

I'm excited to offer this Advent series to you - Christ in Christmas Movies. A little bit of fun mixed with our traditional Scripture study of how God came to be with us over 2000 years ago to show us The Way - The Way to wholeness and life now and eternally.

I heard the broadcaster say in the news this past week, "On this second holiday season of the Covid Pandemic" and I thought to myself. Is this only the 2nd holiday season we've been dealing with this? I actually had to go back and check the dates of when the pandemic began. Somehow this feels like the 3rd holiday season of Covid craziness. It's no wonder when I began thinking about an Advent sermon series this past summer, right away I decided it would be really fun and a pleasant change to think about great Christmas movies and how they speak to us about Jesus and God. I've said before that I really enjoy movies, so this is fun for me and I hope it's fun and inspirational for you.

This first sermon centers around the Christmas classic "Miracle on 34th Street". If you don't know the movie - it's about a man who believes himself to be Santa Claus (who goes by Kris Kringle with two Ks - Kris Kringle) who somehow, mysteriously, is living in a retirement home in New York City (Maybe that's really where Santa Claus lives. Though I thought it was supposed to be the North Pole). He just happens to be out walking downtown - Thanksgiving Day no less - and runs into the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. There at the parade he sees that the man playing Santa Claus sitting in the sleigh is so inebriated he even can't stand up and alerts the woman in charge of the parade, Doris, of this serious problem. With the parade about to start, Doris asks Kris to take the other Santa's place and he agrees. Kris does such a good job "playing Santa" that he's hired to be the Santa inside Macy's Department Store. The rest of the movie is a story about Kris' effort to convince the woman who hired him, Doris, and the woman's little girl that he *really is* Santa Claus and not just someone *playing* Santa Claus. It's a story about identity and faith, which fits precisely with this first part of our Gospel story when Mary is told she will be the mother of the Son of God.

I know that you know this Bible story and some of you might know it very well. But... let's see really how well you know it with a little Bible quiz. See what you remember from hearing the scripture read a few minutes ago.

First question - An Angel visits Mary. Is the angel named? If so, which angel is it?

Yes! Gabriel

What town is Mary living in at the time?

Nazareth

Maybe these were easy questions - so let me ask you, the region was also mentioned - what region is Nazareth in? Galilee.

I really enjoy understanding geography as I study the Bible. An understanding of the geography helps me understand the story BEHIND the story - especially this one of Christmas. If someone told you they were from Los Angeles county or even San Diego county rather than Riverside you would understand more about the person and their life experiences. The same was true in Biblical times.

Here's a map of the location of the Christmas story - basically Israel. You can see Nazareth circled in red near the top, in the North. This is where Mary was at the time of the annunciation as it's called. When the angel announced God's plans for Mary.

You see in the yellow box that the upper or North part of Israel is the region of Galilee. Below that circled in Red is Bethlehem. This is where Joseph and Mary traveled to register for the census and where Jesus was born. The red line between Nazareth and Bethlehm was a likely route they would have traveled. It would have taken them about 9 days. I'll talk more about that the 3rd Sunday in advent.

You see that the region where Bethlehem is located is called Judea and the region in the middle is Samaria. Going back to Nazareth - we know that in Jesus' day this was an insignificant little town with most likely only 100 - 400 people. It's never mentioned by the historian Josephus or in the historical Talmud so it might even have been smaller than that. Probably it was inhabited by farmers, shepherds and laborers who would have traveled to a nearby and much larger city, Sepphoris - which had around 30 thousand inhabitants -

to sell things there. One of the reasons we know Nazareth was seen as a town of no consequence is the passage in John 1:45 & 46 “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth. To which Nathaniel retorts - Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

The word Nazareth comes from the Hebrew “netzer”, which means branch or shoot, like when a tree is cut down and sometimes a shoot will grow from the stump. That shoot is called a netzer. In Isaiah 11 we read that the messiah, called “the branch” would lead Israel:

“A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse (Jesse was King David’s father) and a branch (or netzer) shall grow out of his roots - the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him... His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.”

“Netzer” in those days was a word that signified hope for Israel in a future messiah. Nazareth, coming from the word “netzer”, created a location meaning to fill people with hope regardless of those naysayers who looked down on it and didn’t believe it could amount to anything. It conjured faith in God’s work of changing the world through the presence of One who’s humility and generosity inspired the same in people far and wide. This is also exactly what the character of Kris Kringle conjures in our movie for today - “Miracle on 34th Street.” - Faith in the Identity of one who could change the world person by person.

A disclaimer before I say more about the movie itself. The first edition of this movie came out in 1947 with Maureen O’Hara as the Macy’s parade organizer, Doris, and Natalie Wood as her daughter, Susan. But there’ve been other versions released, the most popular and most available now on streaming platforms is the one from 1994.

Unfortunately the 1947 and 1994 versions are different enough that I had to pick one for today. My favorite is the original 1947 version - though I like the color enhancement as it was black and white at first - so that’s the one I’m referring to today.

