

November 26, 2017

Christmas Goes to the Movies

Christmas Vacation

Skeletons in the Closet

Matthew 1:17-21

Opening words: Today, I begin my Advent/Christmas sermon series, *Christmas Goes to the Movies*. According to Wikipedia, over one hundred Christmas movies have been made through the years. They are not all considered classics. Have you ever watched *Bad Santa* or *Ernest Saves Christmas*? I haven't. However, other releases have become part of the holiday season. We watch them annually and can recite our favorite lines. It is those movies I want to look at during this sacred season. For hidden inside of those secular movies are some wonderful theological teachings. Between today and Christmas Eve, we will look at six classic Christmas movies. This is the list: *It's a Wonderful Life*, *A Christmas Carol*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *Elf*. On Christmas Eve we will look at *Home Alone*. Today, we are going to begin with my favorite Christmas movie, *Christmas Vacation*. I own a copy and look at it several times a year. How many times have you watched it?

Christmas Vacation was released in 1989 and was made for \$25 million. By the time it left the box office, it had made \$71.3 million. It stars Chevy Chase, who plays the common man, Clark Griswold. However, my favorite character in the movie is Clark's cousin Eddie, played by Randy Quaid. You will learn absolutely nothing from this movie, but you will have a good time. The movie reminds us that no family is perfect, and every family is complex. Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 1:17-21. Let me call this message *Skeletons in the Closet*.

Matthew 1:1:17-21 ¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Alex Haley once said, "*Family is the link to the past, and the bridge to the future.*" There is no question about it. He is right. If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

His name is Clark Griswold. He dreamed of giving his family an old-fashioned Christmas. That sounds simple, but everything became very complex. You can blame Clark; after all, he is a little over the top. You know the story. He gets a Christmas tree that is so large it won't fit into his living room. He decorates his house with 25,000 lights. He invites both sides of the family to stay at his house, leaving no room for his own children. There is no other way to say it. If you have seen the movie, you know it is true. Each one in his family is extremely odd. You know the characters? There are Clark's parents, Clark Sr. and Nora. There is Clark's wife, Ellen, and her parents, Art and Francis. There is Clark's aunt and uncle, Lewis and Bethany. There is my favorite character in the movie, Clark's cousin Eddie, and his wife Catherine and their children - Rocky, (he had a lip fungus), and Ruby Sue, who was kicked by a mule (which caused her eyes to go uncrossed). We only hear about Eddie's two older children. The boy was learning a trade at the carnival and the girl was in rehab trying to get off the Wild Turkey. We can't forget Eddie's dog, the world's worst dog, Snot. There is no other way to say it. Each one in Clark's family is odd, but Clark embraces each one because they are family. Can I ask you a personal question? Do you have any odd family members?

Maybe that is why the movie *Christmas Vacation* is so popular? Each one of us can relate to Clark Griswold. We long for that fun old-fashioned holiday, but that is impossible because the people we spend the holiday with are far from perfect. Who plays the role of Cousin Eddie in your family? Does anyone in your family think you are odd? It is impossible to have a perfect family when the members of the family are far from perfect. The family unit is far from perfect. The time has come to stop striving for the perfect family and simply be honest. All families are imperfect. I will admit it.

My family is far from perfect. Years ago, someone studied part of my family tree. My paternal grandmother was named Orbie Dart. She died in 1950 of a heart attack, while preparing the family lunch after church. Someone decided to study her side of the family tree. My parents received a copy of that genealogy. I was young and wanted to hear about my famous ancestors. There was not a lot of fame in my family, but there was an overabundance of hard working farmers from northeast Ohio. There was also another preacher, a botanist, and an embezzler, who spent some time in the "Big House." There was nothing exciting in the report. My family is quite common, filled with ordinary people, who did some good things and some things that weren't so great.

Jesus's family was far from perfect. That is what today's scripture lesson tells us. We find ourselves in the very first chapter of Matthew. Of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Matthew is the most Jewish. The gospel begins with Jesus's genealogy. It does the Jewish thing: it traces Jesus's family all the way back to Abraham. The first verse of our scripture reading says, "*Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.*" That one verse summarizes the first sixteen verses in the gospel. That one verse breaks down Jewish history into thirds, from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, from the exile to the Messiah, Jesus. The history of the Jewish

people is interesting, but what is more important to us today are the names of the people in Jesus's genealogy. Imperfect people can be found in Jesus's family tree too. Just think about it for a moment. It started from the very beginning. If you look at Abraham with a critical eye, he was both a coward and a liar. Do you remember? He told people his wife, Sarah, was his sister to save his own neck. The name Jacob is on the list. Do you remember his story? He was a bad dad. He favored one child, Joseph, over the rest. The name David is on the list. Do you remember his story? He had an affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. The name Tamar is on the list. She was David's daughter, who is remembered as the one who seduced her father-in-law. Ruth wasn't even a Jew. The time has come to be honest. It isn't just true of the Griswold family. It isn't just true of my family. It isn't just true of Jesus's family, or your family. There is no such thing as a perfect family. If you will admit your family isn't perfect, say, **"Amen!"** Can I give you some pastoral advice? Instead of ignoring our imperfections, we need to embrace our imperfections. Often our imperfections make us perfect for Christian service. Let me give you one example.

