

I've been having a lot of fun with this Advent sermon series - Christ in Christmas Movies - connecting classic and contemporary movies with our understanding of God and Jesus. I started this series with the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, then we looked at *Home Alone* and last week I talked about *The Polar Express*. Today I want to think about the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" in connection especially with our scripture passage for today.

You know that the story of Jesus' birth is found only in two places in the Bible - the gospel of Luke and the gospel of Matthew both in the New Testament. The last few weeks in worship we've been reading from the gospel of Luke about Mary - how she was visited by the angel Gabriel and told she'd give birth to God's son, and about Mary's close relative, Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah who also miraculously conceived past their childbearing years. That child became John the Baptist and prepared the way for Jesus by calling people to repent and be ready to receive the Savior, the Messiah - Jesus.

Today's scripture passage is from Matthew, the other book that describes Jesus' birth. But this story in Matthew focuses more on Joseph - Jesus' adoptive father and Mary's betrothed - and how Joseph decides to stay betrothed to Mary and raise Jesus as his own.

When I say Mary and Joseph were betrothed, it's very different from our meaning of betrothal in 2021. For us, being betrothed basically means being engaged. But in those days and in their tradition, the betrothal was the legally binding action making two people husband and wife. In fact, in verse 19 there in Matthew, Joseph is called Mary's *husband*, though they aren't yet married. That's because a betrothal would have legally bound Mary and Joseph and their families together. The betrothal was a lavish and formal first ceremony.

About a year after the betrothal, the second formal ceremony, the "marriage", would have taken place when Mary's father would receive the "mohar" or purchase price for the loss of Mary as his property. After that, Mary would have gone to live with Joseph, most likely in a small room in Joseph's father's house, which was the custom.

But we read here in Matthew, that before the second formal ceremony of marriage, and before they live together, Mary's found to be pregnant and Joseph learns of her pregnancy. Not only that, but as it says, Mary is found to be with child *from the Holy Spirit* meaning somehow Joseph finds out about this supernatural way Mary has conceived.

In order to not cause her more problems, Joseph intends to divorce her quietly it says. I wondered, as I read this, did Joseph believe Mary had been unfaithful or did he possibly question her sanity and want to divorce her quietly for his own sake as well?

It's interesting that in verse 20 of this passage, we get an inside look at how Joseph dealt with this intense tension. The Common English version of this passage we heard says, "As Joseph was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." But the word used here for "think" in the original Greek is "enthumeomai" which means a condition of passionate, intense response, an agitated state of mind, provoking strong impulse. So Joseph wasn't just thinking about what to do, instead he probably went through an agitated, intense time of reflection about his response to the news of Mary's pregnancy. It seems likely to me, that he was so agitated and beside himself, that it made him weary and he fell asleep and as he slept, God spoke to him, through an angel, in a dream.

There are many ways God speaks to us - have any of you ever had a dream where you felt like God was trying to tell you something? Sometimes we "hear" God as we read the Bible or other devotional books, or as we talk with friends about problems, or listen to music or when we're in worship or sometimes when we're in prayer - especially listening or meditative prayer - many people do "hear" from God.

This movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, poses two ways God and we communicate with each other and how we're in relationship - one is prayer and the other is the presence of angels. In fact, the movie actually opens with these two ways we communicate and are in relationship with God - prayer and the presence of angels. We're gonna play a clip of the movie now to demonstrate this.

Movie clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79pIurpNARs>

Angels are interesting to me. Maybe they are for you too, or maybe not. But we can say for sure that they do play a role in our Biblical understanding of being in relationship with God. The first time we read of an encounter with an angel in the Bible is in the Old Testament toward the beginning of Genesis chapter 17.

Biblical times were a very patriarchal society and the Bible was originally written only by men, but it's interesting that the first angelic encounter we find in the Bible - is to a girl, an Egyptian slave, who is in need. It's Hagar. In the Biblical account she's the concubine of Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, who is connected to the Islamic faith.

The word used there in Genesis for angel in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament is "Malak", which more literally means "messenger". An angel is a messenger of God. Hagar encounters a messenger of God in Genesis. The word we translate as angel in the New Testament from Greek is also more literally "messenger". So in both Hebrew and Greek the original understanding of an angel is that they are messengers of God.

Throughout the Bible, these messengers are experienced different ways. From Matthew today we read Joseph met an angel in a dream. There in Genesis it says the messenger "found Hagar by a spring and they talked together."

The difference between Genesis and other accounts of angels is that Hagar doesn't seem to be afraid, whereas in other places when messengers of God are encountered people seem to be very afraid, as if the presence of an angel is somehow overpowering. Indeed later in the birth story of Jesus when an angel appears to the shepherds in the fields at night it says the glory of the Lord shone around the angel and that's why the shepherds were afraid. Most times in the Bible when an angel appears the angel says - Do not be afraid, I'm here to bring you good news.

In this movie - It's a Wonderful Life - although Clarence is working on getting his wings, angels in the Bible never have wings.

There *are* creatures called Cherubim, VERY different from angels - who do have wings and faces of

other animal creatures and wheels instead of feet, but they are not angels. And angels in the Bible are not people who died, but unique creatures of God, created expressly as angels. It even says in Psalm 8:5 that humans were created a little lower than the angels.

But here's the thing - many times in the Bible these messengers of God show up looking and acting just like regular people. Probably the most well-known example of this is in Genesis 19. Two angels, messengers of God, visit the city of Sodom. Lot, Abraham's nephew, is sitting at the entrance gate to the city. Upon meeting them, Lot invites the angels into his house to stay the night instead of sleeping out in the town square, which was the custom. The angels are described as looking just like men, who need a place to sleep and they even eat a meal with Lot. Just like regular people.

I say this as a reminder, that though God is able to do anything - God is all powerful - and I believe, does provide miracles and extraordinary experiences even today - sometimes messengers of God are just regular people. In fact, we're warned about this in Hebrews 13:2, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it." In this way, I believe God uses even regular people like you and me to be like angels to others - servants and messengers of God.

This certainly seems to be the case in the Movie It's a Wonderful Life. Though there is a character named Clarence who's supposed to be an angel - when George Bailey, the main character, gets in trouble for eight thousand dollars that have been lost for his business, the building and loan, it's not Clarence who comes to the rescue, but all of his friends and family. Watch this last clip of the movie and you tell me - who are the true messengers of God's love in this scene? And how might God be calling us to be God's messengers even today?

Movie clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfUV-F9jFro>