

Theme: Emmanuel, God with us.

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How many of you have watched any of the Christmas movies that have been showing on TV during this season? (The Hallmark channel began a constant run of Christmas movies before Thanksgiving.) Some are comedies, many of which revolve around a plot in which Santa Claus is about to lose his job for some reason or other. Many other Christmas movies are romances, in which two people meet under unlikely circumstances but are obviously “meant for each other.” Often these two people are helped in their relationship by some sort of “angelic being.” (In one such movie, the angelic being comes in the form of a Golden Retriever dog (*A Golden Christmas* [2012])). All of these movies border on sentimental schmalz, and yes, most would be considered “chic flicks.” But I admit that I do enjoy watching them on occasion. The question is “Why?” Why do I (and some of you) find these rather inane holiday movies so appealing, particularly when they’re not exactly great art?

After a little reflection, I realized that the movie makers have actually honed in on some **themes** that resonate deeply within our human psyche. Think about your favorite holiday movie or story for a moment. Perhaps it’s one of the older classic Christmas movies: *Miracle on 34th Street*; *The Bishop’s Wife*; or one of the various productions of Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, with old Scrooge. Perhaps it’s one of the newer “made for TV” flicks. Most of these holiday films revolve around themes that resonate with some of our most deeply felt needs.

One common theme that’s apparent in many of these movies is that new beginnings are possible: two lonely people find each other; orphaned children find a home with love; a person finally finds fulfillment by discovering his or her true identity or destiny; and in one of my favorites, *Silent Night*, enemy soldiers discover their common humanity, moving away from hostility to mutual understanding. (Note: We will show this film here at New Jerusalem on Thursday, January 4 at 10:00 a.m. in the fellowship hall; this is not a “chic flick” but based on a true story coming out of World War II, and everyone is invited but do let us know as there will be a potluck lunch following the movie.)

All these stories are hope-filled and proclaim that new beginnings are possible. The message seems to be that if such good endings can happen to the characters in the movie, then maybe we too might find a “good ending” in our own life. That’s a powerful message for anyone who may be struggling, lonely, or has experienced any crisis or loss this past year. It’s a message that brings hope.

A second theme that pervades many of these holiday movies is that there are mysterious forces at work around us. In many of these stories events occur that just can’t be explained very easily according to the laws of science or human intellect. In some of these holiday movies it’s Santa working some kind of magic. In others, it’s strange angelic-like characters that aid human beings as they struggle with life’s complexities (e.g., *It’s a Wonderful Life* w/ Jimmy Stewart).

Most of us yearn for awe and mystery in our life. On the one hand we would like to be able to provide a rational explanation to everything we experience. On the other hand, most of us know

or have had experiences that just can't be explained by any kind of pre-packaged or pre-conceived rational explanation. Miracles of grace occur around us with things or events just happening in ways we never anticipated.

One of my favorite cartoons, which my mathematician/statistician husband shared with me, is reprinted on the inside of the back cover of your bulletin. (*Please turn to it on p. 23.*) A professor is obviously reviewing a student's work on a mathematical equation on the chalk board. The student has apparently started out strong, but then inserts the words, "***Then a Miracle Occurs***" into the middle of the equation before writing out the conclusion to the problem. Like most of us, the professor thinks the student should be "*more explicit*" in step two.

How many of us are like that professor? We want all the facts and figures in the equation of our lives to make sense; we want things to be "*more explicit*"! But this cartoon points to the reality that not everything in one's life can easily be explained. I, and I suspect many of you, need to believe that there are forces operating in this world that are beyond our control, beyond what we can see, touch, or devise for ourselves. We need to believe that there are *mysterious forces* (or *miracles*) at work that help to bring about those new beginnings for which we all hope. And when life gets dark or dreary, we need those miracles to bring us hope.