His name is Joe Didella. He works with the homeless in New York City. He helps them get food and he helps them find a warm place to sleep. He helps them get jobs. He helps them reunite with their family members. He helps them get medical attention. He helps them get emotional and psychological help. The homeless in New York City listen to Joe, not because he is perfect with an advanced degree in homelessness. They listen to Joe because he is imperfect. His story is not perfect. For Joe, it has been a wild ride. If you can do it, he did it. He spent time in jail. He fought the demons of drugs and alcohol. He ate out of garbage cans and slept in the streets. Then, he met this person who changed his life. You may have heard of him. His name is Jesus. He saw Joe's imperfections and knew he would be perfect to help the homeless. The choice is yours. You can call Joe imperfect, or you can call Joe experienced. The homeless in New York City respect and listen to Joe Didella because he was one of them. What is God calling you to do with your imperfections? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

My father had only one brother, my Uncle Carlisle. He was married to Pat. We never called her Aunt Pat. She was just Pat. According to my parents, my Uncle Carlisle and Pat had a horrible marriage. My father said he only married her because she was fun at a party. The relationship between Pat and my parents was strained. My parents saw her as a snob. She wanted to be someone she wasn't. My parents said, she looked at them like commoners. This is the truth. I have very few memories of my Uncle Carlisle and Pat because of their distain for one another. I only remember visiting their home in Cleveland Heights one time. I was young, so I was banished upstairs to play with their only child, my cousin, Lisa. Our time together was not pleasant. She was a year older and heavier than I was. She sat on me the entire time and frustrated me to no end. My Uncle Carlisle died of a heart attack in September of 1968, and we rarely saw Pat or Lisa again. Pat never remarried. Sarcastically, my father would love to say he was "shocked" that no man wanted to scoop her up (she was such a catch). I would like to

say I missed Lisa, but I don't want to lie to you. I never would have seen her again if it wasn't for my father's only sister, my Aunt Phyllis.

Several years ago, Aunt Phyllis called to inform my sister, Susan, and I that Lisa was coming to Ohio for a visit. She had moved to Vermont years ago. That was a good place for Lisa because I never go to Vermont. She was coming to Ohio to visit some old school friends and visit her parent's graves. Aunt Phyllis, who my sister and I truly love, ended the discussion with some horrible words: "I gave Lisa your phone numbers, so you can meet somewhere for dinner". We told my Aunt Phyllis we would love to see Lisa. We lied. She was absolutely the last person in the world I wanted to see. We prayed she wouldn't call, but she did. The time and the location were selected. It was horrible. It was like waiting for an execution. I prayed that Jesus would return before the dinner, but he was a no show.

When the day came, I drove to the restaurant and found Lisa, my sister Susan, and my brother-in-law, Allan, sitting outside on the patio. The first few minutes were kind of odd. We hadn't been together in forty years. For a few minutes we talked about nothing. She told us about visiting her parent's graves and their love for one another. That was the reason her mother never remarried. My sister and I just looked at one another, confused. Then, she asked about our families. Susan and I shared about our lives. Our marriages were stable. Our children were thriving. Our lives were complete. Our futures still held promise. When Lisa shared her story, it wasn't so complete. She had tried marriage several times and each time it ended in divorce. She never had children and you could feel her disappointment. She never completed her college degree, and worked long hard hours as a waitress. She didn't complain about working every holiday, because she made good money. She lived in an apartment and moved every time the rent was raised. As I listened to my cousin talk, I was moved by her story. For the first time in my life, I began to connect with her. I didn't feel pity, I felt empathy. The dinner I had been dreading had become rewarding. Lisa reminded me of something I already knew. I have a good life. I found myself respecting her. However, Lisa taught me something I had never known. She was a good person, who refused to stay down when life was hard. That dinner changed the way I looked at Lisa. She is no longer just Pat's daughter, who sat on me as a child. She is my cousin and I am proud that she is a member of my family. The time has come to stop looking for the perfect family. The perfect family doesn't exist, and you aren't going to change them. The only thing you can do is love them. Is there someone in your family you need to get to know? Do you remember the words of Alex Haley? He said, *"Family is the link to the past, and the bridge to the future."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

To watch the movie clip, paste the following link in your browser:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9kt4kmigBo&feature=youtu.be>