

December 10, 2017
Second Sunday of Advent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“A Little Bit More”

The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



Pastoral Prayer

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

¹*LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*

²*You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah*

⁸*Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.*

⁹*Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*

¹⁰*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

¹¹*Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.*

¹²*The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.*

¹³*Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.*

Mark 1:1–8

¹ *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* ² *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”* ⁴ *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁵ *And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* ⁶ *Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.* ⁷ *He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.* ⁸ *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

"A Little Bit More"
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, Mark 1:1-8

Nobody wants to be the Grinch at Christmas. Nobody wants to be the one who says all of this is nonsense! But there may come a point in every Christmas Season as we whirl in circles like a dervish, trying to be true to self, and true to our faith, and live up to the expectations of family and community, there may just come a time when we start to sense a nagging question: What if the Grinch ... was right?? What *would* happen if Christmas morning came, and there was just ... nothing? Could we *really* stop Christmas from coming? Let's hear a little bit more of the Grinch's story:

*All their windows were dark. Quiet snow filled the air.
All the Whos were all dreaming sweet dreams without care.
When he came to the first little house on the square.
He slid down the chimney. A rather tight pinch.
But, if Santa could do it, then so could the Grinch.
Then he slithered and slunk, with a smile most unpleasant,
Around the whole room, and he took every present!
And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly,
Stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimney!
And the one speck of food that he left in the house,
Was a crumb that was even too small for a mouse.
It was quarter past dawn... All the Whos, still a-bed,
All the Whos, still asnooze when he packed up his sled,
Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,
The Grinch rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!*

Maybe it's just me, but I feel like I kind of fail at Christmas. Every holiday, there's a part of me that longs to be the life of the party, the person who bakes cookies for the entire office, wraps them in beautiful paper and ties a loving hand-written note onto each one. I want to buy the perfect gift for every one of my family and friends, and welcome the New Year with a dance party that lasts until the break of dawn on January 1st, and suddenly I'm exhausted before the first decoration has even gone on the tree. Who am I kidding? What tree. We don't have a tree yet. Am I a bad mother because my kids haven't even gotten to see a Christmas tree, and it's already December 10th? Yet another part of me has this urge to strip away everything to the barest essentials: One small gift, no

parties, minimal decorations. But every time I have these thoughts I hear a voice inside me saying, “What?? Where’s your spirit? That kind of thinking isn’t American. It isn’t Christian. It may not even be human. Oh no. Who am I? Am I the Grinch...??”

This is the second week of Advent. This is the week that we honor Peace. This is also the week, this year, that we explore the theme *Spend Less*. This is not an easy message to get behind at a time of year when “more, more, more” is the mantra of the season – spread more cheer, be more merry, do more with our time and our resources. This is how we are taught to celebrate, and there are many of us who thrive on “more”. Getting things, spending money, celebrating with family and friends... and none of these things are bad. They can be wonderful. It’s not about the things. It’s not about the money. It’s what the things, and the money, and the always needing to squeeze in one more sparkly, festive, humanity-filled gathering does to our hearts and souls. We spend so much of ourselves in this season, and in the end all that spending keeps us from doing exactly what John the Baptist calls the community of faith to do in today’s scripture.

In a way, John the Baptist is a little like the Grinch. His appearance is gruff and unruly. His manner is a little off-putting, and his message is contrary to everything else that is going on around him. But John also points to something that gets to the heart of spending less and finding peace in this season of preparation. John’s message to us at the beginning of every Advent season is “make room, make space – prepare a place for God to dwell among us and within us”. People of God, we fill our lives with so many things – beautiful and exiting things, terrible and exhausting things. We return to John in the wilderness each year to help us remember that less is more. John reminds us that when Jesus came into this world, he came with nothing, to people who had nothing, to a place where nothing spectacular was happening. Even in that place the rush, and crush of a busy season was threatening to crowd out the wondrous events that would take place in Bethlehem. The small town was full to overflowing. The inns were all overloaded with people, animals, and things. When the time came, all they could find to offer was a little bit of extra space under a house in a stable. That was all God needed – just that little bit of space – to work the greatest miracle the world has ever known.

John reminds us that if we are going to follow Christ on this journey, we too are going to have to find a little bit of space. This is what John means when he says “prepare the way, repent, and seek forgiveness.” It’s not just about saying we’re sorry for things we have done to others. It’s also about carrying less, doing less, and stripping away all the things that crowd in on us right now.

