



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

December 1, 2019

Christmas at the Movies: It's a Wonderful Life

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

**Christmas at the Movies:
It's a Wonderful Life**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

© 2019 by Dr. Bruce Lancaster and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 3, 2019

Christmas at the Movies: It's a Wonderful Life

Isaiah 9:2-7

John 1:1-5

"It's a Wonderful Life" is one of the most popular, heartwarming movies of the Christmas season. For those of you who don't know the movie, a brief summary: It's set in the midst of World War II in a small town.

George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, owns a Savings Bank and a large deposit of cash has been lost. Mr. Potter, the banker, is in possession of that lost deposit but doesn't disclose that to George Bailey.

Because of the lost money, the Savings Bank will go under and many people will be hurt, but Mr. Potter doesn't care. He wants to put George Bailey out of business. And this crisis sends George to a bridge on Christmas Eve, ready to jump: "Does my life really matter? Who cares?"

Then George's guardian angel, Clarence, shows up, and the movie is all about Clarence showing George what life would have been like if he had never lived, that his life did matter.

But did you know that "It's a Wonderful Life", when it was released in 1947, the FBI labeled it as a 'subversive movie.'

True! Because the banker, who represented an American institution, was portrayed as the most hated person in the film, according to the FBI categories for analyzing movies, the FBI said that was a common trick used by communists to undermine the American way.

And also, the character played by Jimmy Stewart triumphed through the help of all the common people, and again,

according to the FBI, that was glorifying a communistic ideal of the workers uniting for a common goal.

By looking at it that way, the FBI said this movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," was tainted with subversive propaganda.

That's one way of looking at it, I guess; if that's what you're looking for, you're sure to find it...

Let's be clear, though, those were dark days back then in the late 1940s. World War II had been over for a couple of years, but the aftershocks were still there, and the threat of another world-war-quake was ever present.

So it's easy to understand, isn't it, in that kind of world in 1947, and maybe in 2019, just what were you supposed to look for, whose word could you trust, just what was it going to take to bring lasting peace?

Looking at it that way, the ancient word from John is really up-to-date, and he's building on an even more ancient word from the prophet Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..."

Yes, John knew that the Light had come into the dark world and the darkness had not overcome it.

As Christians, we rejoice in that reality, but it is still a very dark world. We nurse our resentments and nurture our fears and harvest our hate. People are brutalized and destroyed; here on the streets in Pittsburgh there are danger-like zones of war, as random shots are fired and people fall mortally wounded.

Christmas at the Movies: It's a Wonderful Life

It's a dark world, from New Zealand to Syria, innocent children slaughtered; lives destroyed by the greed and gore of power politics, terrors in the night, daily disasters...

Reality is that we live in a world of darkness, and so in many ways, many people stand with George Bailey on that bridge on Christmas Eve: How does my life matter to anybody? Who cares?

His world had gone all wrong, his hopes and dreams were always being dashed, and even as he tried to make the best of it, he was up against the most powerful man in town. The worst of human nature seemed to be winning; so what does it matter? Who cares?

It's not a wonderful life. And then an angel shows up! Good old Clarence!

Just like the Christmas stories in Luke and Matthew, both very different, yet they both agree on the angels showing up in the darkness.

In Matthew, an angel reassures Joseph about taking Mary as his wife, then warns him to flee from the power of Herod's army, and then tells him when it is safe to return home.

In Luke, first, an angel identified as Gabriel tells Zechariah that, although he and Elizabeth are too old to have children, their soon-to-be-born son John "will be great in the sight of the Lord ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".

Next, that same Gabriel tells Mary her soon-to-be-born son Jesus "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David"

John Dominic Crossan, the insightful New Testament scholar, says that, "Angels direct, as it were, the narrative traffic of both those infancy stories". They get everybody in the right frame of mind to see life from another point of view, that is, to see God at work, to see God present in our dark world.

But there is one very special case of angelic intervention found only in Luke: when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and not just a single angel but the entire heavenly choir who show up: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those of [God's] favor".

In the darkness, the angels invade the world with a word from God, or to say it another way, God's word invades the darkness of these very common shepherds.

Not in the temples in Jerusalem, not in the armies of Rome, not in the banks in downtown Bethlehem, but out in the fields, lowly shepherds...God's word invades the world with words of peace.

This word from God that redefines life, gives life meaning, is this baby, the Prince of Peace.

You see, the only life that the shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the Magi know is their life ruled by Caesar, the most powerful man in the world, the institutional power of the empire. It is Caesar's word that defines peace.

So if this most powerful man, Caesar Augustus, had already established peace on earth by his word, the question is just what was left for the Jewish baby Jesus to accomplish?

Christmas at the Movies: It's a Wonderful Life

The difference is the *how*, how Caesar achieved peace as opposed to how peace was to be achieved by Jesus.

For Rome, it was very simple: war, death, victory, peace. Rome believed, as every empire from the Assyrian to the American has believed, that the future of their world demands peace through power at any cost.

But the vision of peace born in this baby brought a different way, a different truth, a different life: faith, justice, love, peace.

The way was peace through justice by loving one another.

I like how James Harnish, a wonderful preacher, has said that the manger is a very small place, and if we are to go there, we have to leave all our baggage outside.

The way to the cradle leaves no room for pride or selfishness or bigotry or hate or anger or bitterness or envy or greed or fear or any of that kind of stuff we carry around with us that we've picked up along the way, the darkness in our life.

Look at the life of George Bailey, he put everyone else before himself, everyone was treated fairly and honestly with respect, so that everyone would share in the good life, and for the powers that be, that was subversive.

As Clarence told George after looking at how dark life would have been like without him, "You had a wonderful life!" He brought light into his world.

And if you remember the movie or when you watch it this year, that last scene in the movie, with everyone gathered

around the tree, I want you to note how bright that scene is compared to the rest of the movie.

That is the subversive gospel truth of the light that comes into the world that the powers of darkness did not overcome: God's peace for all people; God's word in this baby that tells us and shows us how valuable our lives are to God and to each other, and that's exactly what George Bailey found out on that dark Christmas Eve.

The light that had come into their world, the light that has come into our world, because every human being matters. We belong to God and to each other: to share, to love, to reach out and hold one another for a wonderful life.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org