

This Night And All Our Days

Hebrews 11:1

December 24, 2023 (Candlelight Service)

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

I.

Oddly enough, for the Christmas Eve homily this evening I would like to begin with some numbers; call it a Candlelight conundrum, if you will. If you think it might be helpful, you should feel free to get out a pencil or, perhaps, a slide rule; failing that, there is no shame in pulling up the calculator app on your phone. Now, remember, it might behoove you to skip a beat before shouting out your answer. This is Rev. Mike we are talking about here, and on a night such as this he usually gets to feeling a little bit impish and elfin-like. Are you ready? Here it is: 3 times; 10 plus 2.

Now, wait! Just hold your horses! Let me repeat that again for those for whom math may not have been their strongest subject. Just let it sink in: 3 times; 10 plus 2.

II.

Is this ringing any bells for you, sliver or otherwise? Anyone want to venture a guess? (*Nooooooo*, not even close!). All right, I will give you a hint. But only because it is Christmas Eve and I am feeling generous: otherwise we might be here all night and many of us need to get home to prepare the roast beast. (*Waiting.*). That was it, by the way; the hint, I mean. That was the hint, “roast beast.”

Still nothing?!? Ok, maybe this is harder than I think. I will admit those of us who are older might have an easier time with this. How about a visual aid? (*Holding both arms straight up, palms up.*) No clue, huh? Ok, you try it; maybe that will snap you out of it. WOW! Still a no go (*shaking my head*). Ok, then, sing it with me; you know the words:

Fah Who Foraze, Dah Who Doraze, Welcome Christmas, Christmas Day!

III.

(Well) the Whos down in Whoville say,
that the Grinch's heart grew three sizes that day.
And then, the true meaning of Christmas came through
and the Grinch found the strength of 10 Grinches...plus 2.

Get it? 3 times; 10 plus 2!!!

Ok, you can all put your arms down now. The truth is, this is what I feel like tonight, like I have the strength of 10 Rev. Mikes...plus 2. Why, you may ask? Well, because this is the first time in *three* years that we have been able to hold our annual Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. The Grinch that is COVID stole the Christmas Eve service for two years and, then, *last* year we had the great Christmas Blizzard of 2022; not even Rudolph could save the day and we had to cancel the service. So, really doing some math this time, it means that it has been *four* years, to the day, since last we gathered here at the Church on the Park to celebrate Christmas Eve together. My, oh my, how time flies.

IV.

After such a long, many winters nap, I admit to feeling a *great* amount of pressure to deliver unto you a message that is *three* times what is normal in order to make up for all of that lost time. Now, luckily for all the kids here tonight with visions of sugar plums *already* dancing in their heads (and the sugar hit from the caramel corn just kicking in) this does not mean a message that is three times as *long*. Instead, I feel we need a message that packs three times the *punch*. I mean, who *knows* when we will be able to be together again on Christmas Eve; the most holy night of the year, when all is calm and all is bright.

So, as I said, I am feeling a great amount of pressure to fully illuminate to you as to the very same thing the Grinch discovered that day up on the mountain holding high his sleigh filled with all the presents from the Whos down in Whoville: that is, the *true* meaning of Christmas.

V.

To do so, we are going to keep it simple. Though simple doesn't necessarily mean easy, as our introductory exercise so aptly demonstrated. Therefore, tonight we are going to stick to just two things. And, sticking with our Dr. Seuss theme, we will call them Thing One and Thing Two.

Here is the Thing...One: faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Judging from the kids here tonight, there is a *whole* lot of faith going on. Christmas Eve presents (!) us with the perfect metaphor to understand this aspect of faith: the assurance that tonight all the good little girls and boys throughout the land will sleep as in a heavenly peace believing in all things hoped for. Oh, there are plenty of scoffers and doubters out there who find it hard to accept the miracle of a jolly, old, fat man finding his way down the chimney. But that is the thing about miracles, somehow they find a way to happen. Especially when we want them to.

VI.

Thing Two is this: the conviction of things not seen. Given all the planning and preparation that goes into Christmas, it is simply amazing that in such a short time all this will be gone: the candles, the presents under the tree, the tree itself, all the decorations, the lights, fancy foods, the mistletoe and holly, the ugly sweaters, the house guests and, yes, even the egg nog. Soon all that will remain are those pine needles we will keep finding on the floor, and a scary-big credit card bill.

Without all the reminders, it is easy to forget about Christmas and its true meaning. When things become unseen, it is hard to have conviction about our faith. We waver, we fade, we forget; like leftovers disappearing from the fridge and Tupperware containers where only the crumbs of cutout cookies remain.

VII.

In keeping with the form of tonight's service where we sing only one verse of beloved Christmas hymns, I offer to you but one verse of scripture; this, from the 11th chapter of Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." While we might easily accept either part of that verse as a fine definition of "faith," a truer and deeper understanding of

faith involves balancing both our assurance *and* conviction: the assurance of things hoped for *and* the conviction of things not seen.

Like the Grinch needing two arms to lift up and balance a sleigh piled high with presents we need both assurance and conviction to keep aloft and balanced our sleigh piled high with the gift of our faith. Tonight, on Christmas Eve, we have all arrived here abounding with an assurance of things hoped for. Let us be sure, though, that we also leave here with the conviction of things not seen.

VIII.

I think for many of us, Christmas is that one time of year when we come to realize that in spite of everything we see happening in the world, all is not lost. That, in and of itself, comes to us like a gift we can hardly believe we would ever receive. However, the *true* meaning of Christmas is that nothing can *ever* be lost, and neither will we. God *will* find us, God *has* found us; especially when we need him to.

In a few minutes as we spread the light of Christ throughout the sanctuary, to each of us, and to the world, remember we lift not only our candle to shine brightly in the darkness, we also lift both the assurance and the conviction that is our faith. Together, we will hold these two in balance; on this night and for all our days. *Fah Who Foraze, Dah Who Doraze, Welcome Christmas, Christ has come!*
Amen.