I have many things that I need to repent from, many sins for which I ought to seek forgiveness. But the biggest one is the fear of not being enough, not doing enough, and not having enough. No matter how many times I hear the good news that I am already enough just as I am, that I don’t need anything more, that fear just keeps creeping in. I think perhaps it is that kind of fear in all of us that is at the root of our desire for bigger, and better and more throughout our lives, and especially at this time of year. It is also, so often at the root of the despair that comes when the reality of life fails, in one way or another, to meet our own monumental expectations.

In Dr. Seuss’s story, the Grinch believed that if he just did away with all of the trappings, if he got rid of all of the things, if he were able to make everyone in Whoville feel as empty as he felt, maybe he would stop feeling that same kind of despair. He took every last bit of Christmas he could find out of Whoville and then waited and watched for the Who’s disappointed cries. But the Grinch discovered something unexpected on Christmas Day, as it turns out:

*He paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow.
But the sound wasn’t sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn’t be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!
He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
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 three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"
And what happened then? Well...in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!*

The Good News that the Grinch learns on Christmas morning is the same good news that God came into the world to tell us, the good news that we can never hear too many times:

**You are enough. You are more than enough.
Just as you are, all by yourself, you are enough.**

When we know that truth at the center of our being, we are free to spend less – less time in fear, less money, less energy worrying or competing with each other. It is the peace that comes from knowing this truth that allows us to make space in our lives for more – more love, more acceptance, more connection, more relationship, even if it's just a little bit more. All The Spirit needs is a little bit of space and great miracles can take place in us as well.

Like John, we are called every year to prepare the way for Christ the Lord. And like the Grinch we learn again each year that it's never too late to start – or to start again. Wherever we are, however we enter this season, we are enough.

This is a season of many things, but it isn't a season of things alone. It is also a season of the heart. John the Baptist calls us to make way and to make room. And in the end, God comes even when there is no room at all. Christmas comes to us. Christ comes to us. God's abundant love makes a little more room, makes a little more space, and offers a little more grace, exactly when we need it. There is always a little bit more. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
The Rev. Amy Starr Redwine

God of all seasons, In this season as we both remember and await your coming, we come before you today and admit that we are broken. In the wilderness, John the Baptist calls us to get ready for your coming, and reminds us that our preparation begins with repentance. As we participate in the many joys of this season – gathering with friends, decorating our homes, preparing special foods, buying gifts for loved ones and even strangers – we pray that John the Baptist’s words might touch each of our hearts. All we have to do is look around to see that our world – that we – need you to break into our lives and lead us on a path toward transformation and healing. And so we pray, Come, Lord Jesus.

We recognize, O God, the many ways that we your people are a divided people. It has become too easy to focus on the ways we are different from others rather than on all that we have in common, including our longing for affection, meaningful work, good health and safety.

Some of our divisions are so deep-seated, O God, that nothing short of a miracle could bring healing. There are wounds we have covered up, there is guilt we have refused to acknowledge, there is injustice to which we have been willfully blind and in which we have been complicit. Open our eyes to see more clearly, and, having seen, inspire us in this season when we remember your act of incarnation, to join you in action, to do everything we can to participate in the miracle of reconciliation. And so we pray, Come, Lord Jesus.

We remember today the particular injustice of gun violence in our society. Once again we read the names of people we do not know but who lived, worked, studied, and played in our community. We mourn these individuals who will no longer contribute their unique gifts because they have died from gun violence. Move us beyond hopelessness and helplessness in the face of this epidemic, O God. As we hear the tolling of the bell, rouse us beyond grief to action. And so we pray, Come, Lord Jesus.

Today and every day, O God, there are those in our midst who are suffering. Suffering from illness, whether physical, mental, or spiritual; suffering from confusion in the face of looming decisions, suffering from unhealed trauma, suffering from unspoken guilt, suffering from addiction. Help

us learn to name our pain to one another, that we might say to each other, “I know. I see you. Me too.” Remind us that just as Jesus’s coming to be with us as one of us changed the world, so we can make a world of difference by being with one another even – especially – in our brokenness. We pray especially today for Randy, Patrick, Don, Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Marlene, Prince, Janet, Eliseo, Greg, Elizabeth, Olitana, Daniel, Robert, Tommy, Tom, Liam, Doug, Jeff, Norma, and all those whose names have not been said aloud, but who long for your presence and comfort, including patients, families and workers at health care institutions, and students, teachers, and administrators at every level as the semester comes to a close. For all these and all those people and situation we hold close in our hearts, we pray, Come, Lord Jesus.

In the coming week, O God, we pray that you would move us beyond our to-do lists and all the external trappings of the season. Draw us closer to you and shepherd us through a journey of repentance and transformation, that this year, your incarnation might change us and change the world to one steeped in forgiveness, compassion, and peace. And so we pray together with all Jesus’s disciples past, present, and future, the prayer he taught us, saying Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.