

“The Gospels According to Dr. Seuss: The Cat in the Hat”

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Isaiah 1:16-20

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land...

from Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth... [were] without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace...
So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house all that cold, cold, wet day.
I sat there with Sally. We sat there, we two.
And I said, “How I wish we had something to do!”

Do you like Dr. Seuss? I’ve always enjoyed these rhyming stories and crazy illustrations. Theodor Seuss Geisel wrote *The Cat in the Hat* in response to an article published in *Life* magazine in which John Hersey criticized school primers – their insipid illustrations, the stories of “abnormally courteous, unnaturally clean boys and girls...”

A friend gave Geisel a list of words every six-year-old should know and challenged him to write something first-graders couldn’t put down, using no more than 225 of them. *The Cat in the Hat* uses 223 plus 13 not on the list. Geisel wanted the title to rhyme; *cat* and *hat* were the first ones on the list.

In the story, an unnamed boy and his sister Sally have nothing to do on a dreary day. In walks The Cat who – against their fish’s objections – proceeds to turn this dull day on its head.

In a second, less famous *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, Sally and her brother are shoveling “deep, deep snow.” (We know all about that, don’t we?!) “There was no time for fun... There

was work to be done.” The Cat shows up again and makes himself at home, taking a bath while eating cake with pink frosting. When the boy tells him not to do this, The Cat laughs, and says, the boy should try it.

I’ll pause here in the stories. As I did last week with *The Sneetches*, I’m going to introduce a few ideas for you to think about more later. I’ll begin each with the word “maybe.”

This Cat seems innocent enough. He only wants to have fun. Most of us know someone like this. They don’t mean any harm, but their actions create chaos. They may come out of situations smelling like a rose, while we’re left to deal with the mess.

Of course, messes are not only physical. Near at home and far away, those with power use it for their own purposes. Banks sell houses that people cannot afford, then foreclose. Elder care facilities rake in huge profits but pay their workers poorly. Junk food is cheaper than that which nourishes. People make messes of their own and others’ lives too, through continuing cycles learned in childhood, through addictions, or simple through greed and selfishness.

It doesn’t need to be this way! Isaiah wrote to a people facing destruction all around them, sharing God’s hope, saying that no matter how badly they had messed up, God abides with them. God would cleanse them. And they could start afresh.

Maybe *The Cat in the Hat* reminds you of Christ, entering our lives unexpectedly, turning them upside-down and bringing us joy. Like The Cat, Christ also restores our lives and gives us hope. Our Ephesians text speaks to a people who had been without hope. Now they, and we, have more than hope. We have peace. Incredibly, we are members of God’s household.

The joyous message The Cat brings does not last. So he comes again. When we lose our way, God never gives up on us, but through the Spirit offers peace, joy and hope again and again.

Maybe the tub of water with the cake reminds you of sacraments – communion and baptism. The Cat invites. “You should try it sometime.” The boy answers, “Get out! I have no time for that.” How do you respond to Christ’s invitation? When do you tell God to leave you alone?

As The Cat prepares to leave but we see a pink bathtub ring. He says he’ll clean it up but his efforts only spread the mess. The pink ring first appeared in the water – sin? And in Isaiah, the people are called to wash themselves – like baptism?

As we grow more like Christ, we come to see ourselves as God sees us. We grow more aware of the ways in which we miss God’s mark. We see our pink mess and its effect in our lives. The boy finds the pink distressing, as we do as we realize its harm.

Here, the story turns even crazier for inside The Cat’s hat are 26 smaller Cats. He lets out 25 who only succeed in spreading the mess more. Only the 26th cat – too small to see – will be able to clean it up.

How many Bible stories do we know where the youngest, weakest, or least likely one ends up as the hero? There’s Joseph, David, young Samuel, immigrant Ruth... Jesus. The last, smallest cat is the most powerful. It takes off its hat and VOOM! the pink is gone.

Stretching the analogy again, God as Spirit cannot be seen either, yet she blows into our lives to help us clean up our messes. I don’t use the word *sin* a lot. It turns some people off. But whatever you call it, sin, with a “S” means separation from God. “s” sins are the things we do or don’t do which distance us from God. They hurt people. They hurt the world. They hurt God.

Our pink mess spreads everywhere. We may not want to be confronted with it, but our spiritual journey requires that we accept our ways and open ourselves to God's cleanup. The Orthodox Church speaks of sin as "missing the mark." If the ways that you miss the mark showed up pink and obvious, on what and whom would you see them?

Maybe, instead of reminding you of Christ bringing joy into our lives, or of the sacramental waters of baptism, maybe *The Cat in the Hat* reminds you of temptation.

It's easy to go along with what happens around us. Sally and her brother, while not responsible for The Cat's actions, do go along with them. We're each tempted by some things. The apostle Paul reminds us that when we are tempted, God will show us a way out.

What might the children have done differently? What can you do when you are faced with temptation? Scripture tells us to run away from all such things. Instead pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. Compete in the good fight of faith. Three directives.

Running, the first, is mentioned 102 times in the Bible, mostly physically running. But sometimes the writers tell us to run to God. Or from immorality or evil.

There are times when retreat is the best option. This is not about giving up. You've heard the maxim, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day"? Roman historian Tacitus first penned the words. They continue, "But he that is in battle slain, Will never rise to fight again." Each of us knows our particular weaknesses, and what we need to avoid. If gambling is a temptation, you don't wander through the casino.

In the book of Proverbs, we find, "Can a person scoop fire into their lap and not burn their clothes?" Of course not.

The second directive, if you want to avoid temptation, is that if you claim to follow Jesus, live like it. A survey once revealed that most people thought there was too much sex and violence on television at the same time the two highest-rated shows were CSI and Desperate Housewives. Do good. Think good thoughts. Avoid harm.

The last directive is, when avoiding temptation, do not hesitate to be confrontational when the need arises. People have such diverse opinions and ideas. You don't need me to list them.

When others challenge us, we have options. But, and this is important, the difference we make has to begin within ourselves. Looking at history, we find that society changes only when people change first, not the other way around.

We "fight" the evils in our own lives by working to increase our faith and grow into our better selves. It's not about keeping the Bible inviolable but rather ensuring that it's relevant in our lives. Not about defending marriage but preserving relationships. Not about keeping trash off TV but about not watching it.

Temptation. Sacraments. Christ's surprising appearance and God's unending grace. Each of us can find different truths in any story. Today I raise these as possible interpretations. What are yours?

Amen.