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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2017
 Texts: Luke 2:8-14, 9:20-25

Christmas at the Movies: “It’s a Wonderful Life”

“It’s a Wonderful Life” was the first movie I bought. It was on VHS. Technology has changed and that copy is long gone. But I still love to watch the movie. I must confess that I can’t watch it without crying. I streamed it recently in preparation for this sermon series, “Christmas at the Movies.” While Lucy was answering the phone and Nan, typing bulletins, I was behind my closed office door with a box of Kleenex.

So we have before us this morning two Christmas stories—the one told by Luke in the gospels and the one told by Frank Capra in his 1946 classic with Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Let’s watch them together. We’ve got the remote control and can switch back and forth.

Let’s begin with Luke. Luke writes that an angel of the Lord appeared, out of the blue, as it were, to shepherds who were tending their sheep at night. This angel was terrifying. He (or she, Luke doesn’t say) stood among the shepherds. Awed by shimmering wings, a majestic presence, and piercing gaze, their eyes grew wide as saucers. Their knees turned to jelly as the glory of the Lord shone all around them. In the Bible angels are God’s messengers. You could even say that they are stand-ins for God, in this case an awesome, transcendent God. “Fear not!” the angel declared.

Change the channel now and we behold the angel Clarence Odbody. Clarence was anything but terrifying. If Luke’s angel was a lion, Capra’s was a lamb. He’s a convivial, even childlike, old man. If he’s a stand-in for God, it’s a gentle, caring, vulnerable God. Clarence’s earthly life was as a clockmaker, but now he’s an angel trying to earn his wings. To do so, he has dived into an icy river below the bridge where George Bailey is contemplating suicide. But Clarence can’t swim. Nearly drowning he cries, “Help! Help!” After George fishes him out, we see that Clarence in his underwear, his old-fashioned underwear. Contrast that angelic image with Luke’s awesome, powerful, dignified heavenly being!

While Luke’s angel and Clarence couldn’t be more different, they both have a common mission and message which has got to do with salvation. Luke’s angel announces to the shepherds the birth of a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Clarence, meanwhile, tells George that he was sent to save George’s life. Can you recognize in Clarence the clockmaker, an answer to the Deists who claimed that God is like a clockmaker who makes the watch and sets it in motion but then steps back and does not touch his creation? No, this clockmaker is not content sit by and let his watch go haywire. This clockmaker knows that the watch cannot fix itself. This clockmaker comes to earth and goes to work. Heaven steps in. The message for both George and the shepherds from the angels is this: Help is here! The breaking news from beyond is that salvation is nigh. And none too soon.

Still on the movie channel, we know that George needs saving in the worst way. You see, on Christmas Eve George discovers that through an accidental and very unfortunate turn of

events, the Savings & Loan business he has given his life for is about to go under. Eight thousand dollars is missing. George is in financial ruin. He is threatened with jail for malfeasance. After madly searching for the missing money and coming up empty, George goes home. Totally stressed, he lashes out at his children, then feels terrible for his violent outburst. He leaves home and retreats to Martini's where amid the holiday diners he drinks alone at the bar. In agony and tears, George whispers, he pleads, "O God, dear Father in heaven. I'm not a praying man, but show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, O God."

Jimmy Stewart, recalling the scene later said, "As I said those words, I felt the loneliness, the hopelessness of people who had nowhere to turn, and my eyes filled with tears. I broke down sobbing. This was not planned at all."¹ Just as he finishes praying, George gets punched in the nose. He stumbles out into the cold. Things can't get much worse, but then he wrecks his car and finally staggers in the dark to a snowy bridge. Grasping his life insurance policy, he's probably thinking his nemesis, Mr. Potter, was right when he said, "Your life, George, is worth more dead than alive." In utter despair George says, "I wish I were never born."

Is anyone's life worthless?

Is anyone's predicament hopeless?

Is humanity itself left to self-destruct? Let's keep watching.

George Bailey's prayer did not go unanswered. After, the drowning angel gets George to save *him*, (don't you love the paradox?) Clarence still has his work cut out for him. He still has to convince George to go on living. Using his angelic powers, not unlike Charles Dickens's Christmas ghosts, Clarence grants George a vision of his wish—his wish that he had never been born. Together they stroll through town, and Clarence shows George what it would be like if George had never lived.

Without George there to keep the Savings & Loan business afloat, things were very different. Bedford Falls was no longer a pretty town with neighborhoods of nice houses. It was filled with sleazy joints and pawn shops. It was renamed Pottersville after its greedy banker and landowner who gobbled up all the businesses and properties in town. Hard working citizens couldn't get a loan to buy a decent house. Instead they were forced to pay high rents to live in Potter's slums. George's brother Harry never became a war hero. He died instead at age twelve in a drowning accident because George wasn't there to save him. Mr. Gower, the druggist, spent twenty years in prison because George wasn't there to point out a deadly mistake he made. Mary Hatch, George's wife, was an old maid librarian. And, of course, he did not have four loving children. George's life had intersected and influenced others in ways he did not realize.

