

I love watching Christmas movies. One of my favorites is the 2000 rendition of *How a Grinch Stole Christmas* with Jim Carrey. When I read this scripture passage, I envisioned the crowd's response as being similar to the Whos' response to little Cindy Lou. As the crowd gathers with excitement and joy for the annual Whobilation, the Mayor of Whoville, Mr. May Who, says with enthusiasm, "And, now the nominations for that Who among us who best typifies the qualities of Who-dom and Who-dery, The Holiday Cheermeister. Do I hear a nomination?" Little Cindy Lou boldly yells, "I nominate the Grinch!" Shrieks and screeches, shock and horror, interrupt the Whobilation, and everyone looks at Cindy Lou like she has a third eye.

This is what I envision in this passage, when the crowd gathers for baptism, because it's the popular thing to do, and then John the Baptist calls them all a "Brood of Vipers" (v.7). We can rationalize his approach. He has, after all, been living in the wilderness, so we could say that being away from people has caused him to lose his social graces. He certainly has not attended a class on inspirational leadership or watched a Ted Talk on how to motivate people. It's too bad, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, hasn't been written yet, because he certainly could use some of the tips in this book. We could even explain his approach as a product of low-blood sugar, as we do when one of our boys goes off the rails in our home. I mean, locusts and honey certainly couldn't be the most nutritional diet.

It would be easy to sugarcoat John's proclamation during this season of Advent, because it isn't very Christmas-y. But, that would be a disservice to us. We aren't actually in the season of Christmas yet –

we're in the season of Advent, and this passage adequately prepares us for the coming Christmas season and beyond. John tells us that there is something we have to Do first before Christ comes.

We have to repent. "There is no getting to Bethlehem and the sweet baby in the manger without first hearing the rough prophet in the wilderness call us to repentance. Arrival at the manger will be possible only after the careful self-examination and recommitment called for by John."<sup>1</sup> We have to get our hearts cleansed and our intentions straight before we welcome the coming Christ.

In this passage, people were coming to be baptized, which is a great thing to do, but they were coming for the wrong reasons. They were doing it because everyone else was. It looked like the fun thing to do. It was trending, #ComeToThe River. And, John warned of some who tried to pull rank and hide behind their ancestry, by saying they were children of Abraham. John told them that doesn't mean squat. If they were to experience real baptism, the kind of baptism that changes their lives forever, they can't ride on the coat tails of their ancestors. There are no family memberships when it comes to baptism and repentance.

We all come to a point in our lives when we truly repent of our sins. We turn our lives around and walk with Christ for the rest of our lives. We are forever changed – and it's never too late. Genuine, heart-felt repentance is the best thing we can Do during this season of Advent. If you've never been baptized, maybe this is the time that you join with the crowd in this scripture, but with the right intentions! Maybe it's time that you own up to your part in why your relationship with Christ isn't

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, kindle edition, location 2492.

quite up to par. Step out, into the water, to be cleansed from your sin.

John continues to preach to the crowd that true repentance can be seen by the fruit we produce, which is by the way we live our lives. We are called to bear fruit as part of our repentance. The crowd eagerly asks, “What then should we do?” (v.11 ) In summation, John clearly says, “Share, keep no more than you need, be fair, treat others with care, and be honest.”<sup>2</sup> When we truly repent, these are the things that we do, the fruit that is produced. This is how we live our lives by loving God and caring for others.

And, when we do these things, it creates joy. During this season of Advent and beyond, we prepare our hearts and lives by doing things that create joy. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need more joy in life. If you are struggling this season, do things that create joy. If you are unusually low this year, remember Zephaniah’s words: “The Lord is in your midst, and he rejoices over you with singing.” I have had a challenging week, and these words have brought me joy. Being reminded that God is with me and rejoicing over me keeps me going and makes me want to go out and create joy for others.

What should we do this season of Advent? We prepare our hearts and lives by listening to the Holy Spirit and doing what the Spirit leads us to do. That may be genuine, heart-felt repentance and baptism. That may be sharing our clothing and food. That may be being content with what we have. That may be to be kind and respectful to others. That may be to make unselfish choices, reprioritize, and return to lives focused on the love of God and the love and care of others.

Little Cindy Lou focused on caring for the Grinch. Even when he attempted to steal the Who’s joy of Christmas morning, she went to him because she didn’t think anyone should be alone on Christmas. We will watch the scene that shows the moment the Grinch changes. The clip begins with him looking down on Whoville, waiting to see their misery that Christmas was stolen, but instead he sees all of them singing, hand-in-hand, anyway. He realizes that he couldn’t steal their joy, that it came just the same. [show clip]

When we arrive at the moment of repentance, it’s often painful. Just as it was painful for the Grinch’s heart to grow. We all have “grinchy” parts within us that are painful to let go of. But, when we do, the joy that comes from our true repentance is more than we ever thought possible. It’s life-changing. We may experience tears of joy or sing songs of exultation.

What then should we do during this season of Advent? Listen to the Holy Spirit’s whisper. Follow the Spirit’s leading. Repent. Share. Treat others kindly. Do something that creates joy. I challenge you to do one thing that creates joy this week, and be ready to report back. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, location 2500.