we go.

Video Clip

In spite of that surprising interaction with the strange little Who-girl, the Grinch heads back up the hill to his cave intent on dumping all he has

stolen over the cliff.

But something happens – which we'll look at in a bit – which leads him to change his mind.

And he heads back *down* the hill and returns everything to the Whos.

Let's watch.

Video Clip

Ok, so there you go.

That's the basic framework of the story, so let's dive into it a little more deeply

Handling Disappointment

And let's begin with what the Grinch said about why he “stole their Christmas.”

He said, “I thought it would fix something that happened a long time ago, but it didn’t.”

Now, if you read the book or saw the original made-for-TV animation, you know that this part of the story is new. It’s been added on by the screenwriters.

And some folks (like me) *love it* while others – the “Dr. Seuss purists” (so to speak) – pretty much *hate* it. And I understand why they feel that way.

But the reason I love it is because it illustrates so well what so many of us do ... and why we, in so many ways, become Grinches ... and not just about Christmas.

We become “grinchy” about *everything*.

- About people

- About God
- About life in general.

So, what was it that happened a long time ago that the Grinch was trying to fix?

We learn what it was when, a few days before Christmas, the Grinch unexpectedly (and comically and literally) winds up in the middle of Whoville's tree lighting ceremony ...

... and has a flashback and experiences a panic attack.

Check it out.

Video Clip

Wow. "I must stop this whole thing!"

So, what happened to the Grinch in this make-believe story?

The same exact thing that happens to so many of us at some point (or maybe even multiple points) in real life.

- Someone fails us or doesn't live up to our expectations, and it hurts us. Deeply. Badly. It wounds us and scars us.
- And then we face a choice – a crucial choice with long-lasting implications.

If you saw the movie, you may remember that at one point, the Grinch says that he has been enduring Christmas – no, he's been *despising* Christmas – for 53 years.

For 53 years, his life has been ruled by anger at the Whos in general and at Christmas – the birth of “Christ our Savior” – in particular.

He's ruled by it and he's a slave to it because of

the choice he made; a choice that every single one of us has to make when people *and/or God* fail us and wound us.

See, some of us are wounded and hurt because, in our minds, *God* has failed us and *God* – “Christ our savior who was born on Christmas Day” – has not lived up to our expectations.

And the choice we have to make whenever that happens – whether it’s people or God ...

And it *is* a choice.

The choice we have to make can be expressed in several ways.

- To become bitter ... or better.
- To become closed off and self-protective ... or to remain open and vulnerable.
- To turn *from* God ... or turn *to* God.

- To harden our heart ... or to try to keep it soft.

I like that last one best because of the biblical proverb that says ...

Above all else ...

And in the original Hebrew that means “above all else.” It means “take this seriously,” make it a top priority in your life.

*Above all else, guard your heart
for it is the wellspring of life.
Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)*

And “guard your heart” doesn’t mean “keep it from ever being hurt” because that’s not possible in the real world.

Instead, it means ...

- Be careful of what you allow it to embrace and dwell on ...
- Be careful of what you allow to live there and grow there ...

Because whatever it embraces and dwells on ... whatever lives there and grows there ... *that* will begin to shape and direct your entire life and maybe even the lives of the people around you.

And if what dwells there and lives there and grows there ...

If what your heart embraces is anger and bitterness and rage, eventually it will become hard.

And if there is one thing that is impossible to miss from reading the Bible, it's that you don't want to be hard-hearted because so many bad and destructive outcomes are guaranteed to follow.

For one thing ...

When your heart becomes hard, you will eventually make the transition from *victim* to *perpetrator*.

That's what happened to the Grinch, right?

- He was a *victim* of whatever happened to his parents that left him orphaned when he was a child; maybe even a victim of neglect by the people of Whoville.
- And because he had allowed his heart to grow hard in response to that experience, he had become a *perpetrator*.

He began to think evil *of* and do evil *to* others ... the greatest evil being what he thought would “fix what had happened a long time ago.”

But it didn't fix anything because it can't.

