

Simple Faith

◆ December 9 ◆ “Looking Past Pain”

Simple faith reaches past the coldest heart to the real person locked inside

Malachi 4:5-6F

Introduction

“I don’t like Christmas. It’s just a crazy time of the year when everyone is nice to each other for a few weeks!” Bob really wasn’t the Grinch but as he said these words it could easily sound like him. Bob and his wife were passionate followers of Christ but were disturbed by the culture of purchase and the temporary “spirit” in the air. And all of this had shrunk his heart in a season of joy and hope.

Could it be that the Lord has somehow poured into the human heart a hunger for Christmas? Is the season of Christmas, and what is often described as the magic of Christmas, really an expression of the Kingdom of God? Is God’s heart somehow more easily understood at Christmas, a heart that is big and really does love people?

When the angels pronounced the coming of the King they declared “peace on earth” and with that a sense of God’s favor. Is it possible that in the Christmas season the Lord has somehow stirred us to taste what the Kingdom might be like? Is it possible that our hearts are more sensitive to others and we can more easily see them and are moved to care about them?

Simple faith can open our eyes to see beyond the moment into the majesty. Simple faith can open our hearts to experience something significant beyond the season to the Spirit. Simple faith has the power to help us appreciate the Holy Spirit in this season of the coming of the King. Put simply: childlike faith in Jesus can transform hearts.

Undoubtedly, there will be some of us who will navigate the holiday season with higher stress, greater than anticipated financial outlay, and will be ecstatic when the calendar turns a page. I have good news for you: the invitation this year is to step into simple faith and discover that, despite what might surely seem to be a season crowded out by the culture, is actually an invitation into the Kingdom of God. It’s a holy calling to taste the Kingdom and imagine what our world could look like if we lived this simple faith January 2nd and 3rd and 4th and beyond.

Israel’s Experience

This morning we are going to consider two verses from the last book of the Old Testament. The context for the writing seems a bit dark. Let me give you few examples:

- Malachi’s ministry took place nearly a hundred years after the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C., which ended the Babylonian captivity and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple (2 Chron. 36:23).
- The Babylonians had rebuilt the temple after its destruction, which was a critical cultural element for the Jews.
- It had been assumed that the rebuilding of the temple would result in peace, prosperity, the conversion of people from other nations, and the return of God’s own glorious presence (see Haggai 2; Zech. 1:16-17; 2:1-13; 8:1-9:17).

- But these things hadn't happened yet. Instead, they faced economic difficulties due to drought and crop failure (Mal. 3:11). They remained an insignificant territory, no longer an independent nation and no longer ruled by a Davidic king. Worst of all, despite the promise of God's presence, they experienced only spiritual decline.

Because of these conditions, the people of Israel were anxiously anticipating the coming of God. It's what the Bible often refers to as the great day of the Lord. When this day came, they believed, the world order would be changed. Their lives would be changed. Israel would once again be the land flowing with milk and honey. Do you see how important this day was to the people?

There is an intriguing message in this short text that illuminates what God is doing in the Christmas season. Catch the words in Malachi 4:5-6 (NIV):

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. **He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers;** or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." (emphasis added)

Did you hear it? Malachi wrote that something powerful will happen as God moves and it will happen in families. Hearts will turn.

Illustration: The Arbinger Institute is an organization specializing on teaching leaders in military, government, business, and others to resolve conflict. One of their primary behavioral teachings works like this: the people involved in conflict with each other are to sit in a chair. They are then instructed to turn their chair to the other person and refuse to turn back around until the conflict resolves. The Institute believes the power to heal relationships occurs when one person turns their chair toward the other and refuses to give up.

Listen carefully to this. One person, though hurt and angry, can enact a powerful change when they choose to see the other person, turn their chair to look at him or her, and then take up the commitment to resolve. This principle is here in the text! Malachi predicts that while fathers and their children may find their relationship to be painful and challenging, the Lord can work to bring healing. Put another way, when the Lord moves as the Spirit of Christmas, hearts can turn and begin to see beyond the hurt to the heart of the other.

Lucy Lou Who's Experience

Illustration: In the film, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," the Grinch's hatred of Christmas is profound. Why? One reason offered in the story is the size of his heart. In fact, it was a consistent point of mention and an important point of dramatic tension. Do you remember the size of his heart? It was two sizes too small.

But how did this happen? How does a heart—any heart—become two sizes too small? What causes the heart to arrest and shrink? What has closed off your heart? What experience has so broken your spirit that your heart shrunk and calcified? Make no mistake, everyone has experiences when their heart is stepped on, broken, devastated. The wreckage of these moments can be so intense as to wither our heart in unrecognizable ways. The pain of life events may even promote a calcification of our will so that we close off and declare that hurt will never happen to us again.

In the film, little Lucy Lou Who is captured by the curiosity of the Grinch's heart condition. Instead of seizing her own anger over the Grinch's grinchy actions, like the other people of Whoville, this precocious little six-year old wonders what has happened to the Grinch. Why is his heart so small? Why does he live in isolation? By the way, isolation is one of the consequences of a heart shrunk by hurt. We attempt to insulate ourselves from hurt but we only isolate ourselves from love. We seek to protect our heart unaware that we are blocking ourselves from joy and hope and Christmas! That was the story for the Grinch. Hurt once but never again!

