

"IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 13, 1998

## "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE"

### INTRODUCTION

Every year about this time, the television stations bring out of their vaults an old black and white film that is still speaking to the lives of many people. It's a film called, "It's A Wonderful Life". I'm sure you're familiar with it.

George Bailey, the lead character in this heart-warming film, never felt like he amounted to much in life. Early on he had his dreams of becoming a famous architect...of traveling the world. Instead he feels trapped in a hum-drum job in a small town. Then a crisis occurs that strains his every resource. He's faced with some unjust criminal charges. Although he has a fine family and many fine friends, the injustice of the situation plunges him into despair. Faced with this crisis, George Bailey breaks down and leaps off a bridge into cold, swirling waters of the town's river. And that's when his guardian angel, Clarence, comes down to show him what his community would be like without him. The angel takes him back through the years of his life. He shows George how his job has helped many families and how his little kindnesses and generous deeds have changed the lives of others and how the ripples of George's love will spread through the world, thus helping to make it a better place.

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"God...God...dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if You're up there and You can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope....please...show me the way, dear God...."

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About that time a stranger mailed him a video of "It's A Wonderful Life". MacFarlane had never seen it. He later said it was that movie that gave him the inspiration to keep on going. Interesting....a simple Christmas film gave him hope, gave him perspective. And hope, of course, is what Christmas is all about.

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

Hope is what today's scripture lesson is all about. And the first thing that Christ's coming into the world means is hope...hope for the hopeless. Indeed, the George Baileys and the Robert McFarlanes of our world have reason to go on, and so do all of us. There may be that one person in the congregation today who needs to hear this.

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The reply of Jesus is interesting.

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached to the poor".

Notice that He didn't say,

"Go back and tell John, 5,000 people came to hear Me preach the other day...so many it was difficult to feed them all". He didn't say, "The word's out about My big miracle crusades. I should really draw big crowds in Jerusalem....oh, John...I wish you could see Me do it....you'd be pleased!"

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Notice that each of these...the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor and those with leprosy...all these are facing challenges. They're people with some problems and some major obstacles to overcome. These were people living on the edge, many of them on the charity of others, but these were the very people for whom Jesus came...He came to bring hope to the hopeless and that's GOOD NEWS!

Sometimes you and I are there among "the hopeless"...sometimes our hearts grow weary and our spirits sag. We need to know that Christ is there when things look dark, particularly in this season of Advent and Christmas.

Charlene Ann Baumbich knows what it is to be sad at Christmas. Charlene's what we might call a real Christmas enthusiast....you know, one of those delightful people who takes joy in the tiniest detail of the holiday. The yuletide season is a time of excitement in her household. On a bit of a whimsy one year, Charlene decided to have her picture made with Santa, to give as a humorous gift to her husband and her two grown sons. One afternoon at a nearby mall, she came across an unoccupied Santa and asked him if she could sit next to him for a picture. He

seemed quite pleased by the idea and so Charlene squeezed in next to him for a picture. Then the congenial Mr. Claus turned to Charlene and, with the obligatory twinkle in his eye, asked her what she wanted for Christmas and without giving her brain time to engage, Charlene blurted out,

"Santa....I'm having a hysterectomy next Wednesday,  
and I'd like swift healing in the days that follow."

For a moment, Charlene was embarrassed by her own bluntness, but Santa looked deep into her eyes and said, "I'll pray for you and so will Mrs. Claus". Isn't that beautiful. Charlene....moved by his sincerity...started to cry. That was just what she needed to hear and as she turned to walk away, she remarked,

"You know....you still come to my house in the middle  
of the night every year....even though my baby is now  
twenty-five years old". And Santa, with a warm smile,  
said, "I know."

What Charlene needed was a lifting word of hope and she was most fortunate to encounter a Santa with a strong faith who could give her a word of assurance in her time of need. As someone has said recently in a letter to me, "We're praying for you" is the best sentence in the human language. And that is what Christmas is all about - giving hope to the hopeless.

#### HEALING FOR THE HURTING

And another thing to pick up on is that it is also about healing for the hurting. Listen again to those powerful words of Isaiah, read for the scripture and sung by the choir.

