

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

Finding the Gift of Peace | Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Longing for Peace

I want to talk with you today about Finding the Gift of Peace this Christmas. Like so many other goods, we've got a supply-chain problem when it comes to finding Peace these days. There was a time when Americans might have turned to their President to calm them in times of turmoil. They might have tuned in to the voice of network broadcasters to reassure them that life would be OK. For some time now, however, the public square has felt more peace-disturbing than peace-giving, hasn't it? According to multiple measures, American anxiety is at a record high.

We're not sure things are OK or will be OK. The popular version of Christmas doesn't seem to help a lot with this feeling. Alongside the pressures to please others and get everything done are all these images we see of people living an Instagrammably pretty or perfect life. Everything is filtered and lit just right. You can almost hear the so-cool soundtrack playing beneath the images. And that can make us even more anxious because we know THAT isn't OUR life.

Our marriages and kids and homes are often a lot more mixed and messy. Our problems don't resolve in the length of a movie, much less a sitcom. In our reality, people are often unkind or inconsiderate or downright dumb. There isn't a software upgrade that rapidly repairs the glitches in them or us. Life is often chaotic and confusing and conflict-ridden. It brings sudden disruptions and big disappointments and unanswered questions. But in this sense, we are not far away from the real Christmas story. We're close to it. Listen to these words from the first chapter of what Christians call THE NEW TESTAMENT... the fresh revelation of God's purpose and power...

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. From a human vantage point, is this good news or bad news? Very bad! Highly suspicious! **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. (Mat 1:18-19)** The Jewish law said that under these circumstances, Joseph could rightfully walk from this relationship and exact the severest penalty on Mary, if he wanted to; but Joseph is an uncommonly good guy and chooses a more merciful path.

Now, **BOYS & MEN**, read this part of the story out loud with me: **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. 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.” (Mat 1:20-21)

Now, **GIRLS & WOMEN**, please read aloud this part... **All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). (Mat 1:22-23)**

Let me read the last part: **When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name JESUS. (Mat 1:24-25)**

The Saints of Bedford Falls

One of the messages of Christmas is that it’s a wonder-full life we’re living. Not an easy life, but a wonder-filled life. Not a convenient or comfortable life, but one worth hanging onto... and waking up for... and continuing to live with faith through... as Mary and Joseph did. These two young people could have taken all their cues from their present circumstances – which frankly looked between sketchy and terrifying. They could have drawn into themselves or turned on one another. They could have fallen into utter despair or fallen apart. But, instead, Mary and Joseph chose to put their trust in GOD. They trusted in what God may already have done or now was doing or would ultimately do. Even though they couldn’t see it all, they chose to believe: “God is with us and at work within us and at work around and through us for good.” Their circumstances were tough and tumultuous, as ours can be, but God was their peace.

George Bailey wasn’t there yet when an angel met him on that winter night in 1945. Though he was a man of many Christian virtues, at the core he lacked God’s peace. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, it might be worth your while to watch the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. There aren’t too many grainy, black and white films that huge numbers of people still watch. But every year for the past three-quarters of a century, millions of people have made watching Frank Capra’s 1946 classic part of their Christmas tradition. Whether people are conscious of it or not, I suspect the movie still entralls us because it is filled with hints of the real Christmas story – the one that shows us where to find peace.

George Bailey (played by actor Jimmy Stewart, the Tom Hanks of his day) is a twenty-something resident of the mythic town of Bedford Falls, New York.¹ Like many of us, Bailey has glorious dreams and plans. In his words, he wants to “lasso the moon.” He tells his girlfriend, *“Mary, I know what I’m going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I’m going to leave this little town far behind, and I’m going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then I’m coming back here, and I’ll go to college and see what they know, and then I’m going to*

build things. I'm going to build air fields. I'm going to build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm going to build bridges a mile long."

But like Mary and Joseph in the real Christmas story – or you and me in ours -- it turns out that George doesn't really know what tomorrow and the next day will bring. His well-laid plans are repeatedly interrupted by unexpected circumstances. George's dad suffers a stroke and dies. A loyal son and brother, George agrees to stay on in Bedford Falls and run the family Building and Loan business – giving up his college tuition money to his brother Harry. George figures that he'll go on with his dreams when his brother gets back, but Harry returns married and with a job in another city. Again, George sacrifices and stays.

When the Great Depression hits the town, George and Mary stave off bankruptcy and preserve the finances of their poorer clients by giving up the money they'd save to go traveling on their honeymoon to keep the business solvent. Under George's leadership, the family company establishes a community called Bailey Park, that becomes a place where ordinary people can live in affordable, clean, decent housing -- rather than the overpriced slums run by Henry Potter, the banker Grinch in this Christmas story.