As I said, the movie starts with Kris Kringle walking quickly down snowy Madison Avenue in New York city street and from the very beginning he claims his identity as Santa Claus, though those around don’t

believe. In one of the very first scenes he’s looking through a storefront window and tries to tell the clerk, who’s arranging small figures of reindeer leading a sleigh, that he has the order of the reindeer all wrong. “You’ve got them mixed up,” says Kris. “You’re making a rather serious mistake with the reindeer. You’ve got Cupid where Blitzen should be. And Dasher, oh Dasher should be on my right-hand side. And another thing. Donner’s antlers have four points, not three. Still I don’t think anyone would know this except myself.”

To which the clerk says with a dubious expression - “No, I don’t suppose so. Bye. Thanks.” And quickly shuts the door in Kris Kringle’s face, locking it and looks at him from the window inside the store door as if he’s crazy as Kris turns around with a bright smile at having done a good deed.

There are a few people who do seem to believe his identity through the movie - a teenager named Alfred who also works at Macy’s on the cleaning crew and Fred Gailey who is Doris’ love interest and a lawyer who gets to know and help Kris as the story unfolds.

Mary went through the same experience of people not believing her - including her betrothed, Joseph - until he also was visited by an angel in his sleep, which gave him faith in that which is unbelievable by most. Of course, not only did most not believe who Jesus was during his lifetime, but even today, according to Barna Research, among the millennial generation (those born between 1984 and 2002) fewer than half believe Jesus was God.¹

Mary, most likely around 13 yrs of age, was visited by an angel who said, “You have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Though the announcement is glorious, awe inspiring and holds promises one can only dream about, it’s no wonder Mary’s response is, “How can this be,

¹ David Kinnaman & Roxy Lee Stone, “What Do Americans Believe About Jesus?”, *Barna.com*, April 1, 2015.

since I am a virgin?”. In other words, “Wait, what? I’m going to have a baby? How is that even possible?”

The painting “The Annunciation” by Henry Osawa Tanner portrays Mary as light, with her hands in her lap, face tilted, attentive and engaged, yet somehow he also shows her curiosity and fear.²

One Advent devotional I began reading for myself is this book, “All the Good: A Wesleyan Way of Christmas.” I recommend it if you’re looking for an Advent Devotional this season. There’s also a daily Advent devotional of the same title. One of the four authors of this book, Jung Choi, wrote about this instant in time and I was impressed with her thoughts from page 81.

“In this moment, God’s will and power *could* also be perceived as violent, for God’s plan is imposed upon Mary’s life in such a surprising way. God’s breaking into Mary’s life forever changed her life. In this way, Mary situates herself as a “servant of the Lord” in her song in Luke 1:38. It’s noteworthy that the word translated here as *servant (duolos)* literally means, “slave”. This is not a romantic or idealized concept that some modern readings would like to provide.³

In the same way, Kris Kringle is portrayed as one willing to give up much that others might believe in the meaning of Christmas, which he states in the movie, “The past 50 years or so I’ve been getting more and more worries about Christmas. Seems we’re all so busy trying to beat the other fellow and make it go faster and shinier and cost less. Christmas and I are sort of getting lost in the shuffle.” To which Doris replies, “Oh, I don’t think so. Christmas is still Christmas.” Kris says, “Oh Christmas isn’t just a day, it’s a frame of mind. That’s what’s been changing. That’s why I’m glad I’m here. Maybe I can do something about it. That’s why I’m glad I met you and your daughter. You’re sort of a test case for me. Sort of the whole thing in miniature. If I can win you over, there’s still hope. If not, then I guess I’m through. But I’m warning you - I don’t give up easily.”

Which he doesn’t. In the movie he’s willing to allow himself to be committed to a mental ward and then

put on trial in court where the lawyer Fred Gailey and the district attorney duke it out over whether or not they can prove Kris Kringle really is Santa Claus or not. I won’t tell you the end of the movie. You’ll have to watch for yourself to see exactly how it ends. It’s a really good ending too. I encourage you to take time to watch. It will warm your heart this season.

I’ll end by saying this. God doesn’t give up easily either. Not on you or me or the test cases we have in our own lives. If we are believers, then those one or two people who come to mind right now who you wish would “see the light” and be assured that God is and God loves them beyond anything they can imagine. That God’s love offers them life now beyond anything imaginable and forever - even after we are through with this world. As it says in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

So let us also - “not give up easily” - especially during this season of peace, hope, joy and love.

May it be so.

Oh God, you meet us in our fear. You find us when no one expects great things from us. You are God Who leads us and guides us. Even when we cannot fully understand You, let us keep trusting You. Let us remember and honor Your people who have practiced mercies in Your name. Let us follow their steps, but in our own way, in faithful and mutual relationship with You and all Your people. Let us keep our hope in You and rejoice in Jesus, who is the Savior for all Your people. In His name we pray. Amen.⁴

² Jung Choi, *All the Good: A Wesleyan Way of Christmas*, pg. 79, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2021

³ *Ibid*, pg. 81

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 98