

I can't speak for Pastor Gina, or any of you, but I know that I have loved being your pastor in this, our first Advent, here at First Church. The beauty of the sanctuary, the amazing concerts, the mission projects happening, all of it has just made this season so very special for me and a part of it has been just enjoying and having great fun with our Advent sermon series. Two weeks ago, we felt the joy of the season through Buddy the Elf and Mary's Magnificat. Last week we celebrated the peace of the season through the story of Scrooge and the redeeming power of being in a relationship with Jesus. This week it is my prayer that you will deeply know and experience Hope through one of my all-time favorite Christmas movies-"It's a Wonderful Life" and the story of George Bailey and compare him to the life of Zechariah, the star of our Gospel lesson this morning.

But, let's start with George. When we first meet George Bailey people all over the town of Bedford Falls are praying for him. It's obvious from the very first scene that George Bailey is in trouble. Something has happened in his life that has caused him despair and discouragement, that he has run out of hope and is now at the end of his rope. But it's also obvious that he has people who care about him, are worried about him, and are praying for him.

As heaven hears the prayers of George and his friends, his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, is briefed on George's life. In the briefing we learn that George is an all-around good guy who saved his little brother Harry when he fell through the ice at the age of nine, who while working at a drugstore saves a child from being poisoned by tainted capsules ordered from the pharmacist, who has gotten drunk after learning, by telegram, of the recent death of his son. We learn that later in life George is getting ready to head off to Europe to have an adventure and live out his big, grandiose life plans. But we also learn that those plans are interrupted with the news that his father has died and if he doesn't run the family bank, the town greedy miser, Mr. Potter, will take over the business. Again and again, George is asked to sacrifice his plans for the greater good, and again and again he makes the sacrifice.

There are temptations along the way to trade happiness or goodness for the enticements of wealth from Mr. Potter's hand, but they are at the expense of the poor, hard-working people of the community. They are at the expense of justice. So George continues the quiet course of a life of service at home while others leave home to get wealthy, travel, or, like his brother Harry, become famous war heroes.

As George struggles with his place in the world, I am reminded of the lines of the Wesley Covenant Prayer: "Let me used by Thee or set aside by Thee." It is often not so difficult to be used as it is to be laid aside. It's hard to put your own desires aside for the fulfillment of God's purposes: for justice for others; for care for the poor; for help to the needy. We struggle with it as much as George Bailey. It's hard to make choices that don't necessarily mean personal gain, but rather a life of service. And yet, often that is God's call to us. To care for others and do God's justice. To care for those whom the world does not value, because God's heart holds a special place for the least and the last and the lost of this world.

We last meet George in his present. It is a few years and 4 children later. Uncle Billy, who has grown more forgetful, misplaces an \$8000 deposit (right into Potter's lap) which will have a devastating effect on the bank and George as the CEO. George is distraught and helpless. He understands that he will do jail time for this infraction, even if he wasn't the one who lost the money. He comes home to Christmas Eve preparations, and is irritable and lashes out at his wife, Mary, and children. After George leaves home, he visits Potter where the miserly old man reminds him that he is worthy more financially death than alive. We see him mulling those words. He next goes to Martini's bar where he has too much too drink. Through his tears, he prays: Show me the way, O God.

When he leaves the bar, he has a car accident heading to jump off the bridge and end it all. Standing on the bridge, contemplating throwing himself into the turbulent water, he wishes he'd never been born.

George Bailey has simply run out of hope.

And my friends, running out of hope is an awful state to be in.

I often wonder if that was not the state that Elizabeth and Zechariah found themselves to be in. They had waited so long to have children and childbearing was such a vital part of their community and faith. For years Rabbi Zechariah and Elizabeth had waited for the good news of a pregnancy, and I wonder if month after month, and year after year of disappointing news if they had given up hope that they would have a family. When I read the Gospel lesson and this part of the Nativity story, my heart aches for Zechariah. I imagine that he has gone so long without the hope of being a dad that even when he encounters an angel messenger, he is filled with doubt and uncertainty.

So often we read the Gospel narrative and view Zechariah's silence as a punishment, but I often wonder if it was not intended to be a gift. His life, his plans, like George Baileys have been suddenly interrupted and changed. His hopelessness has just had a divine encounter. And perhaps, his time of being

quiet is meant to be a gift, a time for him to pray alongside of George “Show me the way, O God.”

