

“The Most Wonderful Gift of Your Humanity”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Luke 1:67-80

Luke 3:1-6

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

- Luke 1:2

Prayer

God who still speaks,

Give us ears to hear your Word.

May our hearing transform us into

Vessels of our incarnational faith. Amen.

Soon after I completed my second master's degree in theology, I moved to Chicago to serve as a pastor in residence at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, which I know was a spiritual home for a few of you who attend ACC now. During my first Christmas season in the Windy City, a group of young professionals from Fourth Church took it upon themselves to introduce me to some of Chicago's best holiday traditions. We went to the Magnificent Mile Lights Festival and to the city's tree lighting ceremony in Daley Plaza. I got my own private tour of the Lyric Opera House before watching a riveting performance of the Nutcracker by the Joffrey Ballet. We took a night stroll at the Lincoln Park Zoo to enjoy the Christmas lights, saw the decorated windows at the now defunct Marshall Field's Department Store, had some glogg with ginger cookies at the iconic Simon's Tavern and, one night, I was taken to the historic Music Box Theater for an evening of sing-along Christmas carols followed by the showing of a classic Christmas movie that I had never seen, *“It's a Wonderful Life.”*

I must say that out of all those delightful holiday festivities that were blissfully unmoored from the weird theological claims of the Christmas story in the Bible, Frank Capra's film was the only one that got me thinking about the real meaning of the story hidden behind the coziness of our secular Christmas traditions and buried underneath the reassuring domesticity of our Advent services. As soon as I heard that the movie is turning 75 on December 20th, I knew I had to watch it again. So, last month, 21 years after the church group of young professionals in Chicago took me to see what they called *“a heartwarming, corny and unmissable American Christmas treasure,”* I sat down with Erik to see *“It's a Wonderful Life”* a second time. And here's what surprised me most: in 2000, after watching this film with a church group, we went to a trendy Argentine restaurant to eat and drink and be merry without reflecting even briefly on the bigger truth and the issues uncovered on the screen.

It's easy to understand why Capra's film has become such a beloved holiday perennial. There is something uplifting in the scene where George Bailey – a selfless soul who sacrifices his own dreams so others may live and thrive – prays for a second chance at life and then runs through the snow-covered streets of Bedford Falls screaming “**Merry Christmas**” at every building and every person along the way. It's adorable to hear Zuzu say one of the film's unforgettable lines, “**Look, daddy, teacher says, every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings.**” Eyes tear up when the townsfolk stream into George Bailey's living room bringing with them their hard-earned savings to cover the huge shortfall at the Savings and Loan that would have allowed the greedy financier Potter to take control of their mortgages and their future. And the film ends on a high dose of good Christmas cheer as George reads the warm inscription his guardian angel Clarence wrote on the inside cover of the novel “*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*” – “**Dear George: - Remember no man is a failure who has friends.**”

But, perhaps because this is supposed to be “**the most wonderful time of the year,**” no one talks about the culture and banking system that break George Bailey's heart again and again, force him into bankruptcy, poison his soul and plunge him into depression until he can no longer hold it together. George hits rock bottom when Potter accuses him of embezzling \$8,000 from his own family's bank. Despite his honesty, decency, grit, and altruism, George feels utterly powerless before the unforgiving and unscrupulous forces of capitalism, which appear to define the winners and losers in the world and even what a human life is worth. In one of the darkest scenes of any Christmas movie I have seen, George Bailey stands on a bridge contemplating suicide while the life-endangering words of the town's financier linger in the background, “**You're worth more dead than alive.**” George's death has a price tag of \$15,000, courtesy of a life insurance policy. Had the guardian angel not succeeded in showing George that his life mattered and his uncompromising commitment to lifting people out of poverty made a real difference in his town, the unjust economic powers of the world would have remained unopposed. George Bailey and the people of Bedford Falls might have never experienced the hope, the peace, the joy, the love and the wellbeing that come from the presence of justice, compassion, solidarity and from the hearts and minds of weirdos, like George Bailey, who, against all the odds, still believe in a society where every human being deserves to have a wonderful life.

My church group and I left the theater unsettled by Capra's film, but in 1947 J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee were highly suspicious of the movie's storyline. An FBI agent identified “**a malignant undercurrent**”¹ in the story. “*It's a Wonderful Life*” was labeled anti-American and its message subversive. The FBI accused the motion picture of attempting to magnify the economic problems of the common man while deliberately maligning the upper class and showing the people who have money as unsympathetic characters.² George Bailey's unhappiness in a quintessentially American small town was perceived as a subtle attack on the American way of life and on the very promises of the American dream.

