

Romans 1:28-2:1 (NRSV)

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. ¹Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It is the beginning of Advent, a time of preparation. We ready ourselves for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. His coming will be the culmination of God's great rescue project. But do we really comprehend our need to be rescued, to be saved.

Do we truly acknowledge the problem for which Jesus is the solution?

I can hear it now. The Grinch!?!?! This is church! Christmas is about the baby Jesus, not Santa Claus and certainly not the Grinch! . . . Frankly, when an Advent sermon series built upon the story of the Grinch was first suggested, I cringed. But as I thought about Dr. Seuss's story and the story of Christmas, the light quickly came on. I realized that there is still a part of me that wants to draw a bright line between "church" and the "world," Jesus belonging to one and the Grinch to the other. But that is exactly the wrong way to see things. There is one world and its Lord is Jesus; it includes both the manger and Whoville. The story of Jesus Christ's incarnation doesn't belong only to

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Romans is the longest of Paul's letters and generally acknowledged to be his most important and influential. However, its depth often keeps Christians from reading it as a letter, instead relegating Paul's letter to a seemingly unending source of assorted proof texts. This background to the letter will help you put it in context and perhaps be a better reader of it.

Romans has often mistakenly been seen as a theological essay written late in Paul's life, summarizing the key tenets of his faith. Instead, like all of Paul's letters, this letter too was written at a specific time to real churches to address specific problems and it can best be understood by placing it within its historical context.

(cont. in the p.2 textbox)

¹I'm going to assume that everyone has read the book, watched the TV show, or seen the movie. I can't be far wrong!

Christians, but also to the world. God's great rescue project is for all, even for the Grinch. So let's have some fun with this, as we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ-child by considering one Grinch, who desperately needs saving.

Romans (cont. from p.1 textbox)

In 49AD, a series of riots broke out in the Jewish quarter of Rome. The Roman biographer, Suetonius, wrote that the riots were instigated by someone named *Chrestus*, in all likelihood a reference to Jesus Christ, as there was often trouble in the Jewish communities when a Jew came preaching the Good News. In any event, the Roman emperor Claudius responded to the riots by expelling all the Jews from Rome. Though, of course, all did not go, the burgeoning Christian church was largely left in the hands of Gentile Christians in Rome.

When Claudius died about five years later, the expulsion edict died with him and Jews began returning to Rome. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in 56AD as Jewish Christians were returning home to discover that Gentile Christians were leading the churches the Jewish Christians had founded. As one might guess, this return created a lot of tension within the community as all the Christians -- Jewish and Gentile -- tried to find an accommodation to the new circumstances. When Paul learned of the strife in the churches, he wrote to teach them (remind them!) of what life should be in these colonies of the new human race created by God's Spirit.

Paul reminds the Christian Jews that no one is required to keep Torah; rather, we are made right with God by our faith and trust in Jesus Christ (see Romans 3:27-4). Paul reminds the Gentile Christians that the gospel came *first* to the Jews and *then* to the Gentiles; that Gentiles have been grafted on the roots of the Jews (see 11:13-19). Neither Jew nor Gentile in the body of Christ (the community of believers; the church; the people of God) has reason to boast!

The problem

When we first meet the Grinch, we learn he has a problem. Of course, he doesn't know he has a problem; so far as the Grinch is concerned he is perfectly ok. But we know that something is wrong, dreadfully wrong. He *hates* Christmas, the whole Christmas season. And no one quite knows the reason. Some say that his head isn't screwed on just right, while others suggest that his shoes are too tight. But it seems quite clear that the most likely reason of all, was that his heart was two sizes too small.²

The apostle Paul would put it this way: Grinches are "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Romans 1:29-31, from today's Scripture passage).

Yes, the ole' green Grinch certainly has a problem. A heart two sizes too small is a heart that can hardly love at all, much less love well. With a heart like that the Grinch certainly can't love the Whos down in Who-ville, much less his own creator. The truth is that with a heart two sizes too small, he can't truly love even himself.

It's tough for us to admit, but we humans are uncomfortably like the Grinch, for our hearts are also too small. When it comes right down to it, God asks only that we love God and love our neighbor. But how many of us can do even that, if only for a little while, especially when we remember that "neighbor" includes all those we hate just as much as the Grinch hates the Whos. It is easy to love your family and friends, but that isn't really the point. It is loving your enemies that tests the heart.

But we, like the Grinch, have trouble admitting that there is something wrong with us, something that disappoints God and distorts our relationship. This inability to face

²My apologies to Dr. Seuss, but I can't help myself!

the truth about ourselves is crippling. How many successful cures begin with the wrong diagnosis? We read Paul's description of humanity (no, he isn't really talking about Grinches!) in Romans and we protest: "That's way over the top!" or "Doesn't Paul see the good on us!" or "That's certainly of a lot of people . . . [but not me]."

I recently read an article by Scot McKnight on the gospel for "iGens," young adults aged 18-30. He contends that they are impervious to any message about sin, any notion that they are not "ok." They've been taught their whole lives that they are perfectly ok just as they are. So, he rightly notes, there is little point in talking to them about grace or forgiveness . . . or, truth be told, about Christmas.

The problem is that if there is nothing wrong with us, if all we need is a bit of fixing here and there, then there is also no need for Christmas. The coming of the Christ-child kicks off the completion of God's great *rescue* of humanity and all the cosmos. That's the essence of the incarnation – God doing for us what we are unable to do for ourselves because we are not "ok." The Grinch's heart is too small and so are ours;

Jeremiah

One of the great prophets of Israel, Jeremiah's public ministry spanned the last five kings of Israel. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587BC, Jeremiah went to Egypt in exile.