Again and again, we watch this couple making choices consistent with what our world used to admiringly call "Christian virtues." They put others first. They sacrifice to lift up the least of these. They forgive and forbear. They are not Messiahs. Mary in the movie does not give birth to a Savior. But in all the ways they live, this couple – like Mary and Joseph in the real Christmas story -- live by what Jesus would call the values of his Kingdom. They are not wealthy or famous or powerful. They are simply remarkably faithful when the circumstances of life make it hard to be.

And, then, George Bailey, cracks. The evil Henry Potter, who has been trying to buy-out or destroy George, finds a way to pin a false fraud charge on George and George can see no way out. His business and family name will be utterly ruined. He will likely go to jail and lose his family. George is overwhelmed by the apparent failure of his life... the waste of all his potential... the collapse of all his plans. He thinks it would be so much better if I had never been born. So, in the midst of a driving snowstorm that mirrors the cold chaos of life at that moment, George gets out of his car on a bridge, preparing to leap into oblivion in the freezing flow of the river below.

Only someone gets there first. Hearing a cry for help from below, George leaps now in order to save a drowning stranger. What he does not know at that moment is that the stranger is actually an angel sent from God to save George and to show him how God actually views him and his life. In a twist on Charles Dickens' Christmas story, the angel Clarence reveals to George what the world would be like had he never been born. I won't spoil the story for those who've not seen the movie, but suffice it to say that George's calamity-crashed, unplanned, ordinary but faithful life was actually part of God's staggering plan to multiply love and good and hope for so many people.

Providence Makes a Splash with Ripples

This past Thursday night, I went to an outdoor memorial service for a fifteen-year-old girl whose funeral our church hosted one-year ago. She was a phenomenal student-athlete, a beloved daughter and sister and a cherished friend. I do not know why her glorious plans were interrupted and she never got to travel to all the places she wanted to. But as her mom and everyone who knew her would tell you, Kendall's was a wonderful life. The way she did ordinary things with extraordinary passion and faithfulness counted. The ripples of love that keep washing over others because of her, do not answer every question, but bring some small measure of peace and drive us toward the God whose presence in our pain and whose redeeming power over even death is our ultimate peace.

I don't know what the circumstances of your life are right now. I hope your Christmas has been and will be nothing but merry and bright. But hear this clearly: If it is not, you are not outside the Christmas story, but within it. Once upon a time, in real history, a pair of peasant young people with plans for their life had them utterly disrupted. An angel gave them a message that relieved what could have been nothing but despair. The angel said, in effect, "GOD IS IN THIS." This splash that is so rocking your boat is the start of a ripple and a tide of love that will save the world. So Mary and Joseph remained faithful. And through their ordinary life, Jesus made a splash.

As Yale historian Kenneth Scott LaTourette writes: *"No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of humanity as that of [Jesus]. From that brief life, and its apparent frustration, has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphal waging of man's long battle than any other ever known by the human race. Through it, millions of people have had their inner conflicts resolved. Through it, hundreds of millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom and control over the physical environment. [The love of Christ] has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse, and it has emancipated millions from chattel slavery and millions of others from thralldom to vice. It has protected tens of millions from exploitation by their fellows, and it has been the most fruitful source of movements to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and peace."* And, I hasten to add, it has delivered countless souls to eternal life.

Let me repeat in closing: This is not an easy life, but it is a wonder-filled life. It is not a Hallmark channel life, but one worth hanging onto and waking up for and continuing to live with faith through – as Mary and Joseph did. Like them, you and I are called to put our trust NOT in our present circumstances, but in GOD – in what God may already have done or is now doing or will ultimately do whose full ripple effect we cannot yet see. Because of Jesus, we can have faith that God is with us and at work within us, and on the move around and through and in spite of us. And, like George Bailey, when you catch a glimpse of this, even if your life is still messy, you'll have a lot more peace.

Please pray with me...

Lord, only once in history have you made a splash like you did in the coming of your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. But the very wonder by which you brought his life and ministry forth through the disrupted plans and courageous faithfulness of Mary and Joseph both encourages us to believe that you might yet do significant wonders in and through our lives as we put our trust in Your plans. So fill us and use us, O prince of peace. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Years ago, Frank Capra, who directed, *It's a Wonderful Life*, was asked about the central message of his classic film. He thought for a moment about this and then responded, **"I believe the real message... is this: that under the sun, nothing is insignificant to God."**

Jay Ackerman expands: Everything that happens has intended and unintended consequences. Everything, because it happened, causes something else to happen. Everybody in the story is important because he or she relates to everyone else. Nothing under the sun is insignificant to God. Not only are you important to God, but also everyone around you is significant to him, too.

And so seek out the way of the Lord in all your goings, humbly lifting up those who may have fallen down. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Heavenly Father, and the fellowship of God's Holy Spirit be with you this day and until we meet again and forevermore. Amen.

¹ Jimmy Stewart was a deeply committed follower of Jesus who faithfully participated in the life of the Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church and often said that making *It's a Wonderful Life* was among his greatest contributions.