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord - the splendor of God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way and say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong. Do not fear. Your God will come....'

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs."

What a magnificent picture of healing and of new life! It's the very thing that many people long for more than anything else in life...either for themselves or someone they love.

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"Please PRAY for Debbie that the cancer will go away".

A stream of customers, many of them complete strangers, began stopping by to ask about Debbie and to offer their prayers. Mark also began personally to ask customers and business colleagues to pray for his wife. Soon people of every faith were stopping by to offer their prayerful support. And it meant so very much. Some even told Mark that they hadn't prayed for twenty years, but that they would be lifting her up in their thoughts and prayers. And as the months went by, Mark noticed a change in his wife, Debbie, as well as in himself. He had become pretty cynical about the human race. Nobody likes to get their car fixed and usually car-repair customers can be grouchy and rude. Mark was tired of dealing with unhappy people all the time. But after he posted the sign about his wife's cancer, he was amazed at the outpouring of love and support from his customers...and yes, even from total strangers.

A week or two before Christmas about this time last year, The Cruikshanks received some good news that Debbie's cancer was gone. On Christmas Eve, Mark Cruikshank drove to his shop to post a new sign:

"Praise God. Debbie is winning her battle with cancer."

Not everybody wins their battle for healing...whatever the illness may be. We know that, but we also know that God's will is for healing. He never withheld or withholds healing from anyone who asked for it - the blind, the deaf, the physically challenged. The coming of Christ is for the hopeless and it is also for healing for the hurting.

JOY FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE

One more thing. The coming of Christ is joy for all who believe. In a few moments we shall have the joy of witnessing the children's pageant...always a special moment for us.

I'm reminded of the little boy who was given a big role in his church's Nativity pageant. Cast as an angel, he was to deliver that very important line,

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The night of the performance came. He stepped out on to the platform at exactly the right moment...and then suddenly seeing all those people sitting there...his parents, grandparents, brother, a sister...his friends from the church...looking out and seeing all of those people there...his little mind went blank and he couldn't remember how his line started. He stood there...and nobody offered a clue or cue....and after what seemed like an eternity to his parents, he blurted out:

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His coming means hope for the hopeless. It means help for the hurting and deep joy for those who call Him Lord. That's the "Good News". Christ has come into our world in the form of a tiny babe. No wonder we stop to sing at this time of the year,

"JOY to the world! The Lord is come!"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Help us to be alert and aware of the glad tidings of this Holy Season, and to hear once again the song of the angels, 'peace on earth and goodwill to all people'. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we now pray. Amen

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PRAYER

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LEAD IN TO THE SILENT MEDITATION

INTRODUCTION As the world once again draws still to hear the song of the angels, and to kneel in adoration before the manger of the Christ Child,

Let us - in the warmth and hush of these moments - prepare our hearts expectantly that we may receive the "glad tidings" of this Holy Season.

In quietness, let each pray as the heart may prompt.

PRAYERS Cheer us, O God and Father of us all, through the song of the angels that peace and hope...joy and love may bless all who have gathered here this Holy Night.

We pray not only for ourselves, but also for the needs of others ...  
....remembering...those in whose lives there is "little room" for joy and happiness this Christmas.

Let us hold in our prayers this holy night the lost and the lonely of this City:

The bereaved.... the broken-hearted.  
The homeless and the hungry.  
The cold and the forgotten.

Make sensitive our hearts to human need.

Let us all pray for peace on earth.

LORD'S PRAYER Grant us, O God, the courage and the compassion of Jesus of Nazareth.....remembering how as a grown and dynamic man He taught us to pray, saying:

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

CHRISTMAS EVE GREETINGS (1984)

INTRODUCTION Few words need to be spoken at this service - for this Service of Carols and Candles is a service in which things are sung that cannot easily be said. It's a service in which the warm light of the candles speaks far more eloquently of the deeper meaning of Christmas than words even can.

Much of the world now grows still. Tonight Churches are being filled with people for whom Christmas is a matter of the heart and soul. Those events that took place in Bethlehem long ago provide us with the beginning of "The Greatest Story Ever Told". That story has a message in it for all mankind - a message which the world never quite remembers, but has never quite forgotten.

