

"Where Are You Christmas?"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

December 3, 2023

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isaiah 2: 1-5)

The director Stanley Kubrick once said that a film "should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what's behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later." I think that is why Christmas movies hold such a special place in our hearts. We love Christmas movies because of the mood they set, and because of the way they make us feel. A good Christmas movie helps us tap into feelings that can be hard to come by in the world: the simplicity of childhood... a sense of being connected and safe... an optimism and hope that peace, love, and light will ultimately win out over violence, hatred, and darkness. These are things we want to feel, but those feelings often seem very far away from us.

Think of Clark Griswold in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Almost every scene of that movie includes a holiday mishap or tragedy, but right in the middle there is a strange interlude that has a completely different feel than any other part of the film. When Clark is accidentally locked up in the attic while his family heads to the mall, he finds a box of dusty home movie reels. He picks one from Christmas 1959, when he was just a boy. He plugs in the old projector and watches the whole reel with a smile on his face and tears on his cheeks. Even in the absurdity of the Christmas he was trying to create, that movie helped him feel an old feeling that he had lost.

This is why we will be spending our Sundays of Advent talking about beloved films that help us feel what Christmas is all about. On Christmas Eve we will conclude this series with "A Charlie Brown Christmas," but I want to begin today with something that Charlie Brown says at the beginning of that holiday special. "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus," he says. "Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel."

It is a common struggle that many of us understand very well. Every year about this time, I am so excited that the Christmas season has come, but I am also aware that, once it arrives, it will be over in the blink of an eye. There is so much to do, and so little time, and all of that stress and strain and stuff can build and build until that feeling we are looking for is overwhelmed. There are also other feelings that contend against the good ones we are hoping to find – reminders of loss, struggles with finances, enduring the pain of strained relationships, disappointments, or loneliness. We get these reminders on a daily basis... the end of the cease fire in Israel and Gaza... the war in Ukraine that continues to rage... the



desperate plight of migrants and asylum seekers seeking safety, and our struggles to find room for them. To reframe Robert Browning's phrase, "God's in His heaven, but all is not right with the world." Christmas is coming, but like Charlie Brown, we may not feel all that happy. We may not feel the way we are supposed to feel.

This brings us to our first holiday movie, which highlights these inherent tensions in the feelings we associate with this season. It is obvious that, even though Christmas was coming, the Grinch was not happy. He was not feeling what he was supposed to be feeling, or at least what everyone else seemed to be feeling. As others celebrated, he was feeling left out and lonely. As others connected with others at parties and get togethers, he was feeling maligned and misunderstood. And, as it often does, his emotional pain manifested itself in anger and a desire for vengeance.

But The Grinch was not the only one searching for an elusive holiday feeling. Cindy Lou Who, who in the movie was a few years more than two, watches everyone go wild with all the trappings of the season – people throwing elbows in the stores, over the top exterior lighting displays, the rush to get packages mailed away in time, and, of course, "gifts, gifts, gifts, gifts." Even at her young age, she feels a disconnect between what is happening around her and what Christmas is supposed to be about. When we read the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke, it is infused with feelings of peace and light, joy and wonder. Mary is amazed but calm, the shepherds gaze up with awe at the heavenly host, and a quiet pastoral glory shone around. But for the Who's down in Whoville, all of that is being drowned out, and little Cindy Lou is feeling lost in all the hustle and bustle. "*Where are you Christmas?*" she sings. "*Why can't I find you? Why have you gone away? Where is the laughter you used to bring me? Why can't I hear music play?*"

If it seems like I am trying to bum you out, that is not my purpose, although that is probably something we have to feel, at least a little, if we want to embrace Christmas in its truest and purest sense. The passage I just read from the second chapter of Isaiah is one of the clearest prophetic statements of Advent, because it promises that wonderful things are coming. Wisdom will win, the prophet says. God the righteous judge is coming to sort out all disputes and feuds. Violence will cease, weapons will no longer be needed, and people will not study war any more, because the light of the world is coming. But that is not where Isaiah begins.

The first chapter of Isaiah's prophecy is much darker. In the first chapter, God is not at all happy with the world. "My children have rebelled against me," God says. They are a "*sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord [and] are utterly estranged!... Their head is sick and their hearts are faint.*"¹ In short, the world was a depraved mess. That's what made the promise of Isaiah 2 so appealing. But to understand the promise, we first have to understand the problem. By nature, if we encounter conflict, we would rather go to war than seek a compromise. If we have metal, we choose to make swords instead of cultivating the ground so that everyone has enough. We are unable to get ourselves out of the mess we have created... it is only something that heaven can do.

For a modern application of this prophecy, you can find one at the corner of 42nd and 1st in Manhattan. The Isaiah Wall is the most prominent installation in a park named for Ralph Bunche, the first black man and the first man of African descent to win the Nobel

¹ Isaiah 1:2-9.

Peace Prize, which he was awarded in honor of his work for peace in and around Israel in the 1940's. On that wall are inscribed words that we read this morning: *"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. neither shall they learn war anymore."*

Meanwhile, across the street at the UN Headquarters, nations are still debating how peace might be achieved in Israel and Palestine today. It is clear that we are still beating our metal into swords. It is obvious that we are still studying and learning war, and teaching those lessons to our children in very real blood that is being spilled even as we speak.

That is where every authentic journey to the manger begins. The journey begins in darkness, hoping for light that is difficult to see. It begins in conflict, hoping for peace that seems impossible from where we sit. It begins with human brokenness, hoping for a solution that can only come from heaven.

So, if you are not feeling the way you think are supposed to feel, you are not alone. In fact, you are in very good company. Odd as it may seem, you may be in the very best position to experience the full meaning and power of this holy season, because you are asking THE question of Advent:

"Where are you Christmas? Why can't I find you?"