"You see, George, you really had a wonderful life," Clarence tells him. "Don't you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?"

The vision, and Clarence with it, magically vanish. George finds himself back at the bridge praying, "Help me, please. Get me back to my wife and kids. Help me, Clarence. Please. Please, I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again."

Switching back to Luke, now. "This will be a sign for you," Luke's angel told the shepherds. "You'll find a baby in a diaper in a feedbox." That had to have been the last thing the frightened shepherds expected to hear. A terrifying angel and whole army of chorusing angels sent to announce Israel's long-awaited Messiah, and the announcement was this? Not a very auspicious redemption—a drooling infant wearing a diaper (and we all know what diapers

are for), and a poor baby at that. He must be poor because he doesn't even have a crib but is lying in a barnyard feedbox.

But then, Clarence was as unlikely as the message about a baby which the shepherds got. His very name—Odbody—says as much. A fellow angel described Clarence as having the IQ of a rabbit but the faith of a child. A less than imposing figure, he's reading the boyhood favorite, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and, most noticeably, has no wings. George scoffs at him and says that if he's an angel, he must be a fallen angel.

But readers of Luke will quickly catch on that God is up to unlikely and surprising things. Already in Luke's tale, barren old Elizabeth has gotten pregnant, as has a virgin named Mary. When you read on in Luke, you learn that the baby announced by the Christmas angel grows up and says all sorts of unexpected things. Things like: blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping. Do good to those who hate you. And the first shall be last. He told stories about a dad so crazy for his ne'er-do-well son that he threw him a big party when he came dragging home with his tail between his legs. And about a fellow mugged on the highway who was helped by the sort of person he wouldn't be caught dead doing business with. The kingdom he talked about was upside down. It was full of paradoxes. And it ran on love, sacrificial love.

Rewind the movie a bit and we see all sorts of sacrificial love. George shelves his dreams to travel the world, to become an engineer, and to leave behind small town life. Instead he stays home and shoulders the responsibility of running the family business while his good friend Sam Wainwright and brother Harry depart for greener pastures. He turns down a very lucrative job offer from Mr. Potter because it would have spelled the end of the Savings & Loans along with his principles. Even as a child George is willing to risk himself for others. Without knowing it, he has lived by Jesus' kingdom paradox, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." An ordinary person who has acted with kindness and unselfishness, George has lived a wonderful life.

There's a telling detail in the movie which underlines this theme of sacrificial love. It's a plaque under the portrait of George's father which hung in the Savings & Loan. The plaque says, "All you take with you is that which you have given away." We see how this plays out in the movie's ending.

In the last scene George returns home to find that all he's given away does come back to him. While he's been at the bar and bridge feeling hopeless, his wife Mary has been literally running around Bedford Falls telling everybody that George needs help. The whole town responds enthusiastically. Mr. Martini whom George helped get a loan is there. Violet Huff whom he supported when she needed it is there. His brother Harry is there. They and others stream into George's house and each contributes cash, filling a large basket to overflowing. His friend Sam Wainwright cables from London and offers a \$25,000 loan. Even the bank examiners and federal agents who have been waiting to deliver criminal charges tear up the warrant and put some money in the basket. It's a gospel-loaves-and-fish miracle which bails out George Bailey. His prayers are answered, and he is saved. He is surrounded by family and friends. The Christmas spirit of Jesus is palpable. George's daughter plays a carol on the piano and voices rise, joyfully singing, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Here our two stories merge. Luke's angels and the crowd of friends and family at the Bailey home all sing of peace on earth and mercy, of redemption and of Christ—the Messiah, a Savior—born in Bethlehem. They all sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

But in addition to Luke's story and Capra's story there's a third story. There's our story—yours and mine. It's a story where we each face our own challenges from without and within; where each of our lives touches others for good in ways we don't realize; where we are learning that riches are measured not in dollars and cents but in the care of friends and family. It's a story where we are not alone but where God is present with us, often through wingless angels sent our direction; where God answers our prayers in surprising turns and delivers us from all that threatens to steal our hope; where Jesus shows us the way and is for us the way. It's a Good-News-of-great-joy story.

May you all have a Merry Christmas, knowing that God has given you each a *wonderful life* to live and give away in love. Glory be to God! Glory to the newborn King! Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/entertainment/movies-and-tv/guideposts-classics-jimmy-stewart-on-its-a-wonderful-life> on 12/14/17