

December 24, 2017

Christmas Goes to the Movies

Elf

“Keep Hope Alive”

Romans 8:22-25

Opening words: This evening I conclude my sermon series, *Christmas Goes to the Movies*. We are not looking at the worst Christmas movies ever made. We are looking at the best Christmas movies ever made. As a matter of fact, we consider them classics. To date, we have looked at *Christmas Vacation*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. This evening we will look at *Home Alone*. This morning, we are going to look at *Elf*.

Elf was released in 2003. It was made for an estimated \$33,000,000 and has grossed more than \$220,000,000 in the theaters alone. It was such a popular movie, Will Ferrell was offered \$29,000,000 to be in *Elf 2*, in 2013. I can't believe I am saying this, but he turned it down. (I guess he didn't need the money.) I have watched *Elf* countless times. The theme of the movie is great. In a world that has grown hopeless, Buddy remains hopeful. How many times have you watched *Elf*? Our scripture reading for today is Romans 8:22-25. Let me call this message *Keep Hope Alive*.

Romans 8:22-25 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Helen Keller once said, "*Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence.*" That is a great quote. It is so on target. If that quote makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

In his book, *Hope Is Contagious*, Ken Hutcherson shares his journey of being terminally ill. In the process of dealing with his cancer, he heard a story of how many feel when they are facing a hopeless situation. This is that story:

A disturbing story hit the news about a small boy in Chicago who was shot and permanently disabled in a drive-by shooting. That fact alone is awful enough, but the reporter went on to say that everyone in the neighborhood knew who the shooter was, but no one came forward to identify him. The boy's mother even acknowledged she drove by the shooter's house every day on the way to work. But what caught my attention were the words of an educator from Chicago who was interviewed by a reporter. The quote went something like this: "That is what happens when people lose hope. You don't think things will get better, so you give up."

Fear and hopelessness go hand in hand. They have a way of paralyzing us. You don't have to live in Chicago. It is true right here in the Mahoning Valley. That is what makes hope so important. Never forget, we celebrate Christmas for many reasons. One of those reasons is that there is always hope. Jesus entered this world so that God can spend eternity with us! He is walking with you through life's worst experiences. That means there are no hopeless situations. As a Christian, you are a person of hope. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" That leads us to the scripture lesson for today.

Once again, we find ourselves in the epistle to the Romans. This time, we are in the eighth chapter. The words are complex. It is important you know this about these complex words: They were not written to the entire world; they were written to the Christian community in the world. In other words, he is addressing those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Their salvation is not in question. They are living with this hope of salvation. That hope for them, and for us, changes everything. That is why verses twenty-four and twenty-five clearly speak to us. Do you remember those verses?

"For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Those words are foolishness to the non-believing world, but to those of us who believe, they are filled with wisdom. Without hope, we have nothing at all. Just think about it for a moment.

Without hope, there is no hope for a better life!

Because of Jesus, John Newton believed he could live a better life. Do you remember his story? He was born in 1725. As a young man, he was a sailor in the British Royal Navy. His time in the military was not successful. In time, he got involved in the slave industry. He committed every possible sin. His life was headed in the wrong direction, but that all changed on March 10, 1748, when he was twenty-three. For it was on that day he was almost killed during a horrible storm off the coast of Ireland. He cried out to God and God heard his cries. John Newton was saved, and he spent the rest of his life serving God. In 1788, he joined with William Wilberforce to end slavery. Yet, John Newton is not remembered for his fight against slavery. He is remembered for one of the songs he composed, *Amazing Grace*. If you remember the words of that hymn and remember his life, then you understand the words of *Amazing Grace* to be his own testimony. John Newton believed he could be a better person because he had hope in Jesus. John Newton is not the only one. Only God knows how many people have turned their lives around and lived better lives because they had hope in Jesus. In the Christian faith, we always have endless opportunities to start over and try again. You are not trapped by your past habits and sins. You can always be a better person. You can always be the person God wanted you to be from the very beginning. We have hope because we have Jesus. Without hope, there is no hope for a better life. If you believe you can be a better person, say, "**Amen!**"

Without hope, there is no hope for a better world!

