

December 9, 2012
It's a Wonderful Life

Hope in It
Matthew 3:1-12

Opening words:

One of the customs of the Christmas season is the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. It is considered to be one of the most inspirational and loved movies in American cinema. This Frank Capra directed and produced film was released in 1946 but is viewed by many annually. It stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. The film was based Philip Van Doren Stern's book, *The Greatest Gift*. *It's a Wonderful Life* is part of the tapestry of Christmas. This year I am using that traditional Christmas movie as the backdrop for my Advent/ Christmas sermon series.

This morning's Gospel lesson comes from the third chapter of Matthew. The main character in the story is John the Baptist. It is impossible to tell the story of Jesus' ministry with mentioning John the Baptist. He was a unique fellow. He lived in a unique location, the wilderness. He had a unique wardrobe, camel hair robe and a leather belt. He had a unique diet, locusts and wild honey. He did these unique things because he wanted the world to get the message: repent! He wanted the world to be ready for the coming Messiah. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 3:1-12. Let me call this message, *It's a Wonderful Life: Hope in It*.

Matthew 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

How many of you have seen the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*? Then you know the scene. Mr. Potter, played by Lionel Barrymore, is the villain. For years he has frustrated the people of Bedford Falls for personal gain. Nothing matters to him but profit. He was the enemy of George Bailey's father and now he was George Bailey's foe. I love the scene in the movie when Mr. Potter offers George a job. The scene begins with Mr. Potter offering George some thinly veiled complements. George is a young man with high potential. The only logical thing to do is increase his income by going to work for Potter. At first, George is tempted by the offer. Then he shakes Potter's hand and everything changes. George begins to consider the consequences of his new position. With strong words for Potter, George races out of the office.

You can almost feel his frustration. Just a few seconds earlier he had a bright future. He was going to do something big. He was going to do something special. He was going to see the world. He was full of hope. However, he couldn't enter into an alliance with Potter. George begins the next scene feeling completely defeated. There is no hope. He must do what is best for others. Can anyone here relate to George Bailey? Have you ever felt like George Bailey without the last scene of the movie? At one time you had hope but now the hopes are dead. They died from a terminal case of responsibility. Never underestimate the power of hope. And all of God's people said, **"Amen! "**

The reason the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, is so popular is we can relate to the characters. We live in a Mr. Potter world and we all play the part of George Bailey. We are trying to stay hopeful about the future but it is hard. The news is filled with nothing but bad news. There is very little hopeful news. Just think about it for a moment. The theme of every story seems to be more depressing than the prior one. The word that is used repeatedly is strife. There is strife between the political parties. For this reason we are facing a fiscal cliff. There is strife between ethnic factions and strife among nations. There is strife between the economic classes. In our world there is hunger, pollution or violence. Crime seems to be spreading to every community so our prisons are filled to capacity. Our hospitals are filled with both the physically and mentally ill. How many people do you know are addicted to drugs or alcohol? Third World Nations are hopelessly in debt to the world banks. Do I really have to say it? Our world is an ugly place. There seems to be a shortage of hope. This hopelessness has permeated our society.

The other night I was at the Ohio Cultural Alliance dinner. I was sitting at the head table with the various officers and speakers. The president of that organization, George Beelan, was speaking to the crowd about random acts of kindness during this time of year. He brought up the New York City policeman, who bought the homeless man a pair of boots. A gentleman near the front of the room interrupted the speaker and announced to everyone the homeless man had been seen again without boots! He said, "He sold them!" Everyone present responded in a negative way to the negative man. Have you ever noticed negative people are exhausting? George said, "Let's hope he got enough money for a hot meal!" And everyone smiled and nodded in agreement. How many negative people do you know? Do the people in your life consider you negative?

The Dalai Lama once said, *"I find hope in the darkest of days, and focus on the brightness. I do not judge the universe."* Maybe that is why we love Christmas? We simply need something positive in our lives. We have grown tired of negative critical. Our souls are parched for something positive. Is anyone here tired of all this negativity? Is anyone here longing for hope and optimism? If so this message is for you! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** With this in mind let us look at this morning's Gospel lesson.

