

Is Yours “A Wonderful Life?” Advent 2. December 4th

When I was a little girl, one of the things that I liked best about the Advent Season was curling up in front of the fire watching a Christmas movie with my family. It was usually in black and white – and probably on a screen no bigger than 18”, but there was something magical about that special family time. I am sure that I didn’t realize then how powerful the messages were of some of those beloved Christmas movies, but now, looking through them with a theological lens, I can see that those movies, just like a good story, can reach out to us and help us reflect on our faith as Christians. That is why I have chosen the next two Sundays to reflect on two of my favorite Christmas movies. We will tie them into scripture throughout the message, and Joyce Hambly will help me with that, and we will see what God is teaching us as we curl up by the fireplace.

(Cue Fireplace slide)

Matthew 6:19-24

‘It’s A Wonderful Life’ tracks the fortunes (or misfortunes) of George Bailey, the unsung, beloved hero of Bedford Falls. We see him as a child selflessly risking his own life to save his younger brother who fell into a hole in the ice. As an adult, he gave up his dreams of travelling the world and going to college to stay at home and manage the Bailey Building and Loan Society after his father had passed away. Despite knowing that he had been forced into a job that he never wished to pursue, George is hard working and generous-hearted. He turns down a business proposition promising an impressive wage, ‘the best house in town’ and holidays to Europe from his archrival Potter because of his principles and in respect for his deceased father’s occupation. You see, throughout his life, George lived by a creed that always placed human need above riches. He helped the poor that could not afford to put their own roof over their heads. And, as a result, his only real wealth was found in his family and friends. George Bailey was an example of how we are told to live as Christians.

Jesus, in the Bible reminds us of the infinite value of investing ourselves in the world of people instead of the world of money and possessions. He tells us in Matthew 6:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21)

I truly wonder if any of us here would have made the same choice as George Bailey. Would we have given away our life savings to help others and be willing to live in a house with broken windows, peeling wallpaper, and a leaking roof. In our materialistic world, it is so easy to be enticed by the bigger paycheck, the larger house, the newer car. And yes, I am sure that sometimes we fall into the trap of valuing money so much that we need to be reminded in Matthew 6:24: *You can not serve both God and money.*

I am not suggesting that we give everything away. But I am asking you to reflect on which master do you serve?

Colossians 3:12-17

Picture the scene – George Bailey is just about to go off on his honeymoon when he learns that his absent-minded and eccentric uncle misplaces \$8,000 leaving the company in a hopeless situation. George could have just thrown in the towel, allowed the company to go bankrupt, and allowed all the people to have their houses repossessed – but instead, George pays out of his own money to save the business. He had every right to be mad at his Uncle – he could have allowed him to arrested, sent to jail, but instead, the scene is one of celebration as he waives a \$1 bill in the air – all the money he has left in the world. And yet, at this desperate time, George is not angry or mad. He forgives his Uncle. He hugs him. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians it tells us:

Bear with each other and forgive one another Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)

Have you ever been in the situation when things did not go as you planned? You had a vision for something, but things just didn't work out the way that you expected? How did you react? Did you look for someone to blame? Did you point the finger at someone and say 'it's all their fault'? That's what George Bailey could have done. Or did you do as Paul suggests to the Colossians in verse 12:

clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (v12)

That's how George Bailey reacts in *It's a Wonderful Life*. And that is how Christ calls for us to react. The movie is a reminder that as Christians we are called to '*Let the Peace of Christ rule our hearts*' (v15) – not the desire for power and vengeance.

Matthew 5:13-16

George Bailey is only human. Naturally, like all of us, he gets despondent sometimes. I think that many of us can relate to him. At the climax of the movie, George looks back at his life as little more than wasted potential. His boyhood dreams to become an adventurer have amounted to nothing, his vision to escape his family's small-town traditions and become something significant have just never materialized. On Christmas Eve, after mentally scanning his life George honestly believes that he is truly a waste of space and he contemplates suicide on the edge of a bridge. Bitter, resentful, and angry, he slumps his head in his hands and prays to God.

I hope that no-one here has ever been as desperate as George Bailey was on that bridge. But I suspect that many of us have at some point in our lives experienced broken dreams. Like George we might have felt bewildered, lost or alone. Maybe for some of us it was because of the sudden loss of a job, or a relationship gone sour, or even the death of a loved one. Suddenly our lives seem to whirl around us and everything looks bleak. We feel like everything is crashing down on us. And maybe like George Bailey we have found ourselves praying to God: "*Dear Father in heaven. if you're up there. Show me the way. Please show me the way*".

It's in desperate times like those that our faith can be really challenged. We begin to question God, and as Matthew 5 reminds us, we find that no longer believe that we, as Christians, are the "*Salt of the earth.*" We find ourselves beginning to question God's plan for us, and in doing so, we begin to "*loose our saltiness*". Our faith. Our trust in God. We "*put our lamp under a bowel*" rather than letting it shine for all to see. At these moments of despair, we often find it so hard to celebrate and give glory to God.

But, when we do call out to God, our prayers are heard – just like they were for George Bailey. In *A Wonderful Life*, George is rescued by the intervention of a lovable and bumbling guardian angel, called Clarence, who comes to show him that his life is worth living. He shows George Bailey how very different the lives of his family and friends would have been if he had never lived. Clarence reminds George that:

"One man's life touches so many others, when he's not there, it leaves an awfully big hole".

I think this, for me, is one of my favorite lines of the movie – one of the key messages - "One man's life touches so many others." – It's another reminder of how we should live as people of faith. '*It's a Wonderful Life*' has earned its legion of followers because it so effectively touches upon one basic truth of life; that each of us, no matter how apparently insignificant, can make a difference. It shows that the measure of our humanity has nothing to do with power, position, or possessions, but how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis. Ask yourself – what have you done that has made a difference in somebody else's life? How have you shone your light for all to see?

As George Bailey begins to understand how he has made a difference in people lives, he is given a fresh perspective on life. We too are given that through the gift of Jesus Christ. The working title of '*It's a Wonderful Life*' was originally '*The*

Greatest Gift'. At Christmas, we remember a man, born in a Bethlehem stable, who promises us exactly this. The Greatest Gift.

Jesus Christ offers the gift of a 'Wonderful' Life. Like George Bailey, it may not be a life filled with material gain, financial prosperity or a successful and ever thriving career? There might not be a life packed with adventure, enriched by frequent and luxurious visits to far-off distant lands? But this Life is 'Wonderful' because it enables us to reach our potential through Jesus Christ, and live life in all its fullness. In John 10:10, we are told that Jesus said:

"My purpose is to give life in all its fullness".

It's a promise that seems alien to the troubled, broken lives that surround us. Lives that are full of disappointment and shattered ideals. But it is a promise that we can claim, and a gift that we can give to others.

If someone were to ask you, do you have a 'Wonderful Life', what would your response be?