While everyone else in Whoville has written off the Grinch as an abominable, cold-hearted creature, Lucy Lou Who does the unimaginable. She sees him! She sees more than his heart, she sees the Grinch. She embraces him despite his appearance and demeanor. She reaches out in love driven by divine curiosity.

Here's a question for us this morning, and maybe even THE question: are you hiding your heart on a mountain of isolation and protection as the Grinch does; or, are you living with Kingdom curiosity and a heart broken for others as Lucy Lou Who does? The answer to this question will determine the joy you experience in life.

Your Experience

Imagine with me for a moment a rhythm of church life turned upside down by this simple message: love reaches past the coldest heart to the real person locked inside.

Now suppose for a moment this prompts each of us to move into and out of relationships with those around us in such a manner that we did so with an eye to see and a heart to care for those who live with an arrested heart? What would be the result? What kind of impact could we make? Isn't this what Jesus did?

Unfortunately, the human tendency is to give what we receive. We are curt with those curt to us. We are dismissive of those who are dismissive to us. We ignore those who ignore us. But, what if we flipped the equation and did to others as Jesus did to others? What if we became the bearers of the Kingdom, the Spirit of Christmas to those who seem to be a bit too green in this season and too ready to dampen the spirit of Christmas?

None of us have the archives of another's history. However, we do have the Holy Spirit Who can reveal the prison others have inadvertently chosen and the isolation they are putting themselves in in order to be safe. What might it look like if when we encountered a Grinch here and there we chose to express care, even if it was refused?

So, what can we do to climb the mountain and find a heart inside another person? What practical steps can we take to make Christmas alive again for others?

Suggestion One. We could pray for others.

Prayer is often the first thing mentioned, and sometimes we discount its real impact. Prayer opens us to the voice of God so that we can hear as we walk in the world. Prayer helps us to see those in our culture who suffer. When we leave our homes prayed up, so to speak, we are ready to do Kingdom in our lives. We could take the stimulus of their hurt and anger to pray for "our enemies"? We could ask the Lord to intervene in their broken world and restore joy to them.

Here's how it might work. When you meet someone this week at the mall, you may feel stress oozing from him or her. Pray for the Lord to give them moments of peace and comfort. If you meet a mom struggling with her children, rather than be cold-hearted, see past the acts to the pain. Perhaps she is a single mom and lacks finances, or she has a child with an illness, or any number of things. Remember, what we see on the surface is not all of the story this person is experiencing.

Suggestion Two. We could offer a smile.

Smiling is a powerful tool and it has many social benefits. For example, smiling at someone signals friendliness and positive interaction.

Illustration: One study showed that women, who were smiling in their yearbook photos, were more likely to be married 5 years later than those who weren't. Smiling helps people to deal with negative emotional events.

It is also true that people who smile also tend to do better physically.

Illustration: Researchers' gathered photos from more than 200 Major League Baseball players who were active in 1952. They sorted them based on whether the player showed a genuine smile or wasn't smiling at all. And because people keep tabs on professional athletes, the researchers also had access to the dates when those baseball players died. Overall, players with genuine smiles in their photos tended to live longer than non-smilers. When you look year by year, the smiling players were about half as likely as non-smilers to die in any given year.

A smile is contagious and when we smile it's next to impossible for others not smile back. We are fearfully and wonderfully made for sure! And the power of this creation in community has the power to alter the world around us. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, "Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing." Just your smile may be the breakthrough that can move a person's heart to another size, shoot the endorphins into their system, and then alter how they will interact with their next appointment or their family!

Suggestion Three: We could act with compassion.

This season highlights deficiency like no other season. People see what others have and it pinpoints their own lack. The lack is not all monetary or gift oriented. Commercials portray happy families, happy couples, and happy memories. Not everyone has this. As you meet people this season, perhaps you could heighten your sense of spiritual sight and see how you might be a blessing to another. Pay for a meal for the person in line behind you. Invite a neighbor over as we are encouraging small groups to do this week. Whatever it is, do something. God acted in sending Jesus into the world to save us. Dr. Seuss prescribed action on the part of Lucy Lou Who. Now, it's your turn.

Conclusion

But here's the key. We have to be carriers of the Christmas Spirit, the Spirit of God in this season. Seeing others begins with our own experience that God sees us and is moving toward us. Your smile, the Christmas Spirit inside of you, cannot just be driven by the décor or the calendar. It has to be sourced in a connection with the God Who has turned to you and refuses to give up on you. And then you can turn toward others.

This year, you will be moving among many whose hearts are two sizes too small because of a hurt that rocked their world and stole their hope. Giving back to them the same frustration will not alter their heart. They must be seen as people who genuinely hurt, are authentically cared about and deeply loved. You can turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Homes can be healed by your interactions this Christmas. How's that for spiritual power and impact?

It starts in here, right here with a moment for you to experience God seeing your heart, healing your hurt, caring about your history. The power of the gospel is that it alters hearts and then alters destiny. God so loved the world that he moved to it, to us, even when our hearts were small. He is still moving to you. I wonder if you would like to experience His blessing, His touch as you enter the Christmas season. But here it is deeply, the same touch He desires to give to you He invites you to share with others. But it does begin with you.

Possible closing acts:

- Use this time as an opportunity for the Lord's Supper as a closing experience of God seeing us and bringing blessing over our story.
- Or, use this time to offer an altar call or a time of anointing of people asking the Spirit to heal their hearts and light up their world as they live "salt" for others.

1. <http://socialpsychonline.com/2017/05/smile-psychology-science/>