John the Baptist has news the world needs to hear. For generations their lives had been hard, but they had hope. Their hope did not come in the name of George Bailey. Their hope came in the name of Jesus. John the Baptist wants his entire generation to know this carpenter's son is the Messiah, the source of hope. Everything they had known in the past was about to change. Jesus would do the work. They only thing they needed to do was repent! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Today, I don't want to talk about John the Baptist. The truth is, John the Baptist wouldn't want me to talk about John the Baptist. He would want me to talk about the source of his hope, Jesus. The Master's birth introduced a new era of hope. Prior to the coming of Jesus the world was dominated by loneliness, ignorance and discord. Since the birth of Jesus we have the opportunity of companionship, wisdom and peace. It is those things I want to look at today. It is those things we need to remember during this season of Advent. Can you imagine living without those things. No wonder John the Baptist was so excited! If you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

Loneliness/Companionship

The other night on the NBC news there was a report from the New York City area. Today, the work continues from the devastation from Hurricane Sandy. For years homes and community stood in that area. In a matter of a few hours everything was destroyed. It will take years to rebuild those communities. Many are still at the clean-up stage. Many have come to help those individuals. Some that need help are fire fighters who went to New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina destroyed the gulf coast. Some of the New Orleans fire fighters have traveled to the north to lend a hand and return the favor. They interviewed one of the men. He said there is a bond among fire fighters around the country. According to him, Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy forged a special bond between the fire fighters of New York and New Orleans. One New York fire fighter simply said, "It's nice to know we are not alone."

Prior to the birth of Jesus the world only knew loneliness. Since the birth of Jesus the world has the opportunity of having a companionship with God. Jesus was more than a baby. Jesus was the incarnation of God. He left the perfection of heaven and entered our imperfect world. The question that has haunted the generations is, "Why?" This is the answer. He wanted to relate to the human situation. There has never been a moment in your life when you were alone. God is always present. No wonder John the Baptist was so excited! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Jesus came to offer us companionship.

Ignorance/Wisdom

During the summer months, we have been looking at the life of a single Old Testament character. Do you remember the summer we looked at Ruth?

Do you remember her story? There was a great famine in the land of Judah and many were forced out of their homes. One man who was forced to leave was named Elimelech. He was married to a woman named Naomi. They had two sons. The four of them settled in Moab. It was only natural that the sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. You can't blame them. You know what they say about Moabite women! In time, all the males in the story die so the women are forced to live alone. Women had no rights in those days. They had nothing, so Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return home. Orpah does and says, "Good bye." However, Ruth remains devoted to Naomi. She does not stay with her for some legalistic reason. She stays out of love. This Old Testament character teaches us a New Testament principle. The most valuable thing in our lives is our relationships.

Prior to the birth of Jesus the world lived in ignorance. Since the birth of Jesus the world has the opportunity to live in wisdom. When it came to personal finances, Jesus was a failure. He only owned the clothes on his back. When it came to relationships, he was successful. Jesus showed us how to live. The real key to happiness in life comes from our relationships. How rich are you? No wonder John the Baptist was so excited! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Jesus came to offer us companionship. Jesus came to offer us wisdom.

Discord/Peace

In 1555, Nicholas Ridley was burned at the stake because of his faith. On the night before his execution, his brother offered to remain with him in the prison chamber. Nicholas declined the offer. He wanted to go to bed early because he wanted a good night's rest. He said, "Tomorrow, I am going to meet my Savior." How at peace are you with God?

Prior to the birth of Jesus the world lived in discord. Since the birth of Jesus we have the opportunity to at peace with God. Romans 5:1 says, "*since we have been justified by faith, we live at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*". And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Jesus came to offer us companionship. Jesus came to offer us wisdom. Jesus came to offer us peace.

In just fifteen days we will be gathering here for Christmas Eve. I love Christmas! What do you like best about Christmas? There is a long list of holiday traditions to pick. Some like exchanging gifts. Some like Christmas trees and cards. Some like the Christmas parties and the cookies. Do you know what I like best about Christmas? I love leading worship on Christmas Eve and hearing the words from Luke 2 during the 11:00 service. The pressure is off and I can just listen to the words. I have heard those words our entire life. Those words move me. I am so humbled that God entered into this world. Between now and Christmas I would challenge you to simply read the Biblical story of Jesus' birth.

The Christmas narrative is so large it can't be described by one author. Each one of the writers handles it in this own way. Mark does not even mention the birth of Jesus. John looks at the birth of Jesus in a logical way. You remember the verse. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the word." Luke, the common man's Gospel, tries to include the actions of that sacred night. He tells us about the no vacancy sign at the inn. He tells us about the manger. He tells us about the shepherds and the angels.

Matthew tells us about Jesus' genealogy, the coming of the Magi and the Holy families escape to Egypt. There are so many parts to the story that you must read all four Gospels to get the whole picture.

I challenge you between now and then to simply read the words for your own enjoyment. I guarantee they will move you. I guarantee your soul will be enriched. Christmas reminds us of our divine companionship. Christmas reminds us how to live. Christmas reminds us of our divine peace. Calvin Coolidge once said, "*Christmas is not a time or a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and good will, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas. If we think on these things, there will be born in us a Savior and over us will shine a star sending its gleam of hope to the world.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"