

# Transforming Humbug to Joy

## Third Sunday of Advent

*Zephaniah 3:14-20   Luke 3:7-18   Rev. Todd B. Freeman*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa   December 13, 2009*

The assigned lectionary Gospel passage for today again deals with John the Baptist. Since last Sunday's sermon was about his message of "Prepare the way of the Lord," I thought I would instead focus today on the subject of the third candle in our Advent Wreath – **Joy**.

To introduce that, let me first ask if there is anyone here this morning who doesn't know how the Grinch stole Christmas? Dr. Seuss' Grinch character has become such a part of our modern, popular culture that a grumpy, joyless person is often referred to as "a Grinch". And have you ever noticed the similarities between the Grinch and another literary character that was created over a century ago by Charles Dickens in his tale, *A Christmas Carol*? Who isn't familiar with Ebenezer Scrooge and his infamous line, "Bah Humbug"?

**It's not hard to notice that there are many, many people living with a deep-seated Grinch-like, humbug attitude - and especially around Christmas.** I'm almost embarrassed to admit that with each passing year that's becoming more and more of my attitude toward this season. Not with the religious and spiritual aspects of Christmas, but with the secular consumerism approach to this holiday – the attitude that attaches the economic message that in order to save the economy each year at this time its every American's civic *duty* to spend money they don't have on gifts that their loved ones often don't want or need and cannot return for cash. For many people, this causes stressful impossible-to-meet expectations. I also know that I'm not alone in this increasingly cynical attitude toward this time of year.

Studies reveal, in fact, that the emotional pressure-cooker of the Christmas season causes cases of serious depression to increase and even the rate of suicide to rise. **Like myself, you may know someone, perhaps even yourself, who has an especially difficult time during this season. This being the case, I think it is imperative, from a pastoral perspective, to keep ourselves open and sensitive to others and their emotional state, as well as our own.**

For as much as we anticipate Christmas, there are many of us who also look forward to the time when it's over. At one level, that's kind of sad. But on another level, perhaps it's a good thing to become more aware that we've been sucked into all the hype and commercialism. **It all makes me truly wonder what Jesus himself would have to say about what we've turned the celebration of his birth into.**

Along with all the hype of this "Joyous Season" we are almost made to feel that we *ought* to be happy, that anyone who isn't happy at this time of year must be a truly miserable person – a real Grinch, a true Scrooge. The Rev. Peter Gomes, the now

retired chaplain at Harvard University, once preached a sermon entitled "Humbug and the Christian Hope." He states:

We compound our problem by mixing this all up with the church of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith, thinking somehow that a whiff of incense on Christmas Eve or the invocation of the manger scene with its pious simplicities will somehow make it all right. Of all the humbugs about, this one is the most grievous.

The Christian faith is *not* the sugar-coated pill we swallow at Christmas to make us feel better and the world look better. Indeed, the church has a medicine for this condition, a cure and corrective for this acute case of humbug; it comes in the form of this Holy Season of Advent and in the substance of what is called Christian Hope.

Gomes summarizes what he means by Christian hope with the following wonderful statement. **"The Christian hope is based upon the assurance that the God who formed us out of God's love and [dwells among and within us] will not abandon us in that future into which God calls us."** So let us remind ourselves again during this season that **it is this assurance of God's constant presence that transforms humbug into joy.**

In the December 2000 issue of *Presbyterians Today* the cover article was entitled, **JOY: God's Unexpected Gift.** It was written by Ben Campbell Johnson, a recently retired professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, and of Christian Spirituality, at Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia (just north of Atlanta). He begins by asking that same common question, **"Why is it that even in the Advent-Christmas season of joy so many people feel flat or depressed?"** He answers, in part:

After a rather long journey with Christ, I have discovered a few things it does *not* mean. When we are joyless it does not mean that God is displeased or angry with us. Neither does it mean God is punishing us for our sins. And, most important, feeling a lack of joy does not mean God has forsaken us.

In a sermon last year in October, I focused on a passage from Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, Rejoice." From that same article from Ben Campbell Johnson I shared a list possible contributors to a sense of joylessness. See if any ring true for you as I share this list again this morning.

- False expectations.
- Confusing happiness with joy.
- Refusing to face our pain.
- Struggling with skewed relationships.
- Feeling haunted by things in our past.
- Suffering from clinical depression.
- Running away from conflict.

If any of these raise a red flag for you, perhaps that may help explain a lack of joy in your life. And perhaps it can act as a guide for some of the things you need to address in your life. Ben Campbell Johnson adds, "Most of these behaviors will clamp the pipeline of joy and keep it from flowing freely into our lives. A personal inventory might reveal some of these hindrances to joy."

I'd also like to reintroduce one other element that I shared in that sermon from last year. Peter Gomes, in his sermon, "Humbug and the Christian Hope," shares something that may help all of us during this Advent/Christmas season. It deals with the particular issue of confusing happiness with joy.

**Joy and happiness are not the same.** Happiness seems to depend on our external circumstances. If our circumstances are pleasant, our needs are met, and we have the approval of family and friends, we generally feel happy with our lives.

But joy is different. It comes from within and does not depend on our circumstances. While we may work on or even clear up some of the things that rob us of joy, we cannot create our own joy. Joy has a gift-like quality. It appears in our lives as a consequence of growth or change or a special relationship with others and especially in our relationship with God.

In contrast to happiness, joy can overflow even if we are in bad circumstances. Even in difficult and trying circumstances that could never be called happiness, joy can overflow to nurture and sustain us. To put it another way, **happiness is like a fair-weather friend who hangs around when circumstances are good but at the first sight of pain, complexity or confusion quickly departs. Joy, on the other hand, has deeper roots.**

Reflecting Rev. Gomes' view, Ben Campbell Johnson states, "**Christians have joy in the midst of pain because they have hope.** Every day may offer us challenges and fears, but we know joy in spite of the challenges because we have hope that God makes 'all things work together for good for those who love God'" (Romans 8:28) – one of my favorite verses in the Bible.

Maybe we can even take a page from the Grinch and Ebenezer Scrooge themselves, who by the way, each had their humbug transformed into joy in about the same manner. Do you know what that was? They eventually filled with joy because **they came out of their self-imposed isolation and accepted the joy that was offered to them by others.**

So this Christmas let us all choose joy! Let us share our joy with others, and as importantly, let us accept the joy others have to offer us.

**And let us especially remember that in this season when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, it was through his life and ministry that we, as Christians, have come to truly understand and experience God's love – our true source of joy.**

Amen.