

December 25, 2016

It's a Wonderful Life

Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:1-7 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

How many times have you seen the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*? Then, you know the storyline. Absent-minded Uncle Billy has lost \$8,000 of the Bailey Building and Loan's money. The bank examiner suddenly arrives and George Bailey, the main character in the story, begins to panic. Without success, George looks everywhere. With his shattered dreams in his hands, he decides to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. He is saved by his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, Angel Second Class. He is the one who grants George's wish. He shows George what his world would be like if he had never been born. The picture is not pretty. His wife never married, so his children were never born. His mother struggles to survive. His brother Harry drowns, so others he saved during the war also die. Uncle Billy was institutionalized. His town, Bedford Falls, was run by his enemy, Mr. Potter. It is renamed Potterville. In light of this new information, George begins to realize the difference he has made in his world. With nowhere else to go, he returns to the bridge. George begins to pray and asks for his old life back. His request is granted. He happily returns home knowing he is going to be arrested. All this sets up the final scene. When he returns home, he has a new appreciation for his old life. He embraces his children and looks for his wife, Mary. She is the one who saved the day. Mary told the whole town George was in trouble. They respond by showing up at the Bailey home. Each one brings cash and openly expresses what George means to them. Brother Harry has the line that summarizes the whole movie. He lifts his glass and says, "To George Bailey, the richest man in town!" This is the question I must ask you today: How rich are you?

Can anyone here relate to George Bailey? When you were young, did you have dreams of seeing the world? You longed for fame and fortune. You knew it was only a matter of time, but time changed everything. The longer you lived here in the Mahoning Valley, the harder it was to leave. In time, everyone in your life left the area. You stayed in the Youngstown area and you wonder about lost opportunities elsewhere. Through the years, the magic of the area wore off and your relationships grew stale. How close am I? Your name is not George Bailey, but you are George Bailey? Does anyone here have a few regrets? What part of your life do you take for granted?

This morning, I want to give you some pastoral advice. I would encourage you to appreciate everything thing about your life. Each one of us has been blessed in many ways. Let me say this clearly: We have good lives. Don't be like George Bailey, who took his good life for granted. Embrace everything about your life. Appreciate **your relationships**. Appreciate **your opportunities**. Most of all, appreciate **your Savior**. It is those three things I want to talk about this morning. So, if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Your Relationships

Never take your relationships for granted! How would your life change if one of your loved ones was suddenly gone? When I woke up on Friday morning, I heard the news. The attacker had been shot in Milan, Italy. You know the story. On December 20, a truck drove into a Christmas market near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany. There were countless injuries and twelve dead. The western world has been shocked by the violence. This is hard to say in a church. Many are glad he is dead. We live in violent times. My heart aches for the family of the twelve. This morning, Christmas morning, they are gathering with their families, but everything has changed. There is a little more room around the Christmas tree and a little more room around the Christmas dinner table because one of their loved ones is gone. Two things are true: First, for them, and for all of us who have lost a loved one, Christmas is a little less joyful. Second, equally true, we appreciate the people still with us. How would our lives change if one of them was suddenly missing?

In the next few hours, you are going to spend time with the most important people in your life. Some of you have traveled a long way to be here. Some have spent a great deal of money to spend time with you. You are hosting cherished guests and you want everything to be perfect. You have cleaned your home from top to bottom. You have thought out the menu. You have purchased everyone the perfect gift. You have sacrificed your time and money and you would do it again. Why? Because you love them. How would your life have changed if they had never have been born? How would your life change if they were suddenly gone? Never take your relationships for granted. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Never take your relationships for granted!

Your Opportunities

Second, never take your opportunities for granted! America is still the land of opportunity. If you can't make it here, then you can't make it anywhere. How would your life change if you were forced to live in another country? The answer is, a great deal. Several years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Haiti. I was part of a mission team that observed the work of a mission project, which was attempting to reforest part of that nation. That trip changed me. I have never been to a place that had less opportunity than Haiti. It is only a two hour flight between Miami and Port-au-Prince. However, it is like you are on two different planets. The contrast was shocking. Did you know Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere? The average Haitian makes \$1.30 a day. How do you survive on a \$1.30 a day? However, the Haitian people

were great. They were gracious and hard working. Their children pierced my heart. I would like to think they have a bright future, but I can't. They live in a country with no future. They are a country of "no". There is no public school system. There is no postal system because there are no addresses. There is no form of health care. There is no electricity and no clean water to drink. There are no jobs. The unemployment rate is 80%. I really don't know what happened to all the money after the earthquake, but I know money doesn't fix everything. It pains me to say the next line: In my opinion, Haiti is a country which has no hope for a better future.

Have you ever wondered why you were born in the United States of America? Did we win the eternal power ball? You could have been born in Haiti. You could have been born a legless Russian orphan. You could have been born in North Korea. You could have been born in Africa or you could have been born in China. You know it is true. America is not a perfect place, but America is still the land of opportunity. Don't ever take your American citizenship for granted. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Never take your relationships for granted! Never take your opportunities for granted!

Your Savior

Third, never take your take Savior for granted! How would your life change if Jesus had never been born? This is the good news: Jesus was born. You know the story. A census was taken every fourteen years by the Romans. The population was counted for two reasons. The first was for military service. The second was taxation. Every male was required to return to their hometown. Joseph returned to Bethlehem, the House of Bread. It would have taken ten days to make that eighty-mile trip between Nazareth and Bethlehem. You can drive it easily in two hours. In Joseph's case, it must have taken him even longer. He was traveling with a young pregnant woman, Mary. When they finally arrived, they saw nothing but "no vacancy" signs. The best they can do is accept an offer to sleep in the barn. Surrounded by animals, the baby is born. Everyone is surprised they didn't name him Joseph. They named him Jesus. The name is important because it summarizes his entire life. Jesus means "God is Salvation." You know how the story ends. Thirty-three years later, Jesus would be executed. It is upsetting, but it was all part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. Jesus lived the perfect life, so he was the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Never take Jesus for granted.

When you have Jesus, you have three things. First, when you have Jesus, you have forgiveness. There is not a single perfect person in this room. Each one of us has made mistakes. Second, when you have Jesus, you have hope. In Christ, we believe our world can still be a better place. That is why it is important you discover your purpose. Third, when you have Jesus, you have salvation. You are going to heaven and you are going to live for eternity. Never take your Savior for granted. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Is there a George Bailey in the room? Is there anyone here who is taking their life for granted? I hope the answer is NO! I hope you appreciate everything about your life. As your pastor and your friend, I would encourage you to never take **your relationships** for granted. How would your life change if one of them was gone? I would encourage you to never take **your opportunities** for granted. We live in a great country. I would encourage you to never take **your Savior** for granted. The angels said it best:

***Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.***

And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" May God bless each one of you on this sacred day! Merry Christmas!