I do not say this lightly, but I wish that all of us who are kindling the Advent candles and singing Advent hymns this morning were as perturbed, uneasy, and disquieted by the Christmas message as the FBI was alarmed by *“it’s a Wonderful Life.”* It appears though that our over-familiarity with Advent has turned this sacred time of preparation for the coming of Christ into a heartwarming annual countdown to Christmas Eve. The Advent season hardly ever makes us ask ourselves anymore how the Incarnation of God’s love in Jesus impels us to imagine a very different world from the one bankrolled by the powers and the powerful of our time.

Willie Dwayne Francois III, an assistant professor of Liberation Theology at New York Theological Seminary, says that Christians have come to take Christmas for granted and have lost sight of its wild, off-putting, compelling, hopeful, transformative and life-saving message. Rev. Francois reminds us that we often stagger into the church during Advent too tamed by patriarchy, too domesticated by Whiteness, too programmed by capitalism, too disciplined by heterosexism, too allegiant to doctrines, and too complaisant to the status quo to be surprised or even changed by the wildness of Advent. And yet, he points out, Advent is a time to be wild. Wild for hope, wild for peace, wild for the possibility that we may incarnate the message of Christmas in our social, political, economic and religious realities. And, as Rev. Francois put it so well, ***“To be wild is to be free, unbought and unbossed by the structures of power.”***³

There is a reason why the Gospel of Luke names the Roman emperor, the governor of Judea, the rulers of Palestine and the high priests in today’s lesson and then makes the wild claim that ***“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”*** The evangelist is saying something quite extraordinary in this passage! Our preparations for Christmas do not begin with ornaments and the lights, the gift-shopping or baking, not with the hollow sentimentality of some of the carols, candle-lighting or holiday festivities; our preparation for Christmas starts in the wilderness, in the desert, with a fiery preacher who lives off-the-grid, makes controversial fashion statements with his chosen apparel of a garment made of camel’s hair, keeps a rather unusual diet of roasted locust and honey,⁴ and who would not be high on the list of pastoral candidates at any mainline church since he has a knack for speaking the bare truth to the people around him.⁵

John the Baptist was born into a highly respected family of priests, but he walked away from his hereditary claim to the priesthood, from the conformity imposed by religion, and from the trappings of social conventions to proclaim ***“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”*** and to announce the good news that ***“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*** Hope for a world of peace where life is celebrated daily as a wonderful gift from God, the evangelist says very boldly, will not come from the halls of political power or much less from well-established religious institutions, it will come from weirdos like John the Baptist who embrace the wildness of repentance and are not hesitant to trade power and privilege for the God-given freedom to affirm the inherent value of every human life.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

The Irish theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama believes that repentance is a sign of the goodness in humankind because repentance allows us to accept with open arms and heart the gift of being wrong and it inspires us to change our tune, our mind, our ideas, and the direction of our lives.⁶ Ó Tuama also speaks about the two rebellious daughters of sin: Language and Hope. Language to confess the awful truth about our addiction to be less than the person God wants us to become and hope that we might move, however slowly, toward change, toward that human being God wants us to be.⁷

In the Gospel of Luke, John stands at the outskirts of power, beyond imperial reach and outside the asphyxiating rigidity of religion calling on people of faith to re-orient our lives and dare to change even if the change happens slowly so we may live wildly free, “**unbought and unbosomed by the structures of power**”⁸ in our world. Luke insists that it is here, when our hearts are unsettled and unfettered by the story of the Incarnation of God in Christ that our preparation for Christmas begins. Here – where no one would have ever expected, in the desert – the Gospel of Luke claims, prophetic weirdos and wild dreamers can participate in God’s great dream of making life wonderful for all people. It is here, in this unusual place where we feel exposed, vulnerable and uncomfortable, in the wilderness of our world where school shootings still happen and a new variant of COVID makes us wonder if we will ever feel safe again and climate change threatens the future of our planet, it is right here that John repeats the words of the prophet Isaiah, “**every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,**” and the Baptizer challenges us to take it upon ourselves to let Christmas transform the landscape of human history. It is here that God becomes incarnate and invites us to take part in the great work of leveling the paths that favor some people and make life so much harder for so many others.

Dom Hélder Câmara, a Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop who for two decades was a lonely voice crying out in the wilderness during the military dictatorship in Brazil, felt in his own flesh what it meant to live a life of faith unsettled by the Incarnation of Christ. He used to say that when he gave food to the poor, he was acclaimed as a national saint by the military régime and the upper class; but when he asked why so many people were poor and hungry, the political, economic and even the ecclesial powers turned against him and called him a Communist.⁹ Despite ongoing threats against his life, D. Hélder Câmara stood up for this Christmas hope of peace where the paths are made straight and level for the less privileged. The military and the hierarchy of the Church pushed him to the sidelines. For a while, not even the media could mention his name. Still D. Hélder Câmara would not stop believing, even in the darkest moments, that preparing for Christmas is not just something religious people do during Advent, but a way of life that doesn’t give up on the hope for peace and justice even when all hope seems lost and justice appears to be designed only to punish the weak and the powerless.