It is the message of God's love -- the hope and promise of "peace on earth, good will toward men".

MERRY CHRISTMAS It is our hope that as you share in the singing of the carols and the lighting of the candles...as you worship the Christ Child here in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary...

It is our hope that the warmth of His Presence and a sense of His guiding Spirit will fill your life with the Christmas lights of peace, hope, joy and love. and flood your life...

A Merry Christmas to all - in the fullest sense of those treasured words.

FELLOWSHIP Christmas Eve can be a lonely time for many people in this city. And this is why we have a time of informal fellowship planned following the service. Our thanks to those who have made it possible.

You may be alone here in the city. Join with friends here and share in the warmth and cheer of this night. Christmas punch and cookies will be served in the Russell Room downstairs and all are invited.

OFFERING Christmas is a time of giving as well as a time of receiving, a time of love and warmth. We thank you for the many Christmas gifts already received. Your support and generosity mean much to us. The ushers will receive the Christmas offering. "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

SCRIPTURE

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light! And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness."

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has a light shined."

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

"I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

"For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

"You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven".

LET US PRAY

"O God of love and the Father of light. The Father of all mankind. The darkness that covered the earth has given way to the bright dawn of Your Word made flesh.

Make us a people of this light. Make us faithful to Your Word, that we may bring life and light to the waiting world.

Be near to those who this night feel pain, and heart-ache and sadness...those whose dreams have been shattered and thrust into the shadows.

For loved ones - no longer with us, but now with you in the great Kingdom of light and whom we remember as part of Christmas past...who saw the light and followed it, we thank You, O God.

Bless the family reunions of these days with much joy and love.

Confirm within us, we pray, the high resolve of these quiet moments. Open our hearts that You may come into our lives and make them new.

We ask these things in the name of Him who was born in a stable, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

NOTE

After this prayer, go back and sit down...we sing 1st and last verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem"....following the "amen" go to altar and light candle.

CHRISTMAS PRAYER

(After the singing of "Silent Night")

"O God, give us eyes this Christmas  
                   to see the Christmas Star.  
 And give us ears to hear the song  
                   of angels from afar...  
 And, with our eyes and ears attuned  
                   for a message from above.

Let 'Christmas Angels' speak to us  
                   of Hope and Faith and Love...  
 Hope to light our pathway  
                   when the way ahead is dark,  
 Hope to sing through stormy days  
                   with the sweetness of the lark,  
 Faith to trust in things unseen  
                   and know beyond all seeing  
 That it is in Our Father's Love  
                   we live and have our being.

And Love to break down barriers  
                   of color, race and creed.  
 Love to see and understand  
                   and Help All Those In Need"

Amen

CHRISTMAS BENEDICTION

(After the singing of "Angels, We Have Heard on High"....from back of the Church)

John...Mary...Ruth...Robert....whatever your name may be -

"May the joy of Christmas fill your days with gladness;  
 May the peace of Christmas take away your anxious care;  
 May the light of Christmas shine through your deepest  
                   darkness;  
 And may the love of Him who was born on Christmas Day go  
                   with you in all of your ways.

This night and forever more. Amen

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### INTRODUCTION

Every year about this time, the television stations bring out of their vaults an old black and white film that is still speaking to the lives of many people. It's a film called, "It's A Wonderful Life". I'm sure you're familiar with it.

George Bailey, the lead character in this heart-warming film, never felt like he amounted to much in life. Early on he had his dreams of becoming a famous architect...of traveling the world. Instead he feels trapped in a hum-drum job in a small town. Then a crisis occurs that strains his every resource. He's faced with some unjust criminal charges. Although he has a fine family and many fine friends, the injustice of the situation plunges him into despair. Faced with this crisis, George Bailey breaks down and leaps off a bridge into the cold, swirling waters of the town's river. And that's when his guardian angel, Clarence, comes down to show him what his community would be like without him. The angel takes him back through the years of his life. He shows George how his job has helped many families and how his little kindnesses and generous deeds have changed the lives of others and how the ripples of George's love will spread through the world, thus helping to make it a better place.

