

Welcome to this second Sunday of Advent, of preparation for Christ as an infant breaking into our lives, and this second sermon in a series I'm calling Christ in Christmas Movies. I hope this is a way to bring some fun to this important and sometimes emotional time of the year.

Last Sunday I talked about the classic movie Miracle of 34th Street and how faith - believing in things we can't see - offers peace about things that are yet to be. I talked about Mary's faith in agreeing to be mother to the Son of God. There are print copies of the sermon in the Narthex or you can watch online if you missed it.

Today the highlight movie for this sermon series is called Home Alone. I'm sure some of you know it, but others of you may not. I'll introduce it to you today and talk about how God prepares a way for us even though sometimes we're disobedient or ill-tempered toward God and others. You might even go home interested in watching the movie for yourself. A few people commented to me after church last Sunday that they were gonna go home and watch Miracle on 34th street.

Can you remember a time playing Hide and Seek? I actually have memories of playing Hide & Seek inside the church I grew up in - we'd have lock-ins as youth and play hide & seek. There are a couple of different phrases the seeker in Hide and Seek might call out when they're done counting. What phrase comes to mind for you?

I was thinking of the phrase, "Ready or Not, here I come." Karen expertly read our scripture lesson today from Luke chapter one - the part of the Christmas Story where the angel Gabriel - the same angel who announced Jesus' conception, also announces the conception of Jesus' relative, John, who later became known as John the Baptist. As it said in our passage today - the angel announces that John "will be great in the sight of the Lord... even before birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

More or less, the angel Gabriel said, "Ready or not, here he comes." And when John grew up, more or less he said those words to many people about Jesus, "Ready or not, here he comes!"

The small Advent devotional I introduced to you last Sunday and that I've been reading this season called "All the Good: A Wesleyan Way of Christmas" says this: "Advent begins with the acknowledgment of our need and desire for God. The season of Advent marks a time and space to prepare to receive God's presence in the birth of Jesus Christ that overcomes the separation that sin continues to inflict on our world."¹

Another way of defining sin is either wrongdoing or just plain missing the mark of perfection. Even those who feel they haven't DONE MUCH WRONG, can agree that they're FAR from perfect - that they've missed the mark at times. This is exactly what the word "sin" in Greek - Hamartia - means. It's an archery term - Hamartia - sin - meaning to miss the mark.

From the beginning of our Biblical account of creation, of our relationship with God - where life existed, sin, in this definition, also existed. The only boundary Adam and Eve were by God was to not eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet they did, both of them. In Christian speak this is called "original sin", which exists in every person alive. Everyone misses the mark at some point. No one is perfect.

In the Christmas movie for today - Home Alone - the main character, an 8 year old boy named Kevin, confronts sin - missing the mark of perfection - in his family and in himself. Kevin and his extended family are gathered in his home preparing to take a trip together for Christmas. As you can imagine, a home with 15 bodies getting ready for a trip - the majority of whom are adolescents - makes for a comedy of errors, insults galore and tempers that reach the roof. In this scene we're going to show you in a moment, Kevin feels he's been the brunt of the family's bad tempers so he decides to inflict his own version of pain on his mother who is sent to "deal with him." Watch this.

¹ Lacey Warner, All the Good: A Wesleyan Way of Christmas, pg. 19, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2021

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Luke 1:5-17

Rev. Susan Juergensen

It's possible some of us can relate to Kevin's feelings about family in this scene. As a mother though, every time I see this scene I'm amazed at how Kate, the mom, keeps her cool in response to Kevin's snide remarks. Mothering has provided, for me, many opportunities to miss the mark of perfection. Just ask my kids, or my husband.

Our words in Luke today tell the story about a person in our Biblical history who was sent to help us with our sin. A person who was set aside and filled with the Holy Spirit, even before birth, to prepare the way for people in his time and for us to meet God and change our life from anger, hurt and pain to release, hope and wholeness. As it says in Mark 1:2 "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way."

As it says in this devotional, "the Means of Grace are a way that God sends God's messenger ahead of to prepare the way. Whether our path is beginning with awareness or grappling with actions and next steps, the messenger present in the Advent journey is clearing space for us. There is One who makes a path for us today."²

I wrote in our newsletter this past week, that the Means of Grace, for one of the founders of the Methodist Movement, John Wesley, were ordinary ways we receive God's grace - prayer, praise & worship, reading & studying scripture, singing, silence, practices of charity, fasting, confession to God and seeking justice for those oppressed. Unfortunately, ordinary, daily expressions of faith like these seem to get lost in our society where we want newer, popular fads that promise better and quicker results for the problems and wrongs in our life.

This short, four week season of Advent - now only three weeks - offers us a perfect chance to try out a few of these simple, daily practices for ourselves. The goal is NOT to accomplish a task, but to be open to a way, a means - to receive God's love and grace which is infinite in abundance if we only open ourselves to it. If you've seen this Christmas movie, Home Alone, you know that Kevin gets his wish. Due to a series of errors, his family leaves for their trip, but Kevin is left "Home Alone." Many really funny mishaps and Kevin's run in

with two crooks who try to rob his "empty house" cause him to regret that he wished his family away. His regret sends him to visit Santa's helper at the mall on Christmas Eve where he asks, "This is extremely important - will you please tell Santa that instead of presents this year, I just want my family back. No toys, nothing but Peter, Kate, Buzz, Megan and Linny & Jeff and my Aunt and my cousins - and if he has time, my Uncle Frank." Feeling very bad about his wrongs, on his way home he passes the church on the corner where he hears the children's choir practicing. He stops. Looks at the church lit from the inside and the glowing nativity in front and listens to the words of "O Holy Night. He decides to take a chance and go inside. To his surprise, he runs into his neighbor, who he's been afraid of all his life. Watch this clip and see what happens next.

Part of what I love about this movie is the great writing - it's a John Hughes screenplay and the film score by John Williams is also amazing. So this morning we have two talented Johns and one pesky John the Baptist who calls to us - Ready or Not, Here Jesus comes. And Kevin, who reminds us to turn the lights of our faith on 'cuz we might be surprised by what it brings in the end. The ordinary means of grace just might be God preparing a way for us despite our disobedience.

² April Casperson, All the Good: Devotions for the Season, pg 25, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2021