

The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
25 December 2022

Isaiah 9:1-6
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
(Luke 2:10-11) Luke 2:1-14

Christmas: It's a Wonderful Life

My favorite Christmas movie—and one of my favorite movies of all—is *It's a Wonderful Life*. Many of you have likely already seen or know something about this movie. It premiered just before Christmas in 1946, and is about a man named George Bailey who, on Christmas Eve, has run into a financial crisis at the building and loan he's in charge of. In that moment of crisis, all the things that he's been frustrated with throughout his life seem to come to a head. After an argument with his wife, and in the depths of discouragement, George decides that the world would be better off without him.

As an answer to the many fervent prayers of his family and friends, an angel named Clarence is sent to save George. But, as Clarence tries to encourage him and help him be grateful for God's greatest gift—the gift of life—George gets angry and says to him: “I wish I'd never been born!” Clarence grants George's wish, and shows him what the world would have been like if he had never been born.

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I try to watch this movie every year around this time, having seen it many times over the year. The closing scene is quite moving and never fails to bring me to tears; never fails to renew my own gratitude for the gift of life God has given me. I recently came across an article that explained some interesting facts about the movie's history that I had not known before.

The movie was adapted from a short story written by Philip Van Doren Stern called “The Greatest Gift.” It's said that the story came to him in its entirety as he was shaving one morning

in 1938.¹ It took him a while before he finally wrote it down. However, he struggled to find a publisher to purchase the story. In 1943, he decided to send out his story in booklets to 200 friends as a Christmas present. The booklet caught the attention of a producer, who then had a studio purchase it for adaptation and production as a major motion picture starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed.

However, the movie received mixed reviews, and was only nominated for a few awards. It even failed to make a profit at the box office. There was nothing about its release that indicated it would become what it is regarded today—widely ranked as one of the greatest movies of all time.

So, how did that happen? Apparently, as this article explained, it all came down to a clerical error. Again, after it left the box office, *It's a Wonderful Life* didn't enjoy any particular attention as a great movie. Some 28 years after its release, it was in some ways forgotten, even by the studio that owned its rights.

In 1974, as its copyright was about to expire, the studio somehow forgot to file paperwork renewing its rights for another twenty-eight years. Consequently, the film became part of the public domain. Therefore, it was then free for any television station to air it, and any VHS tape producer to sell it, all without paying any royalties. As a result, *It's a Wonderful Life* was repeatedly shown during the holidays on TV and widely available for purchase on cassette tape. In 1993, the studio was able to reassert some of its rights, but over that twenty-year period, due to it being so widely available, the public began to take another look at this film, and gain greater appreciation for the message and truth it conveys about God's greatest gift—the gift of life.

As I read this article, I couldn't help but notice some fitting connections with the story of the Birth of Jesus. When the movie debuted, there were a few people who noticed and appreciated it—Academy Award-winning director Frank Capra considered it his finest film—but it was not something that the world took much notice of. It wasn't until almost three decades later that the world got to appreciate the important message contained in this movie.

It was the same with the Birth of Jesus. When Jesus was born, most of the world didn't know much about it. The shepherds heard the Good News from the angel, and went to visit the Newborn Savior—giving glory and praise to God for what they had seen.² Soon, as we'll hear in a couple weeks on Epiphany Sunday, the Wise Men will follow the star to give homage to the Newborn King.³ But, for most of the world, it was “business as usual”. Not much changed in the world with the Birth of Jesus. Yet, we know now that the world would never be the same.

It wasn't until thirty years later that Jesus reemerged to the public and people began to notice. That the world began to understand the meaning of Jesus' Birth and the gift of eternal life He came to give us.

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Another fitting connection is all the costs associated with the movie. The author had a tough time selling his short story, but finally did for \$10,000. It cost about \$3 million to produce the film, but it lost about \$500,000 at the box office. The studio that owned the rights could've extended its rights for a mere \$4.00 filing fee. Because it failed to do so, it likely lost millions per year in royalties. In the movie itself, George Bailey is distraught because his building and loan has lost \$8,000.