Show me the way, O God. I know I have prayed a similar prayer when my hope rope was running out. And I wonder if it is not a prayer that has been prayed in some form through the ages.

Perhaps Adam and Eve prayed that prayer as they stepped out of the Garden of Eden for the first time.

Perhaps Noah and his family prayed that prayer as they and the animals left the ark after the flood waters receded.

Perhaps Daniel prayed “show me the way” as he entered the lions den.

Perhaps David prayed that prayer as they crowned him King of Israel.

Perhaps the prophets prayed that prayer as they proclaimed good news in the face of utter destruction.

The list goes on and on...

And perhaps we ought to pray that prayer today. When we pray for God to show us the way we are praying a prayer of profound hope. A hope that says God hears our prayers, God is so deeply intimate in our lives that there is a way for us, a hope that says with God the worst thing is never the last thing, that the light will

always prevail over darkness, a hope that proclaims that with God all things are possible.

And we know that God answers George's prayer, that God does show George the way. To get there, George must first see what the world would have been like without him.

To do this Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody says, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

A George-less world is not pretty. As a young man, George saved his brother Harry from drowning. Without George, Harry dies and the men who Harry saves in the war die. Uncle Billy is institutionalized. His mother struggles to exist. His wife never marries, so his children are never born. The citizens of Bedford Falls struggle. Bedford Falls itself struggles. It turns into Pottersville, where the dark character Mr. Potter calls all the shots. Making money is his only motivation.

You probably know how the story ends. George Bailey is redeemed. God has shown him the way his entire life. Every interruption, every changed dream, every relationship formed, every act of justice and kindness...it was all a part of the way. He hasn't wasted his life. The days of taking his possessions and his relationships for granted are over.

In those moments of truth, George is encouraged, given hope for the future, and renewed in his conviction that his life has truly been a blessing, no matter the consequences of the bank scandal. A humbled George pleads with Heaven to restore his existence and make the world as it was – problems and all:

“Help me, Clarence. Get me back. Get me back. I don’t care what happens to me. Get me back to my wife and kids. Help me, Clarence, please. Please! I want to live again! I want to live again. I want to live again. Please, God, let me live again.”

He cherishes his life, and in the end, the community itself comes to his rescue.

His wish is granted and he runs through the town with a new attitude and joy in living: “Merry Christmas!” he shouts to all he meets, to the buildings, to the town.

And then he is blessed beyond measure, for his friends have gotten the word out that he’s in trouble and from the wealthiest to the poorest, they rally to his aid and he is rescued by those he has spent his life seeking to serve.

When Zechariah and Elizabeth are holding their baby, John, for the first time, they have this renewed zeal for life as well. Zechariah doesn’t break out into a run yelling “Merry Christmas” but he is so overwhelmed by the joy and peace and hope of this sacred and holy moment that he does break out into his own song and blessing where he proclaims to the community that God has done great

things, that God is doing great things, and that God will forever continue to do great things.

My friends I pray that your hope rope is long and strong this morning. But if it isn't or if there is a day in the future when it isn't, I pray that you will pray the prayer for God to show you the way, that you will know deep in your core that God's light shines through you and that makes the world better and brighter for each and everyone of us. I pray that you will always know that you matter, that your life matters. I pray that you will always, under any and every circumstance know that we gather week after week and build the beloved community of faith because we are there for each other in our best moments and in our worst moments. Sometimes we miss the mark. Sometimes we may not feel connected to the church community. But, it is our goal to pour out love and grace in real and tangible ways. I see this church do just that each time a card is written to someone struggling, each time a meal is delivered, each time the prayer team gathers, each time we make a donation of food, or hats and gloves, or toys. I see the church do this every time a small group gathers and relationships are built and strengthened.

God comes to earth in Jesus to save us from our own discouragements, failures, and mean-heartedness; to interrupt our lives and ask us to work with Jesus to

spread love and justice; kindness and hope; generosity and comfort to all we meet both inside and outside these walls; and to have priceless spiritual friendships that cross the years and even miles as we work together to help God create a better world.

Thank you, George Bailey, thank you Zechariah, for reminding us of God's hope for our lives today and throughout the Advent/Christmas season. May we now go forth and live as God's hopeful and hope-filled people. Amen and Amen.