



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Christmas at the Movies:
Miracle on 34th Street**

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Isaiah 7:10-17

Luke 2:8-20

Life was not good in the kingdom of Ahaz the King. He was dealing with the rumblings of war and trying to manage the politics of power was haunting every minute of his day.

This was a dark time in which Isaiah told him to look for a sign from God, a child to be born in a world of fear and anxiety, as we heard, "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

Just as the angels on that dark night in a world gone mad brought greetings of peace and good will for the shepherds to go and look for a sign from God, a child being born.

While the darkness has had its moments this past year in our world, Advent moves us toward the divine light that shines bright, a sign from God for you and me.

Do you remember the riots in Ferguson, MO, a suburb of St. Louis, a few years ago? I was serving a church in another suburb of St. Louis, about 15 minutes south of Ferguson. Shootings, buildings vandalized, marches day and night, tanks rolling through the streets. It was a dark time for the entire area: violently, emotionally, spiritually.

This year has brought so many Ferguson moments when the darkness of this world has seemed to overcome the light.

But one thing I will never forget from that time was that Christmas, after months of turmoil and terror, as the crowds and police still rumbled their way through the darkness,

stretched across a Ferguson Street was a sign that couldn't be missed: SEASONS GREETINGS!

The miracle of Christmas says that even in the darkness everything in the world is charged with the beauty and majesty and grandeur of God, if we are looking, if we can see the sign from God.

It's the underlying theme of the movie 'Miracle on 34th Street, and I'm speaking of the original from 1947. The movie itself was somewhat of a miracle.

It opened that summer of 1947, the summer! As far from December 25 as possible...didn't have any big stars...Maureen O'Hara, who plays a single mother, and John Payne, who plays a lawyer and becomes her boyfriend, were popular, but simply general-contract performers.

Natalie Wood, who plays the young daughter, was a 9-year-old who nobody really knew anything about. And Edmund Gwenn, who played Kris Kringle, was 72 years old, a reliable character actor who had never made it big, until he won Best Supporting Actor for this movie.

Even Darryl Zanuck, the boss of the movie studio, didn't want to make this movie, but the director of the movie agreed to make another movie if Zanuck allowed "Miracle on 34th Street."

And here it is today, one of the most popular of all Christmas movies: a serious little girl and her working mother, single and skeptical; two retail giants of the day, Macy's and Gimbels; a nice guy lawyer, and of course, an old man who insists he is Santa Claus.

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And that's what the movie turns on, whether or not this man is Kris Kringle, Santa Claus; but even more, it also about the difficulties of faith in a world that demands proof.

Like the psychologist who has his personality tests to define the human condition or the prosecuting attorney and judge and politician who try to twist it all to their own personal advantage; and Macy and Gimbel themselves who use it all to sell, sell, sell.

The movie, on one level, takes a subversive jab at Christmas commercialism and consumerism and secularism.

But on a deeper level, the movie is about the need to trust, to believe in something, to see the miracles that happen on our street, because that's where the miracle really happens.

Oh, it starts on 34th Street at the big department store and it moves through a court room, but it all happens in a small apartment when a little girl, deep down in her heart knows what she wants from Santa Claus.

And it's not something that can be wrapped and put under the tree or in her stocking. It has to do with love and family and a house. And she only tells Santa Claus what she wants, this man nobody believes, but she puts her trust in him.

In the final scene of the movie, John Payne, Maureen O'Hara, and Natalie Wood are driving down a neighborhood street, she sees what she knows to be true and she knows that what she sees is the truth of the one in whom she has entrusted her secret.

She sees a house with a bay window, the swing in the back yard, everything she had told Santa she wanted; and proof

beyond proof, when they go in the house, there is Santa's cane in the corner.

Even the adults see the sign of the miracle!

But then, what is it you are looking for this Christmas, any Christmas? Are you looking for toys and gifts under the tree...video games or dolls or jewelry or clothes?

Or maybe you're looking for something unwrappable: loved ones coming home for Christmas...looking for the joy of celebrations with family, laughter and traditions and simply being together ... looking for the glad sounds of children and grandchildren which will fill the empty space for months to come...looking for a voice that has been long absent but still says 'I love you and always will'.

Are we looking in the night sky for a twinkling star of season's greetings, of hope that life may get better?

What is it we really want for Christmas...what is it you and I are looking for? Has Christmas become so predictable or are we so cynical that we no longer look, no longer see; as the Eagles sang in one of their songs, "When you look up in the sky, you can see the stars and still not see the light."

Maybe we've gotten so used to the story, so comfortable with the waiting, fighting the crowds of last-minute shopping, coming to Candle-light services on Christmas Eve, gifts on Christmas morning, eating too much on Christmas Day, and then returning to life as usual...keep moving, folks, nothing to see here!

Are you and I looking this Christmas for that star in the sky, to hear the angels in the night with the message of good news and great joy, to see the light of the world?

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The prophets had gone looking for Christmas years ago when they spoke of a child being born for us, the gift of the Messiah.

And Mary and Joseph, they trusted what they heard from the angels as they waited for the child to be born, looking for all that God had told them would come true.

That sign is what the shepherds and wise men were looking for, because God's promise is true.

The sign of Christmas is that God's promises about a world at peace, where all people are treated with justice and kindness, where truth and integrity and decency are commonplace, where the poor and the stranger and the oppressed are taken care of are seen in this child.

Do we see that today, that that baby's birth so long ago and far away in a Bethlehem stable has changed our lives here: that our waiting for Christmas hope is changed into hopeful actions, our waiting for Christmas peace is changed into peacemaking, our waiting for Christmas joy is changed into continuing gladness, our Christmas goodwill is changed into acts of kindness, our Christmas greetings changed into constant caring.

More than ever, we need the candles of the Advent wreath to shine the flames of hope, love, joy, and peace, leading to the light of the Christ candle glowing in our world.

We Christians must stand up in the darkness of this world, and shine the light of Christmas for those whose circumstances of Advent waiting deprive them of Christmas joy: the hungry who must think constantly of finding food; the lonely who sense their aloneness more in this season than

at any other time; for those who do not see how they can put their lives back together again; those who have lost homes to the typhoons and tornadoes and fires, who have no place to lay their heads; the grieving who feel the depth of loss as they remember past Christmases shared with others.

The Christmas sign given to you and me is to be found in all of our living, in the mangers and mansions, in our sorrows and joys, our fears and our failures, our hopes and our dreams, our work and our leisure.

Are you looking for the miracle on your street? God present, incarnation, love in the flesh, caring for other people as if they were an infant who needs to be held, fed, loved...all the signs point to it.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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