Many holiday movies indeed present themes of both hope and mystery, but if we begin to believe that these movies will provide any sense of *enduring hope* or *lasting awareness* of mystery, we would be fooling ourselves. They may allow us momentary escapes from whatever it is with which we are currently coping, but they are not enduring. However, the story we came to hear tonight is of an entirely different magnitude – it is one that *can* provide both enduring hope and incalculable mystery. Phillips Brooks, who wrote the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem", was quite correct when he wrote: "*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*" The story of Jesus' nativity is the "miracle that occurs" in the middle of our human equation – the miracle that brings both hope and mystery because this babe has the power to inform and transform us.

The story of Jesus' birth, as recounted by Luke, is a wonderful story, which we have seen re-enacted by our youth and children this evening. It's a simple story-line and quite intriguing, but it is neither its simplicity nor its intrigue that has probably drawn us here tonight. Instead, it's the contrasts and reversals inherent in this story that make it so powerful:

- Messengers from the Lord God Almighty appear to the lowest of the low – crude, uneducated, smelly shepherds.
- These angels do not appear in front of Caesar Augustus' palace in Rome, or on the White house lawn in front of a hundred media cameras. The very Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior – the one whom the prophet Isaiah calls "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" – this one is born in a barn, not in a palace.
- And this child is born to a couple who are nobodies – they are not celebrities of any kind and have no notoriety.
- And this child is born in an out-of-the way small town that's not in the center of anywhere or anything.

All the details of this story seem to assault our fondness for power, wealth, social rank, and respectability. These contrasts and reversals touch and challenge us at our deepest human levels. This story challenges us to strip away the illusions of our culture, civilization, and our basic

human tendency to pretension. This story calls us back to the simple fundamental basics of what it is to be human – a humanity which will be revealed in this child who has been born. This is the story of a God who loves us so deeply and completely that this God took on human form, being born as a human baby to fully share in our humanity. We call this the MIRACLE of the INCARNATION, for it's in this child that we can find the hope and mystery for which we all so earnestly long.

Did you notice just how directly *personal* is the address of the angel to the shepherds? The angel says: “*I am bringing you good news . . . to you is born this day . . . This will be a sign for you*” (Luke 2:10, 11, 12). Martin Luther once noted, and I quote:

“*He [the angel] does not simply say: ‘Christ is born,’ but ‘for you he is born.’*”

Then Luther adds:

“*. . . What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own?*”¹

For you, for me, Christ is born. The Christmas story reminds us that God came to earth, to dwell among us as “Emmanuel,” which means “**God with us**,” in all our situations of struggle and ambiguity. As one author has put it:

[This] “is a sign to us that God enters into the very ambiguous and difficult, very real and gritty, situations in our lives, to love and redeem us. ‘God with us’ is God’s work unfolding in the midst of our daily lives – not despite life’s other tasks, or dashed expectations, but in the midst of them. Or as Charles Spurgeon once said: ‘Immanuel, God with us . . . in our nature, in our sorrow, in our life work, in our punishment, in our grave, and now with us, or rather we with Him in resurrection, ascension, triumph, and 2nd Advent splendor.’”²

“Emmanuel – God with Us” – the birth of Jesus is the “miracle that occurs” in the middle of our human equation. God himself has chosen to enter into our life and reality by being born in human form, to be born as a human infant. This is a mystery that can’t be explained, but it can be entered into by faith. In so doing, we will find Emmanuel – God with us – the God who is with us, no matter where we live, no matter how obscure the moment or place may appear. It is this child who can touch the deepest parts of our being and work miracles within us and around us. There is no deeper mystery to experience, no greater hope to embrace, no greater miracle than this child Jesus.

As the angels beckoned the shepherds, so the angels likewise call us to the manger, “To Come and See.” And then to “Go and Tell!

Choir Anthem: *Amen! Tell It on the Mountain*

¹Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, ed. Davild L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 2010) 116; from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 52, *Sermons, II*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1974), 15 & 21.

²Quoted in *LectionAid*, Vol 19, No. 1, Year A, December 2010-February 2011 (Boulder CO: LectionAid, Inc., 2010) 14.