Because of Jesus, William Booth, a Methodist minister, believed the world could be a better place. In 1865, the east side of London was a horrible place, filled with the poor, homeless, and needy. Booth had compassion on those forgotten souls and left the established church to help them. He wasn't just concerned with their temporary physical needs, he was also concerned about their eternal spiritual needs. The East London Christian Mission was established to help those poor lost souls. In 1878, the East London Christian Mission was renamed The Salvation Army. William Booth would not recognize his Salvation Army today. According to their website, the Salvation Army is present in 106 countries around the world. The Salvation Army has changed through the years, but not their core values: faith in God and love for people. Without hope, the Salvation Army would have never been established, but it was established because William Booth believed the world could be a better place. The Salvation Army is not alone. Countless Christian organizations have been established because a Christian person believed the world could be a better place. Within the Christian faith, everyone, no matter how forgotten and unloved, has value. We must try to help them because every person is a child of God. If there is no hope, then why even try? We have hope because we have Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no hope. If you believe the world can be a better place, say, "**Amen!**"

Without hope, there is no hope of heaven!

John Wesley, the founder of the great Methodist movement, was born June 28, 1703. Raised in a Christian home and educated at Oxford, God had a special plan for his life. He was an ineffective Anglican priest until May 28, 1738. It was on that date he reported his heart was "strangely warmed". We understand that to be his sanctification experience, when he set apart by God and touched by the Holy Spirit. The rest is history. I have no clue how many miles he rode on horseback to proclaim the Gospel. I have no clue how many sermons he preached. I have no clue how many souls he saved. I do know he prevented a political revolution and began a spiritual one. As Methodists, we stand in the aftermath of his life. John Wesley died on March 2, 1791. Surrounded by loved ones, he grasped their hands and told them farewell. These are the last words John Wesley uttered, "*The best of all is, God is with us.*" We have hope in the face of death itself, because we have Jesus. It isn't just John Wesley's story, it is our story too. No one escapes death. Without Jesus, we have no hope of heaven. If you believe you are going to spend eternity in heaven, say, "**Amen!**" The Apostle Paul said it best, *for in this hope we are saved.*

His name was Buddy the Elf. When we first meet him, he believes he is a Christmas elf. He should have known better. His size was his first clue. Physically, he just wasn't the same as the other elves. Physically, he just couldn't do what the other elves did. Finally, it was Papa Elf, played by one of my favorites, Bob Newhart, who tells him the truth. He wasn't an elf; he was a human being. His biological father was James Caan, who plays the part of children's book publisher Walter Hobbs. The story is a little hard to believe. Buddy was conceived by a young couple in love, Walter Hobbs and Susan Wells. His father never knew he was born and his mother died. Infant Buddy finds himself in a

Catholic orphanage and climbs into Santa's toy bag on Christmas Eve. At the North Pole, is he raised by Bob Newhart, Papa Elf. However, the time came when Buddy had to be told the truth. Trying to make sense of his life, Buddy travels to a magical place called New York City. The transition isn't easy. Buddy doesn't fit into human life right away. But, the movie has a happy ending. If you have ever seen the movie, then you know it is true. You can call Buddy innocent, or you can call Buddy hopeful, but in time, Buddy the Elf wins everyone over, even Walter. However, there is more. In time, everyone benefits from Buddy's presence. Can the same thing be said about you? Can I ask you a question?

How much are you like Buddy the Elf? Do the people in your life see you as hopeful in all situations? I hope the answer is yes, because you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. With Jesus, we always have hope of a better life. With Jesus, we always have hope of a better world. With Jesus, we have hope of eternal life. Do you remember the words of Helen Keller? She said, *"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**