

December 3, 2017

Christmas Goes to the Movies

It's a Wonderful Life

"What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?"

Romans 3:21-26

Opening words: According to Wikipedia, over one hundred Christmas movies have been made through the years. Each one is not considered a classic. Have you ever seen *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* or *Grumpy Cat's Worst Christmas Ever*? Those are considered two of the worst Christmas movies ever made. However, there are other movies that are considered classics. It is those movies we are looking at in this sermon series, *Christmas Goes to the Movies*. You remember my task. We are uncovering the divine truth found in six classic Christmas movies. We began last week with the movie *Christmas Vacation*. In the weeks to come we will look at *A Christmas Carol*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *Elf*. On Christmas Eve we will look at *Home Alone*. Today's movie is *It's a Wonderful Life*. How many times have you watched it?

In 1947, Frank Capra released *It's a Wonderful Life*. The movie was made at the RKO Ranch for \$3.2 million. That is like spending \$42.4 million today. It made \$7.3 million at the box office. That equals \$97 million today. The movie stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. Drew Barrymore's grandfather, Lionel Barrymore, plays the part of sinister Mr. Potter. The Internet Database (IMDb) has ranked the best 250 movies ever made. *It's a Wonderful Life* is number 30. You remember the storyline. Common frustrated man, George Bailey, is granted his wish. He gets to see what the world would be like if he had never been born. George is shocked to discover how his world would change without him, and learns to cherish his life. How would our world change if you had never been born? This is the question for today: How would our world change if Jesus had never been born? Our scripture reading for today is Romans 3:21-26. Today's message is called *What if Jesus had Never been Born?*

Romans 3:21-26 ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody once said, *"Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"* I agree with ASC Clarence. If you agree with Clarence, say, **"Amen!"**

His name was George Bailey. He lived in Bedford Falls. (Many believe that fictitious town was inspired by Seneca Falls, New York.) When George was young, he dreamed of seeing the world, but it never happened. Instead, he lives his entire life in his hometown, Bedford Falls. The reason he never leaves can be summed up in one word: responsibility. He is the backbone of both his family and the family business, The Bailey Building and Loan. One of his trusted employees is his absent-minded Uncle Billy. He was the one who lost the \$8000, just before the bank examiner arrived. Today, it would be like losing \$106,000. Everyone in Bedford Falls is celebrating Christmas, except George Bailey. In a moment of complete despair, he decides to end his life by jumping off a bridge. He is saved by his guardian angel, Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody. It is he who grants George his wish. George gets to see what his world would have been like if he had never been born.

A George-less world is not pretty. As a young man, George saved his brother Harry from drowning. Without George, Harry dies and the men who Harry saves in the war die. Uncle Billy is institutionalized. His mother struggles to exist. His wife never marries, so his children are never born. The citizens of Bedford Falls struggle. Bedford Falls itself struggles. It turns into Pottersville, where the dark character Mr. Potter calls all the shots. Making money is his only motivation. You know how the story ends. George Bailey is redeemed. He hasn't wasted his life. The days of taking his possessions and his relationships for granted are over. He cherishes his life, and in the end, the community itself comes to his rescue. George Bailey truly is the richest man in town! Can I ask you a question?

Have you ever felt like George Bailey? When you were young, you dreamed of seeing exciting places. You dreamed of doing exciting things. You dreamed of meeting exciting people. Things didn't work out that way. The best you can do is drive through Mill Creek Park and look for deer. Some days, you wonder what went wrong. Like George Bailey, your youthful dreams died because of responsibility. Like George Bailey, you have taken your life for granted. Listen to what I am about to say. Like George Bailey, you have had a positive influence on your world. How would your world change if you had never been born? I do not know if it is humility or pride, but it is hard to see the positive influence we have had on our world. It is much easier to see it in our loved ones. Let me give you an example.

