

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

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

Isaiah 7:14 proclaims, "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."

Ahaz the King was dealing with the rumblings of war. It was a dark world in which the prophets spoke of looking for a sign from God, a child to be born in a world of fear and anxiety.

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

While the darkness has had its moments this past year, Advent foreshadows the divine light of the manger overcoming the darkness.

A few years ago, when the riots hit Ferguson, MO, I was serving a church in another suburb of St. Louis, about 15 minutes south of Ferguson. It was a dark time for all: violently, emotionally, spiritually...maybe still is.

But one thing I will never forget 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 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.

The movie itself was somewhat of a miracle.

It opened in the summer of 1947, the summer! As far from December 25 as possible...didn't have any big stars...Maureen O'Hara and John Payne were popular, but simply general-contract performers.

Natalie Wood 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 he 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.

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 another level, the movie is about the need to trust, to believe in something, 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 tells only Santa Claus what she wants.

In the final scene of the movie, 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: the house, the window, the swing in the back yard, everything she had told Santa she wanted; and proof beyond proof, Santa's cane in the corner.

Even the adults see 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 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?

The greatest condemnation is to look at the world of Christmas: at the greenery and the trees and the gifts and the lights and the faces of the children, and not see anything in it, not aware that God is somehow in all of it.

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."

This is why the gospels put such a premium on hearing and seeing.

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

That is the gift of the Messiah, what the prophets and people of God wanted, who they were looking for – that God's promise is true.

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

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

The sign, God's promises about a world at peace, where people are treated with justice and kindness, where the poor and the stranger and the oppressed are taken care of.

Even secular Santa Claus songs hint at this vision of God's promises.

In the song "Here Comes Santa Claus" is a verse: *He doesn't care if you're rich or poor, He loves you just the same; Santa Claus knows we're all God's children, That makes everything right.*

This is the night to greet the promise of Christmas, because we want God's promise for all God's children, to make everything right – to save us, to love us, to hold us, to heal us.

We must stand up to the darkness of this world, shining the light of Christmas for all to see, to see everyone as created in the image of God.

And so the sign, maybe hanging over a street in Ferguson and or in the dark corners of our lives: a sign of the miracle of 'God with us', to hold him, follow him, love him.

Can you see it, the miracle is on your street: God present, incarnation, love in the flesh, all the signs point to it.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.