

Sunday, December 5, 2021 Advent 2 "Developing a Passionate Heart"

Psalms 139:1-6,23-24 Philippians 1:3-11 Luke 1:67-79

This is the Second Sunday of Advent and we continue our sermon series focusing on Dr. Seuss' "The Grinch who stole Christmas". The key character in this Christmas story is the Grinch who is mean, hateful and just despises the people of Whoville because they celebrate Christmas with so much noise and he really does not know why! The main reason the Grinch is so mean is because his heart is two sizes too small. Because of this, he makes the goal of his life and the lives of those around him to be as miserable as he is. The story continues with the Grinch trying to destroy Christmas for the Whos in Whoville by stealing all of their Christmas presents, decorations and food on Christmas Eve. However, by the end of the story, the Grinch is overwhelmed by the love, goodness and kindness of the Whos that his heart grows from being two sizes too small to two sizes too big. That is, his heart grows four sizes and he ends up being welcomed into Whoville. The Grinch's story is a great example of what is possible when the Spirit of Christ's birth and the transformation of knowing Christ can bring to a person's heart.

As we continue to reflect this Advent, it is our hope that God will enable our hearts to grow and develop so that we will experience Christmas in new ways. Our focus verse found at Proverbs 4:23 will ground us into what we are in need of doing so that our hearts may grow. It states, "Above all else, guard your heart for it affects everything you do."

Last week, we defined what this means- the heart that we need to guard as being 'nefesh'. This includes your soul, self, life, mind, living being, desires, emotions and passion. It is what is and what makes you unique as an individual. What is in your heart is who you are!

As we prepare to welcome Christ into our midst again, we need to prepare our hearts for transformation from the inside out. This transformation includes focusing on purity, passion, patience and peace in our life. The second step is developing a heart of passion. Just what are you passionate about? What is it that you like to do? What calls from your heart to get up and get going in the morning? For some people it is or was their work, for others it is their special interests in sports, crafts, creating new objects in different types of media. Still others like to learn or be challenged with something new to end up teaching others or even just learning more about God's creation. Just what is your passion? Passion is a force that runs through all of us and we each have to learn how to channel it and/ or contain it.

The Grinch was passionate but his passion was to destroy Christmas for all of Whoville. His passion was misplaced as his heart was set on the wrong things, and even something else!

Last week we talked about the need for a pure heart and committing ourselves to God and fully trusting God to guide your life. To have a passionate heart means to put your pure heart into motion by striving to accomplish goals that are focused on God. In Psalm 139 we read that God knows you and everything about you- but it is up to us to ask God to change us from within. At the end of this reading we read, “Search me O God and know my heart... see if there is any wicked way in me. God will then test our thoughts and then will divert us into His way that is, God will lead us in the way everlasting. But how does God do this?

When we say we believe in God just what are we confessing? Do we just believe or do we love God like God loves us, unconditionally? Jesus gave us two commandments as written in Mark 12:33. We are to love God with all our heart, with all our understanding and with all our strength. We are also to love our neighbours as ourselves. Another translation puts it this way: “Love him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and love others as well as you love yourself.” (the Message). We are to love with passion. But what are the three passions of a Christian heart?

The first is to have a passion of God’s presence. This means that when we believe and truly have passion/ love God, we realize that God will show us the way of life and we will have joy in our lives. Just think for a moment; when was the last time you really felt joy from within yourself? One of the gifts of God we celebrate as Jesus is born is joy- not just being happy with a short smile that lasts a few minutes, but internal joy. Joy comes with Jesus. Because of Christ’s birth in our human world, God is with us. God became flesh so that we might personally build a relationship with Jesus. God knows us through and through- now we can know God through Jesus Christ. And when we are familiar with Jesus, all things are truly possible. When we read, learn and remember the stories of Jesus we have nothing to fear. Jesus told this to his disciples who he was with one night in the boat on the lake. While Jesus was asleep a storm arose and the winds were tossing the boat in the huge waves. The disciples were afraid, woke him up and questioned him whether he realized they were going to drown. But Jesus asked, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith in me?” Jesus calmed the storm and they were safe again. We need to remember that with a passionate heart focused on God- the creator, Christ and Spirit are always with us and we do not need to be afraid. God is with you always.

We also need to have a passion for God’s people as we all need help from time to time. We need others around us as God created us to be people persons. This is the second passion as stated in Mark 12—we are to love your neighbour as yourself. In writing to the Philippian

church, Paul encourages these followers by telling them that he is praying with joy for all of them. This is because they have received Paul's teachings of Jesus and they have a special place in their hearts for him. Paul prays for the Philippian church as they pray for him. He has compassion for those whom he shared Christ's story and his prayer is that their love will overflow as they continue to tell His story to others.

How have you or do you share your passion for others? What do you do that others know that you care? Words of encouragement, telling others that you hold them in prayer for whatever is ailing them, talking with them when they feel down or even when they are happy. Do you listen intently when they speak? Do you speak to people wherever you? What about the mail carrier, the cashier, the sales staff person or the delivery person? Do you acknowledge them with a thank you or a smile? This is part of sharing in passion for others. Another part is to welcome others into fellowship of the church because if we do, God will be glorified and our lives are enriched.

The third passion of a Christian heart is to say not my will be done but God's. There might be fear in this because what if God makes you into someone that you do not want to be. But this is not the case. God brings to life the person you already are. When you commit to God he lifts you up and builds up the passions within you. God does not ask you to do something that you were not made to do. He ignites in you an excitement and enthusiasm that enables you to do more than you ever thought possible.

Our reading from Luke is Zechariah's prophecy about his own son John. Zechariah knew that the baby Elizabeth gave birth to would be a part of God's plan to bring into the world a Saviour. Zechariah had been told by an angel that Elizabeth would have a baby boy but he did not believe the angel's words. So from that time until after the baby was born Zechariah could not speak. And when the baby was to be named Zechariah's speech returned and he began to prophesy. Zechariah knew that John was to be the one who would prepare the people for the Messiah to come. As we read from Luke 1, Zechariah states, "You child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways and to give knowledge of salvation to his people." Zechariah had been informed of John's purpose and the plan for his life.

God has a plan for you and sometimes we get off track. His plan is not complicated and you will only find it by reading the Bible but you must read it and keep it in your head and heart. But if you do not regularly sow God's word the concerns of our every day life will again stress

you. In Steve Covey's First Things First there is a story about a very rich man who wanted to have the world's greatest garden. He wanted everything perfect. He hired one of the top designers and explained what he wanted. He explained that the garden was to be self-sustaining and that he did not want to do any watering, weeding, or managing of it. The designer then explained that some of the things could be done automatically and we can make some of that happen but not everything. He also said that where there is no gardener there is no garden.

God is your gardener and this grace is within you but sometimes you become the gardener as well. You have to do the work of removing those things from within that get in the way of your passions as a Christian. By having a passionate heart focused on God's presence in your life, on others as you reach out God's plan for you will continue to be revealed and evolved. As we continue to focus on enlarging our Grinch heart, we need to open up our hearts and let God's Spirit in. For when we do we discern and develop our passion as Christians and learn to see God in us each day.

We do not know what happens to the Grinch after celebrating Christmas with the Whos in Whoville. All we do know is that his heart was changed and his passion for living changed. As we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts again this Christmas, let us pray for the passion of Christ to be ignited and raised within each of us.

Let us pray. God of love we pray in these moments that you would open our hearts and reveal to us our passions. Help us to want to tell your story of love and of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. Search us O God and lead us in your way evermore. We ask in Jesus' name.
Amen