Jeremiah was the greatest spiritual personality in Israel during a time of great chaos and decline. Though by temperament he was gentle and compassionate, Jeremiah never softened his warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He brought them God's call to stay faithful to God and his law, rather than trust in the outward trappings of the temple system. When Jesus charges into the temple calling it a "den of thieves," he is quoting Jeremiah, who brought word of God's judgment on the temple just before its destruction by the Babylonians in 586BC.

At the same time, Jeremiah brought glorious images of God's faithfulness, as in today's passage. His letter to the Babylonian exiles still resonates with words of comfort and promise. Jeremiah, like all the prophets, looked ahead to the day when God's great rescue project was completed, ushering in a world of justice and mercy.

hence, the rescue. Why are there starving people in this world? Because our hearts are too small. Why do so many lack clean water? Because our hearts are too small. Why did we humans kill hundreds of millions of each other in the last century? Because our hearts are too small. And woe to those who only see the truth of this in others.³

The solution

Once you see the problem clearly, the solution is also plain to see. If the problem is a too-small heart, then we need bigger hearts, new hearts, God-filled hearts. That's true for the Grinch and it is true for all humanity.

600 years before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah promised just that – a new heart provided by God. A heart transplant or, even better, a transformed heart. No longer would God's teachings have to be carved into stone or printed with ink and paper. Instead, it would be written on our remade hearts. These hearts would embody a new covenant between God and his people. No longer enshrined in rules and priests, but one born in faith, through faith, for faith.

Christmas is the story of the arrival of this new heart and new covenant. The true joy of the season has to be born in our recognition of the darkness into which Christmas thrusts a light brighter than all the suns. Let Advent be for us a time to prepare ourselves to be the children of the light with hearts remade by God.

³We live such comfortable lives that it is easy for us to be "nice" to others. But consider this, how nice would we be after 90 days without electricity or running water. Think about it! The recent novel, *One Second After*, takes a look at America in the weeks after a successful EMP attack fries all the computers. Sobering stuff.

Covenant

The notion of *covenant* is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

In the Old Testament, the fullest expression of God's covenant is the covenant brought to the Israelites by Moses. As Kittle notes, the basic idea is that God is willing to act to give his people *shalom* in a relationship of fellowship that transcends a purely legal understanding. God promises that he will be Israel's king, protecting her and bringing her peace, raising her above all nations, so long as Israel keeps God's laws and embraces God's way of being his people. Simply put, the people's share of this covenant boils down to loving God and loving neighbor.

It is through this covenant that God will fulfill his covenant with Abraham that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. Regrettably, much of the Old Testament is the story of Israel's inability to fulfill her commitments under the covenant and God's relentless pursuit of his people nonetheless. Indeed, the vocation of Israel's prophets is to continually remind Israel of the covenant, painting hopeful images of a restored Israel and restored cosmos, while also painting stark pictures of the judgment that awaits Israel if Israel does not return to God's way. Jeremiah, writing 600 years or so before Jesus during the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians, brings God's promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), in which God will put his law (his way of being God's people!) in the hearts of his people, so that every person knows God and is bound into the sort of relationship with God that God had always envisioned. Truly, God says, "I will be their God and they will be my people." It is important to understand that God was always interested in the human heart; law and sacrifice were always a means to an end (see Micah 6:6-8).

When we come to the first century and the arrival of Jesus, the driving tension in the OT is unresolved. The Jews believed that their God was the one true God, that this God had chosen Israel as the agent for his renewal of all creation, and that God had made wondrous promises about the restoration of Israel – they believed all this, it just sure didn't look like the promises of God would ever be kept because of Israel's inability to live up to its responsibilities in the covenant. Nonetheless . . . God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper, so it is not surprising that Paul sees Jesus as God's means of covenant-fulfillment, as the representative Messiah, doing for Israel what Israel was unable to do for herself.

Jesus invites people to enter into a covenantal relationship with him and to live as part of the new covenant community. When Jesus was asked about the OT law, he said that he had come to fulfill it, not abolish it (Matthew 5:17). But what characterizes this covenant relationship to which Jesus invites us? Perhaps we can gain a few insights by returning to the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). Our covenant relationship with Jesus is a relationship of the "heart," which Jews and Christians have always understood to include our emotional, ethical, and intellectual lives. Our covenant lives are to be lived within a community of faith, open to all persons from "the least to the greatest."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I've always gotten a kick out of Dr. Seuss. I enjoyed his books when I was a child, read them to my kids, and am now looking forward to reading them to my grandson when he gets a bit older. There are lots of preachable themes in Dr. Seuss's imaginatively told stories, from the redemption of the Grinch to the faithfulness of Horton the Elephant. Horton's "I meant what I said and I said what I meant, an elephant's faithful one hundred per cent" is said in many different ways about the LORD God Almighty in the pages of Scripture. What are some of your favorite Dr. Seuss stories? What themes do you find in them that are expressions of biblical themes?
2. The biblical story is actually quite simple, told in just a minute or two. The humans willful abandonment of God wrecks their relationship with God, so God sets about to put things right, to rescue them. God begins the rescue project with Abraham and brings it to its completion in Jesus Christ. Jesus is thus the solution. But to what problem? How hard is it really for us to acknowledge the darkness in us all, the sin that can grip us like some sort of beast? Why is it so hard for so many to admit they are not "ok?" Why is acknowledging the problem essential to embracing the solution?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Monday, Genesis 9:8-17 God's covenant with Noah</p> | <p>Tuesday, Genesis 17:1-14 God confirms his covenant with Abraham</p> |
| <p>Wednesday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9 The importance of obedience to God's covenant brought by Moses</p> | <p>Thursday, Luke 1:67-79 The hymn of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist: Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham</p> |
| <p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 Paul reminds the church that Jesus' blood is a sign of the new covenant.</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