To any church or person that wants to get in on what God is about to do on Christmas, D. Hélder Câmara left these wise words: “**We must have no illusions... If**

we listen to the voice of God, we make our choice, get out of ourselves and fight non-violently for a better world. We must not expect to find it easy; we shall not walk on roses, people will not throng to hear us and applaud... If we are to be pilgrims for justice and peace, we must expect the desert. Then he said, ***“We must not trust our own strength... we must stay humble knowing that we are in the hands of God, we must want only to share in the making of a better world. Then we shall not lose our courage and our hope.”***¹⁰

Throughout his life, D. Hélder Câmara was in the desert, hoping that God might use his life and his own body to bring Christmas into the world. He prayed incessantly, saying, ***“Lord, Jesus, don't extinguish the light of your presence within me. O Lord, look through my eyes, listen through my ears, speak through my lips, walk with my feet. Lord, may my poor human presence be a reminder, however weak, of your divine presence.”***¹¹

Our preparation for Christmas begins here: when you and I become the kind of weird and wild followers of Christ who hope against hope that our flawed and poor human presence may become a constant reminder of the Incarnation of God's love.

In his memoir, Frank Capra wrote, ***“I didn't give a film-clip whether critics hailed or hooted, ‘Wonderful Life.’ I thought it was the greatest film I ever made. It wasn't made for the oh-so-bored critics or the oh-so-jaded literati. A film to tell the weary, the disheartened, and the disillusioned, the wino, the junkie, the prostitute; those behind prison walls and those behind Iron Curtains that no man is a failure! To show those born slow of foot or slow of mind, those... condemned to unschooled toil that each man's life touches so many other lives. And that if he isn't around it would leave an awful hole. A film that said to the downtrodden, the pushed around, the pauper: ‘Head's Up, fella. No man is poor who has one friend...’ A film that expressed its love for the homeless and the loveless; for her whose cross is heavy and him whose touch is ashes; for the Magdalenes stoned by hypocrites and the afflicted Lazaruses with only dogs to lick their sores. I wanted to shout to the abandoned grandfathers staring vacantly in nursing homes, to the always-interviewed but seldom-adopted orphans, to the paupers —I wanted to shout, ‘You are the salt of the earth. And ‘It's a Wonderful Life’ is my memorial to you.”***¹²

We can only hope that our preparation for Christmas will make God's presence, God's love, God's peace, real to all those people who need to know that they are not forgotten, and that God's only dream for all of us is that we may know how wonderful life is.

My prayer for you, friends, in this time of preparation for Christmas is that you may be grateful for your life, for the most wonderful gift of your humanity, for your very human flesh. It is the only gift that really makes a difference in the world. And, like Zechariah, the Baptizer's father, I pray that each one of you may be known as a wild prophet of the Most High. This Advent, may you let God use your very human life to

give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. May the God of Christmas, look through your eyes, listen through your ears, speak through your lips, and walk with your feet always.

Amen.

¹ By Kat Eschner in The Weird Story of the FBI and 'It's a Wonderful Life', published in Smithsonian Magazine, 20 December 2017 [<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/weird-story-fbi-and-its-wonderful-life-180967587/>].

² By Michael Winship in It's a Wonderful Life, Comrade, On Democracy, Moyers, 23 December 2014 [https://billmoyers.com/2014/12/23/wonderful-life-comrade/?fbclid=IwAR3cfHEP5vWt0eRShNdwdyW_IZZs9gyrpQPREt4kbMp-MznLP_EbB4zhOjg].

³ By Willie Dwayne Francois III in December 5, Advent 2C (Luke 3:1-6), Living By the Word, The Christian Century, 09 November 2021 [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-5-advent-2c-luke-31-6?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5191a752e6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2021_11_30_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-5191a752e6-86220759].

⁴ Matthew 3:4.

⁵ Luke 3:7-18.

⁶ Pádraig Ó Tuama in In The Shelter, p. 183 & 200.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁸ By Willie Dwayne Francois III in December 5, Advent 2C (Luke 3:1-6), Living By the Word, The Christian Century, 09 November 2021 [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-5-advent-2c-luke-31-6?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5191a752e6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2021_11_30_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-5191a752e6-86220759].

⁹ Quoted by Marcelo Barros in Dom Helder Câmara: Profeta para os nossos dias.

¹⁰ Helder Camara in The Desert is Fertile, p. 24-25.

¹¹ Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday in Cloud of Witnesses, revised edition, p. 215.

¹² Frank Capra in Frank Capra: The Name Above the Title, p. 383.