

The Real Christmas Story: Hope Sunday, 12/2/18

1 The real Christmas story does, of course, star a baby born in a manger. Don't worry, we'll definitely be going there. But meanwhile, as we prepare our hearts and our lives for the birth of Jesus, let's also have a little fun as we revisit some of those classic Christmas films that so many of us have grown up watching.

I realize that what's classic to me might not seem classic to you. My top ten list would include: *A Christmas Carol*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Little Drummer Boy*, *Elf*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, and *The Santa Clause*. Rotten Tomatoes lists *Meet Me in St Louis*, a 1944 Judy Garland Film, at number two, just behind *It's a Wonderful Life* on their list of 50 top Christmas movies. Then again, they also listed Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* at number eleven, so go figure.

How about you? What are your favorite Christmas movies? Are you one of those fans of *A Christmas Story* with Ralphie and the Red Ryder bb gun? Or maybe *Frosty the Snowman* is more your speed? Some of the Christmas movies we watch make us laugh, and that's a good thing. Some of them invoke a feeling of nostalgia, reminding us of Christmas's past. That also can be a good thing, as long as we don't get so stuck in the past that we forget to live in the present. The very best of our Christmas films convey something of the real spirit of Christmas. Hope, peace, joy, and love aren't just impossible ideals that we tote out during the season of Advent. They represent the very best of our humanity, the God who gave us those gifts, and the Spirit of God who continues to bear them in our midst.

This advent we'll be comparing the Hollywood Christmas stories with what we know of the true story and spirit of Christmas as revealed in the Bible. Let's see if we can get real, without losing the fun of our favorite Christmas films.

2 How many of you have seen *Miracle on 34th Street*, either the original 1947 version, the colorized edition that we'll be seeing today, or the 1994 remake? I was going to say it's a timeless tale, but then I remembered that the premise of the story concerns a man named Kris Kringle working as a Santa at a Macys department store. You see, prior to the advent of the internet, people went Christmas shopping at department stores. Can you believe that?

Anyway, the question raised in the story is this: Is the man calling himself Kris Kringle really Santa, or is he just a mentally ill man with long white hair who should be

locked up? Doris Walker, the Macy's employee who hired Kris, is determined to be realistic, to only trust what she can see with her own eyes. Her lawyer friend Fred Gaily, on the other hand, is determined to defend Santa in court, as well as the hopeful "intangibles" that Santa stands for. Take a look at this clip, as Doris and Fred come to realize that they have radically different ways of seeing the problem of Kris Kringle.

{Show Scene 19 of Miracle on 34th Street, close captioning on: 2:28}

3 Which of those two characters do you most identify with? Are you a realist, like Doris Walker, who tells Fred that "he's got to be realistic and face facts?" The world needs realists, without which nothing that's ever been engineered and manufactured would exist. Or are you an idealist, like Fred Gaily, who warns Doris that "[s]omeday [she's] going to find out that [her] way of facing this realistic world just doesn't work?" The world needs idealists, without which nothing new would ever be imagined or tried.

I won't spoil the ending if you haven't seen it yet, so suffice it to say that the film is most sympathetic to Fred's perspective, and Santa doesn't remain incarcerated forever. The crux of the film, from a Christian perspective, lies not in the dramatic courtroom scenes but in the middle of the dialog we just saw. Did you catch it? Fred said to Doris, "You don't have any faith in me, do you?" To which she replied, "It's not a question of faith, it's just common sense." And then the punch line from Fred: "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to." That line reminded me of a line from *The Santa Clause*, when Elf Judy said, "Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing."

The Bible is conspicuously silent on the question of Kris Kringle and Santa Claus, but has much to say on the matter of faith and hope. The Apostle Paul said it so well in that classic line from Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see." Notice the similarity between Paul's words and those movie lines. "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to." "Seeing isn't believing. Believing is seeing." And the one thing that each of these quotations begs, is the question: Just what is it that you believe in, and what do you hope for?

4 Coming off of a Black Friday and Cyber Monday that in actuality took place over the entire month of November, many of us are hoping for a new gadget- A new smart phone,

tablet, laptop, smart watch, game console, you name it. Each year we're promised that the bigger, faster, and more expensive technology will revolutionize our lives. Full disclosure: you know that I'm one of those people who loves the latest gadgets. But a phone is just a phone, no matter how new it is. If you're lucky and take good care of it, you'll have it for a few years, after which it will be traded in for parts and rare metals. The people selling these things spin a great story about how they exist to make products that free us and enhance our lives. But let's be honest- whether you prefer Samsung, Apple, or you still have your old flip phone, the people selling these things don't exist to make us happy. They exist to tap into our revenue stream. If you're hoping for a new phone this Christmas, I hope you get it, if you can afford it. But I also hope that you're finding joy in those intangibles from the Miracle on 34th Street, qualities that can't be purchased at any price.

5 Advent is a strange time in the life of the church, because we're both anticipating, hoping for, the coming of the light of Jesus into the world on Christmas Day, and we're also celebrating all the while that God did keep that promise over 2,000 years ago. So Advent is strange in that way. It's a time of living in the tension between what we hope for, and what we know by faith has already come into being. What was it again that Paul wrote? "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see."

None of us were there in that Bethlehem stable when Jesus was born. And even though none of us saw that with our eyes, because we believe, we can see. Our great hope is that the tiny child born on Christmas day was more than just another baby born to an unmarried teen, far away from her home. Our hope is that God was so grieved to be separated from us that God came into the world in this way, to live as we do, to laugh as we do, to cry as we do, to grieve as we do, and even get angry as we do.

Our hope is that God's love for us was so radical that Jesus even died as we do, and yet, died in a unique, self-giving way, once for all of us, a sacrificial death that only could have been offered by the God who first judged us guilty back in the Garden of Eden.

Our hope is that Christ's death wasn't the end, that he rose again, that he will return again to restore all of creation, and that in the meanwhile, God offers us resurrection life, both today and in the next life, through the power and glory of God's Holy Spirit.

Our hope is that as long as we have the breath of life in our bodies, we have a purpose and calling to be a part of God's work in restoring creation, in ushering in a new kingdom of hope, peace, joy, and love. That's a lot of hope, ultimately pinned to one little baby who was born long ago. We haven't even seen his baby pictures! "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see." Advent reminds us to hope for big, audacious, reality-changing things that span eternity. Coca-Cola is sweet, and iPhones are cool, but Jesus is the real thing!

6 Some of what we call hope today is actually fantasy, like playing the lottery or sending in those Readers Digest sweepstakes entry forms. Even more of what we call hope is a kind of tepid, luke-warm desire for a preferred future, like "I hope it doesn't snow today." This Advent is a call to remember what real hope is. Advent is about so much more than getting the right decorations up, getting the right cookies baked, and getting the right presents under the tree. Advent reminds us that no matter what snow storms are blowing in our lives, we have a hope in Jesus that endures. If you're a realist like Doris Walker, hope might be a hard thing for you to hold onto. By definition, hope can't be collected, measured, analyzed, and controlled. But take heart. Advent is a time when skeptics can become believers, realists can become dreamers, and a baby born out of wedlock can become the savior of the world. How will the hope of the Advent, the coming of Jesus, change you this year?



Buffalo United Methodist Church

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

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