

The Real Christmas Story: Joy Sunday, 12/16/18

1 I've been thinking about the Christmas movies I've watched, and one thing seems to be true of most of them: The characters face difficulties in their lives. Rudolph was teased, shamed, and then almost eaten by the abominable snow monster! Chris Kringle was detained for psychiatric observation. Buddy the Elf was rejected by his father. Even Frosty suffered the disastrous fate of melting into a puddle of water. Christmas, it turns out, is never an easy, tranquil time for the heroes and heroines of our favorite Christmas movies. Not only does that make their stories more interesting, it also makes them more real. Why? Because all of us face our own trials and tribulations during the days leading up to Christmas, and unlike in the movies, we haven't all arrived at our "happily ever after" endings.

The difficulties of life don't get put on hold just because December 25th is approaching. For some us, like retail and postal employees, the Christmas season means extra work and longer hours. Christmas tends to surface family disagreements and financial stress. People who are dieting worry about eating too much or the wrong kinds of food. Families endure the challenges of long trips with small children. The winter weather slows travel and leads to falls on the ice and heart attacks while shoveling. And for many of us, Christmas reminds us of loved ones who are no longer here to gather around the Christmas tree with us. Contrary to the Hallmark version of Christmas, our Christmas stories are not all visions of gingerbread houses and hot chocolate by the fire- at least, not all the time.

And yet, Christmas is also a time of joy and celebration. Can the joy of Christ co-exist with the difficulties and disappointments of life? You know the answer to that question is "yes," even if you can't feel that in your heart. As we continue our Advent comparison of Christmas movies with the true story of Christmas in the Bible, today we come to joy. When the angel Gabriel promised news that would bring "joy to all people," did he really mean all people? Where is that joy to be found in the midst of the darkness of the pain we're carrying?

2 {TECH: Cue DVD here, Scene 19} It's a Wonderful Life is a movie classic that shouldn't have been one. The acting isn't especially good- it didn't win a single Oscar. In fact, the film was a money loser at the box office when it was released in 1946. It was only a

quarter of a century later that it was picked up by television as a low-cost programming option that it became the classic it is today.

Like every good Christmas story, this one is about much more than singing Christmas carols by the Christmas tree. It's actually chock-full of troubling human problems: war, poverty, disappointment, accidents, greed, anger, despair, and even attempted suicide. But it's also a story of joy. George Baily (Jimmy Stewart) lives a life of making sacrifices for others, repeatedly giving up his own plans, hopes, and dreams for the sake of family, friends, and neighbors. Instead of world travel and a career designing skyscrapers and bridges, Harry settles for a life of managing his father's struggling Savings and Loan. But one fateful Christmas Eve, everything falls apart when a large cash deposit goes missing and George faces arrest for a crime he didn't commit. Anger and despair get the best of the loving father of three, and he lashes out at his family. Let's take a look.

{Show Scene 19 of It's a Wonderful Life (1:51)}

3 As George's family begins to pray for him, his desperation leads him to prayer as well. When he doesn't see an immediate answer from God, he decides that with his life insurance policy, he's worth more to his family dead than alive, and he readies himself to jump from a bridge.

I know what you're thinking. Not too joyful yet, right? But let's face it. Life is full of challenges ranging from annoyances to soul-crushing pain. And that's hardly a new reality. Jesus was born in a barn in an occupied city, governed by a man who was out to kill him. The happy, smiling family hug that's on the cover of the DVD is a snapshot only, just one of the thousands of frames from the film we call life. It's not in spite of, but because of the pain in our lives that the coming of the light of Christ into the world is great news of joy. Before we can receive that joy, we have to first honestly reckon with our pain.

4 No matter how wonderful you consider your life, your life has included pain. What pain are you carrying in your heart this morning? Is it the pain of a failed or failing relationship or marriage? Is it the pain of a body that's at war with itself, fighting the ravages of age or disease? Is it the pain of never having enough money to make ends meet? Is it the pain of living as a slave to your addiction? Or perhaps it's the pain of depression, a terribly dark night of the soul. All of us live with pain. It's not a sign that something's wrong with us

or that our faith isn't strong enough. Pain is simply a sign that we're alive in a broken world, and sensitive enough to notice that God's creation hasn't quite been restored yet to its full glory.

5 Say hello to Clarence Odbody, Angel Second Class. Unbeknownst to George Bailly, his prayers and the prayers of his family have been answered, first in the person of Clarence, who takes George on a supernatural journey to witness what the world would have looked like without George in it. George needed Clarence to show up, because he was so lost in his pain that he was ready to throw away his life.

It's a fact that pain has a terrible tendency to grab ahold of our attention and not let go. In some ways, that's a good thing, because pain reminds us that there's something not quite right that needs our attention- a trip to the doctor, a call to apologize, perhaps some help with counseling. Pain can be a helpful, adaptive thing if it provokes us to change, to seek healing and healthy living. But the shadow side of pain is that we can become so overwhelmed by its intensity that everything else begins to fade out, and we can stop seeing and hearing and feeling the things of life that aren't our pain, the very blessings from God that we need to restore joy to our lives.

TECH: Cue DVD here, Scene 27} That's where George was on Christmas Eve, consumed by his pain and ready to give up on his life. Maybe that's a place you've been yourself. Maybe that's where you are now. God spoke to George through Clarence, showing him that he really did have a "wonderful life" all along. This is a post-war Hollywood movie, so we shouldn't be surprised that everything worked out for George in the end. But even if all of George's friends hadn't pitched in to cover the missing cash, George would still have been more than ok. As we see this next clip from near the end of the film, I want you to notice the difference in George's demeanor from the last clip, and the contrast between George's attitude and the faces on the sheriff, the banker examiner, and the reporter. Remember, at this point in the film nothing worldly has changed. George expects that he's going to jail for bank fraud. How is it that George is so exuberant?

{Show Scene 27 of It's a Wonderful Life (1:51)}

6 I don't really know your pain, and you don't really know mine, so please understand that I in no way intend to minimize whatever it is that torments your soul. But I do know

your Jesus, because he's my Jesus too. And what I know is that just as even the prospect of the birth of Jesus brought joy to Elizabeth and even John, while still in Elizabeth's womb, Jesus can still restore joy to our lives, no matter how great the pain and no matter how long we've lived with it. If you're one of the many who is lost in their pain today, then hear this good news. Your life really is a wonderful life, even if today your pain is keeping you from seeing, hearing, or feeling the signs of God's presence in your life. It's possible that God will send an angel into your life to speak or act a hopeful word, but don't expect that to necessarily eliminate your troubles. If you need the kind of healing that you can find from a doctor or a counselor, please act on that. I'll be glad to help you make a plan to seek healing. If you're wondering if you might be better off giving up on this life, then I don't want you to leave this morning without talking to me first. Hope, and even joy, can coexist in your life with pain. The hard choice that each of us must make is to get out of bed and live our lives, not surrendering to the inevitability of our pain, but feeding the hope that comes from living in the light of Jesus. Often that's really hard to do. But Advent reminds us that it's always possible.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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