Instead, all hardening your heart ever does is to ensure that your own misery, dismay, and isolation will continue.

Check this out.

Video Clip

Redeeming a Grinch

Now, I know what some of you are thinking at this point.

You're thinking, "dude, this is just a movie – a *children's movie* – and you're making waaaaay too much of it."

And I might agree with that except for the fact that, for some people in this room or watching online ...

I just described your life.

- I just described where you are right now, today, and where you've been for many years.
- Or I just described where you're headed if you don't choose another way to deal with the pain and anger from "what happened to you a long time ago."

And for some of you, I didn't describe *your* life. I described the life of someone you *have* to love or have *chosen* to love.

And you're at a loss as to what to what might release them from their self-imposed prison because it pains you to see them so miserable.

What does it take for that to happen whether it's for you or for someone else?

I think it takes three things.

And incredibly – and probably not intentionally – this movie illustrates all of them.

We've already seen the first one ...

1. ... which is repentance.

Now, repentance is one of those “churchy” words that people *think* they know what it means but they really don't.

Most people think repentance means to “clean up your act; stop doing bad stuff.”

But it doesn't.

Now, it might *result* in that – and likely *will* result in that – but what repentance really means ...

... is to see things from a different perspective; to change your mind about how life really works.

It means changing your mind about the strategies that will make life better for you and for everyone else.

And, again, we saw the Grinch do this when he said, “I *thought* that stealing your Christmas ... I *thought* that doing evil to you would address the pain I feel over the evil done to me.”

“But I was wrong. And I am sorry.”

That’s what repentance looks like. “I was wrong, and I am sorry.”

And if you’re ever going to break out of the emotional and spiritual prison you’ve built for yourself, you need to change your mind about how you handle it when someone fails you or doesn’t live up to your expectations.

You have to admit – to say out loud to God and to anyone who will listen – that your strategy of

hardening your heart ...

- Has not worked and is not working
- That it is not good
- And that it is destroying you and others around you.

And you have to be willing to learn and embrace a new strategy, which is ...

- To be open and vulnerable instead of closed off and self-protective.
- To turn *to* God instead of turning *from* God.
- To do things that help you become better instead of bitter.
- To do things that soften your heart instead of allowing it to harden.

And none of those things are easy or you would already be doing them, right?

So, you might need to get help. And there's no shame in that.

But where it starts is with *repentance*. That's the first thing ... repentance.

As for the two *other things* that need to happen ... well, that's what's illustrated by the ending of the movie.

As we saw a few minutes ago, the Grinch has departed Whoville in shame, returning to his cave expecting to continue living a life of dismay.

But something – actually, *someone* – happens which changes everything.

Let's watch.

Video Clip

As good and necessary as it was for the Grinch (and for you and me) to repent – to change our minds about what we think is the best way to live ...

It's not enough because when you *really see* the foolishness and destructiveness of your ways, it can break you.

When you really see who you really are – the depths of your depravity, it can reinforce the thought that *you are not worth loving* and push you into an even deeper pit of despair and dismay.

So, what's needed ... what the Grinch needed ... what *we* need is ... what the people we *have* to love and have *chosen* to love need ...

... is *grace* AND the faith to accept it and live in it.

So, let's talk about grace.

And I know there are lots of ways to define it but let me put it like this.

2. "Grace" is when someone actively pursues you in your shame and then treats you better than you expect and deserve.

Grace is Cindy Lou Who knocking on the Grinch's door and saying "yep, I know what you did. And I'm not sugarcoating it. It was wrong. It was evil."

"But you're invited to dinner anyway because *you still matter* in spite of what you've done."

Grace is the father in Jesus' story of the prodigal son ...

Grace is the father seeing his broken and empty-

handed son walking home in shame and ...

- “While he was still a long way off”
- Being “filled with compassion for him”
- And then running to him, throwing his arms around him and kissing him.
- And then throwing a dinner party to celebrate.

Grace is that scene earlier in the movie when the Grinch is being chased by the choir singing “Let nothing you dismay! Don’t despair Mr. Grinch!”