Clarence—George's guardian angel—says to George, “Ridiculous of you to [wish you'd never been born] over money--\$8,000 dollars.” When George asks for that \$8,000 from the

angel to help him out of his crisis, Clarence laughs, “We don’t use money in Heaven.” George replies, “Comes in pretty handy down here, bub.”

It does seem that money comes in handy down here, doesn’t it? All this talk about money, and how we are so fixated with it in our world, it’s interesting to note that *It’s a Wonderful Life* only became popular and was able to share its message of the gift of life with the world when it became so forgotten and ignored that it was considered to have *no* monetary value. Not even worth its own studio remembering to file an extension on its copyright. When it was “set free”, so to speak, from being possessed, only then was it able to be shared freely with the world.

Similarly, we are reminded that Jesus Christ came into our world in poverty. He had no possessions and no social or financial standing. The first people to learn of His Birth and visit Him were shepherds—those of the lowest and poorest class of society.⁴ The rest of the world saw no value in His Birth, yet the reason He was Born was to give us something that cannot be bought. Something that is priceless, yet freely shared with all. The greatest gift, which is not just the gift of life in this world, but, the gift of eternal life with Jesus in Heaven.

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George Bailey was ready to throw away God’s greatest gift. The worries, concerns, pressures, and tragedies of life were beginning to catch up with him. And caused him to lose sight of what matters most. To lose sight of what is so valuable that no amount of money can buy it.

Every year we gather at Christmas to be reminded of this. To be reminded of what truly matters. The gift of life that each one of us has been given cannot be measured in dollars, wealth,

possessions, successes, accolades, achievements, or prestige. The gift of each life can only be and is only measured by God.

To understand the full meaning and value of Jesus' Birth, however, we can't stay here at the manger. We have to look at the Cross. "For God so loved the world[—God so loved each and every one of us—]that He gave His only Son" to be our Savior.⁵ To redeem us from the darkness of sin and death. To show us the light of life. So that we might have life—life eternal.

On this Holy Night, we join the angels and shepherds in singing "Glory to God in the highest," because a Savior has been born for each one of us.⁶ That's what Christmas is all about. It's about receiving the greatest gift of all—the gift of eternal life.

I don't know what might be weighing on your heart this Holy Night. I don't know what you've been through this past year. Likely a mixture of joys and sorrows that come with every life in this fallen and sometimes darkened world. Yet, tonight we celebrate that a Light has shown into our world.⁷ Jesus Christ our Savior.

I don't know what gifts you're hoping for this Christmas. I don't know what you're hoping for in the New Year. Give yourself permission to receive the love of Jesus tonight. Tonight, my hope for all of you, is that you renew your receiving of the greatest gift. The gift of life. The gift of Jesus Christ. The Only One who can help you or anyone see what truly matters in life.

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I'll close with a prayer that I found a few years ago on a holy card. I often give it as a penance in Confession. Please open your heart and listen and receive this prayer:

Lord,
let me wake up every morning
and be thankful for the wonderful
life that you have given me.

Help me to see the good in things.
Help me to be happy with who I am
and the life I am living. Lead me
down the path you have set for me.
Guide me in the way that
I get to show the world my gifts.
I put all in your hands Jesus,
use me as your vessel.
I thank you for my health,
love, abilities, family, friends
and most of all this life.
I will do great things in your name.⁸

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Merry Christmas!

¹ Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story" - *It's a Wonderful Life* (flop and copyright expired became hit):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vJuTQdHZ1L8>

² Luke 2:15-20

³ Matthew 2:1-12

⁴ Luke 2:8-14

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ Luke 2:14, 11

⁷ John 1:4-5, 8:12

⁸ While suffering pain caused by a debilitating disease, 17 year-old Nikole Drummond hand-wrote this prayer in 2009. Written for her own use, she now shares it with the world.

https://www.catholicprayercards.org/Holy_cards_of_Jesus_Christ/prayer-for-gratitude-holy-card.html