There is no one in this world I respect and love more than my wife, Kathryn. I have no problem seeing the difference she has made in this world. If Kathryn had never been born, the churches she has served through the years would never have experienced her pastoral leadership and her passion for missions. She is responsible for the the Lowellville United Methodist Church being open today because no one else wanted to

go there. If Kathryn had never been born, eighteen years of students at Youngstown State would never have been blessed by her spiritual leadership. One of her students went into campus ministry and one went into the mission field. If Kathryn had never been born, then countless people would never have experienced the people of the former Soviet Union, and would only have known about those people from the news. If Kathryn had never been born, then countless orphans would not have experienced Christian love. If Kathryn had never been born, three Russian orphans, Vlad, Kolya, and Stas, would never have received their prosthetic legs and would have lived their lives within the walls of a Russian institution. If Kathryn had never been born, then no one would go and visit her Aunt Erma. If Kathryn had never been born, my children, Sarah and Anna, would not have been born. My granddaughter, Pippa, would not have been born. If Kathryn had never been born, then we never would have married. I say comically, without her, I would be living at the Rescue Mission. Seriously, without her, I would not be the person I am today. From the very beginning, she saw something in me I didn't see in myself. There was a time when she was the only one who believed in me. I am comfortable saying, in nearly thirty years of marriage, she has made me a better person. In a real way, if you find any value in me or our time together, it is because of her. Isn't it funny how one life ends up touching so many other lives? It isn't just true of George Bailey. It isn't just true of Kathryn Adams. It is true of each one of us. It is true of you. How would the world change if you had never been born? Let me ask you a more profound question. How would our world change if Jesus had never been born? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" The answer to that question is found in our scripture lesson for today.

We find ourselves today in the Epistle to the Romans. Written about the year 57 AD by the Apostle Paul, it is a theological masterpiece. Some have called our reading for today, "The Guts of the Gospel." Paul understands what many in our world have forgotten. We are saved by grace, not works. What does that mean practically? That means your good deeds are not good enough. Salvation is still out of reach. It doesn't matter how many dinners you have cooked for a sick neighbor. It doesn't matter how many times you take your neighbor's trash out. It doesn't matter how many church committee meetings you have attended or how big of a check you write to support this ministry. Those things don't matter, because we are saved by grace, not good works. Those things are only an expression of gratitude to God for saving your soul. Paul knows we are saved by grace, through the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. That is what Paul is saying in verses twenty-two through twenty-four. Listen one more time.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Let me say it clearly. If Jesus had never been born, there is no redemption, there is no justification, and no hope of eternal life. In other words, there is no hope of heaven. It's funny how one man's life can touch so many other lives. Jesus had such a powerful

positive influence on our world. Jesus changed everything. If you find some truth in that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

His name is Andrew. He and Elaine were married in 1951. That means they were married 66 years. Not only was she his first and only wife; she was his first and only girlfriend. They met when he was fourteen and she was thirteen. Elaine was the love of his life. They did everything together, but no more. Last Sunday afternoon, I officiated at Elaine's memorial service. Andrew sat in the front row of the funeral home, flanked by his two daughters. He was surrounded by family and friends, but in many ways, Andrew was alone. Elaine was gone. If Jesus had never been born, there would have been no words to comfort Andrew. Andrew and Elaine's relationship would have been over with the benediction. But, Jesus was born, so there is so much more. There is the great promise of heaven itself. Sixty-six years together is a long time, but it is nothing in comparison to eternity. Jesus changed everything!

It isn't just Andrew's and Elaine's story. It is our story as well. If Jesus had never been born, there is no justification. There is no redemption. Without Jesus, there is no hope of heaven. However, with Jesus, there is so much more. Do you remember the words of Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody? He said, "*Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole.*" How many lives do you think Jesus has touched? If you are thankful that Jesus was born, say, "**Amen!**"

To see an excerpt from *It's a Wonderful Life*, paste the following link in your browser:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYYUn83xzwA>