

“Learning from the Grinch”
Luke 2:1-20

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Mark D. Ridley
Christ The King Lutheran Church
Vestal, New York
December 24, 2007

As a keen observer of social trends, I’ve noticed a recurring theme in the contemporary cultural treatment of Christmas. See if you can pick up the common thread in this assortment of Christmas movies, books and DVDs:

- Ernest Saves Christmas
- Elmo Saves Christmas
- Diego Saves Christmas
- Felix the Cat Saves Christmas
- The Berenstain Bears Save Christmas
- Inspector Gadget Saves Christmas
- Rover Saves Christmas (he’s a dog)
- Dumpy Saves Christmas (he’s a dump truck)
- And, of course, my personal favorite, The Bikini Bandits Save Christmas.

Do you hear the message implicit in all of these titles? Apparently, in modern America, Christmas is a pretty fragile, precarious thing — kind of like a feeble-minded neighbor who keeps wandering off and has to be found all the time. Christmas just wouldn’t *happen* if it weren’t for the fact that, every year, someone comes along just in the nick of time to save it.

The latest heroes to come along and rescue Christmas are Dr. James Dobson and his friends at “Focus on the Family.” They’ve decided that Christmas is threatened by the fact that merchandisers haven’t been *mentioning* it enough in their ads. (I’m not kidding! This is for real!) And so “Focus on the Family” has compiled a list of “good, bad and ugly” retailers for you, based on how frequently they invoke

Christmas in their marketing. You'll be happy to know that Wal-Mart and Sam's Club made the Christmas *honor* roll — they've been flogging Christmas for months. But bad old Dick's Sporting Goods and Barnes & Noble — they're on the "Naughty List"; they don't mention Christmas at all!

How times have changed! When I was a kid, I distinctly remember hearing preachers complain that retailers were making Christmas *too* commercial. But now, folks like "Focus on the Family" have decided they're not making Christmas commercial *enough*.

As far as I'm concerned, you can *have* Ernest and Elmo *and* Dr. Dobson. *My* favorite Christmas hero is the Grinch, from the famous Dr. Seuss book. The Grinch is my hero, not because he saved Christmas, but because he tried to destroy it, and by doing so learned a very important lesson, for all of us.

As you all know, the Grinch was even badder and uglier than Dick's and Barnes & Noble, because he wasn't content to just leave Christmas out of his advertising. The Grinch tried to *stop* Christmas from *coming*, by stealing every gift, every decoration, every candy cane he could find — he even stuffed the Christmas tree up the chimney!

After all his hard work, the Grinch was really looking forward to hearing all the cries and sobs down in Who-ville, when the Whos woke up to discover that their Christmas had been stolen. But when he listened — boy, was he surprised!

Every Who down in Who-ville, 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 ... means a little bit more!”

It's a bit embarrassing when a silly old grouch like the Grinch discovers something that you and I just don't seem to get, smart as we assume we are. Unlike Mr. Grinch, most of us still think that Christmas *does* come from a store. We think that Christmas is something we can bring into being by our own frantic efforts, by our own frenzied shopping and baking and decorating and the like.

But here's the plain, unvarnished truth. Christmas doesn't have to be “saved” — by Elmo or Ernest, by the Bikini Bandits or “Focus on the Family” — not by *anybody*. And Christmas *can't* be bought in a store, or baked in an oven, or lit with electric lights, no matter *how* much we wear ourselves out trying to make Christmas happen.

The truth is: Christmas is a *gift*. Christmas *itself* is a *gift*.

It's a gift God gave to the whole human race, two thousand years ago — a gift that has survived, all those years, *despite* all the best efforts of King Herod, and the Grinch, and Dick's and Barnes & Noble.

Christmas comes without ribbons! It comes without tags! It comes without packages, boxes or bags!

Christmas *comes* because *God*, in God's own good time and out of God's own infinite love, made the choice to come to earth in the form of a human being. Christmas comes because, to put it crudely, God chose to mingle the divine essence with our own human DNA — God chose to “take on flesh and dwell among us.”

And ever since that night in Bethlehem long ago, the world has been a different place — not *one* day out of the year, but *every* day. Because, through that Bethlehem child — through the man he became, who taught and healed and suffered and died and rose from the dead — through Jesus Christ, every one of us has been offered the gift of

forgiveness, the gift of healing, the gift of eternal life.

Believe me: we don't need to have Elmo or Ernest *save Christmas* for us. Christmas doesn't *need* saving . . . *we* do. *We* need to be saved, from ourselves. And, in Christmas, God reaches out to *save* us.

Martin Luther put it even better than the Grinch when he said: "Oh, we poor, ignorant human beings — that we should be so cold and indifferent to this great joy which has been given us. We chase after so many vain and foolish things, and yet we ignore this greatest gift, which far exceeds everything else that God has created. God sending us his own Son, for the sake of us and our sons and daughters!

"The gift is so great, but we believe so feebly, even though the angels themselves proclaim it and preach it and sing it from the heavens. Oh, if only we would listen!"

On this Christmas night, may *you* come to see the gift that God has placed before of you. May you *receive* that gift, in your heart of hearts, and may you come to trust in the God whose own Son came that night long ago — as a *gift*, especially for *you*. Amen.