Remember that Christ our savior was born on Christmas Day to save us all from Satan’s power

...

- When we had gone astray.

- When we had believed the lie of The Enemy that injustice and suffering means God doesn't love us and doesn't care about us.
- When we had hardened our hearts and become bitter towards God
- When we didn't *deserve* to be pursued ...

“There's good news Mr. Grinch! Jesus came to save us anyway!”

“Oh tidings, glad tidings of comfort and joy ... even *for you!*”

And if we or those we love are ever going to break free of our bitterness and hardness of heart, it's going to take being overwhelmed by that kind of grace from God and from others.

3. But it's also going to take the faith to accept and live in that grace.

I love how the movie illustrated that with the Grinch hesitating before he rang the doorbell.

Remember what he said? “They’re all gonna’ hate me.”

But that was the old way of thinking. That was the kind of thinking that put him in the prison to begin with.

And because he had repented of that – he had changed his mind about it – he was finally able to enter in and rest in the grace he had been offered.

And some of you who have become so bitter about your life – so hardhearted towards others and even towards God ... maybe today for the first time, you’re seeing the foolishness of your ways and you’re willing to embrace a new way.

And maybe it’s dawning on you that God’s grace

is pursuing you in spite of that. That's why you're here today. God drew you here so you could hear this message, so you could become aware of it.

But you need to *accept* his grace and then live begin to live in it.

In just a minute I'm going to give you the opportunity to do that.

A Question

But before I do, I want us to watch the final scene of the movie because I have a question for those of us who are Christians: a question for those of us who say that we believe in and follow Jesus.

And I know that not everyone who attends or watches online *is* a Christian and so this question is not specifically for you.

But the final scene in which the Grinch is invited to carve the roast beast raises a question in my mind.

As we watch, listen closely to what he says.

Video Clip

“To kindness and love, the things we need most.”

Here’s my question: Where are people going to find that in this world?

Where are people going to discover the kind of grace that actively pursues them in their shame and then treats them better than they expect and deserve?

“Well, Rick, that’s what Jesus does isn’t it?”

Yes, of course.

But before most people meet Jesus, they meet Christians and churches.

So, the question is ... when people meet you, and people meet me, and people come through the doors of this building on a Sunday morning ...

... what do they experience? Is it grace? Or something else?

One of the most amazing things to me about this story is how whenever the Grinch does his worst to the Whos, they are at their best.

Let me say that again: whenever he does his *worst*, that's when they are at their *best*.

Every single time.

And, again, this isn't a "Christian movie," but the Whos continually do what Jesus taught.

- They love their enemy instead of hating

him.

- And they don't return his evil with evil. Instead, they bless him.

My point is this: if you're a Christian, Jesus said you are a part of a great and wonderful city on a hill that lights up the world around it ... *kind of like Whoville.*

And it takes a Who for people – hurting, broken people – to discover the “what” of grace.

And you and I, individually and collectively as a church, are called to be those Whos.

We're called to be living in God's grace ourselves and then sharing that grace with others.

Because it takes a Who for people to discover the “what” of grace.

A Taste of Grace

Now, a few minutes ago, I said I would give whoever needs it an opportunity to accept God's grace, but I don't want to oversell what we're about to do ...

Because, for some of us, it's going to take a long, long time to find freedom from the prison we're in.

It's going to take a repeated process of repenting and being overwhelmed by grace and then trusting that grace and living in it.

And you might need some help with that.

Lucky for you, that's what a church is for. Lucky for you, that's part of the reason *this* church exists.

But for today I want to offer you just a small taste of grace. So, I invite you to do in the next few moments what the Grinch did at the turning

point of the story.

Remember, he had “stolen Christmas” from the Whos – or so he thought.

And just as he was about to push it all off the cliff, he made an amazing discovery. And he took his very first step into grace.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip

It’s a great movie. I hope you’ll watch it this week and that you’ll come back next Sunday (whether in person or online) and invite someone to join you.

Adios.