George Bailey is played in the film by actor, Jimmy Stewart. In the making of the film, Stewart said that things happened to him that never happened in any other picture he ever made. For instance, in one scene, George Bailey, broke and in despair, sits in a little roadside diner. In this scene, Jimmy Stewart, playing George Bailey, raises his eyes and, following the script, pleads:

"God...God...dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if You're up there and You can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope....please...show me the way, dear God...."

Jimmy Stewart once said,

"As I said those words, I felt the loneliness, the hopelessness of people who had nowhere to turn and my eyes filled with tears. I broke down sobbing. This was not planned at all, but the power of that prayer, the realization that our Father in heaven is there to help the hopeless, had reduced me to tears."

I've often wondered how many people have been touched by this warm and simple film. Perhaps you have. Chuck Colson once told about a person who was. His name was Robert MacFarlane, President Reagan's former national security adviser. MacFarlane had been indicted for his role in the Iran-Contra affair. MacFarlane was crushed. His career ruined. In desperation, he tried to commit suicide.

About that time a stranger mailed him a video of "It's A Wonderful Life". MacFarlane had never seen it. He later said it was that movie that gave him the inspiration to keep on going. Interesting....a simple Christmas film gave him hope, gave him perspective. And hope, of course, is what Christmas is all about.

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

Hope is what today's scripture lesson is all about. And the first thing that Christ's coming into the world means is hope...hope for the hopeless. Indeed, the George Baileys and the Robert McFarlanes of our world have reason to go on, and so do all of us. There may be that one person in the congregation today who needs to hear this.

John the Baptist was languishing in prison. As one writer has noted, John was a "wilderness wanderer"...so imprisonment must have been especially hard on him. When John heard in prison the news of what Jesus was doing, John sent his followers to ask Jesus:

"Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else...?"

The reply of Jesus is interesting.

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached to the poor".

Notice that He didn't say,

"Go back and tell John, 5,000 people came to hear Me preach the other day...so many it was difficult to feed them all". He didn't say, "The word's out about My big miracle crusades. I should really draw big crowds in Jerusalem....oh, John...I wish you could see Me do it....you'd be pleased!"

NO, He says:

"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear and the Good News is preached to the poor".

Notice that each of these...the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor and those with leprosy...all these are facing challenges. They're people with some problems and some major obstacles to overcome. These were people living on the edge, many of them on the charity of others, but these were the very people for whom Jesus came...He came to bring hope to the hopeless and that's GOOD NEWS!

Sometimes you and I are there among "the hopeless"...sometimes our hearts grow weary and our spirits sag. We need to know that Christ is there when things look dark, particularly in this season of Advent and Christmas.

Charlene Ann Baumbich knows what it is to be sad at Christmas. Charlene's what we might call a real Christmas enthusiast....you know, one of those delightful people who takes joy in the tiniest detail of the holiday. The yuletide season is a time of excitement in her household. On a bit of a whimsy one year, Charlene decided to have her picture made with Santa, to give as a humorous gift to her husband and her two grown sons. One afternoon at a nearby mall, she came across an unoccupied Santa and asked him if she could sit next to him for a picture. He

seemed quite pleased by the idea and so Charlene squeezed in next to him for a picture. Then the congenial Mr. Claus turned to Charlene and, with the obligatory twinkle in his eye, asked her what she wanted for Christmas and without giving her brain time to engage, Charlene blurted out,

"Santa....I'm having a hysterectomy next Wednesday,  
and I'd like swift healing in the days that follow."

For a moment, Charlene was embarrassed by her own bluntness, but Santa looked deep into her eyes and said, "I'll pray for you and so will Mrs. Claus". Isn't that beautiful. Charlene....moved by his sincerity...started to cry. That was just what she needed to hear and as she turned to walk away, she remarked,

"You know....you still come to my house in the middle  
of the night every year....even though my baby is now  
twenty-five years old". And Santa, with a warm smile,  
said, "I know."

What Charlene needed was a lifting word of hope and she was most fortunate to encounter a Santa with a strong faith who could give her a word of assurance in her time of need. As someone has said recently in a letter to me, "We're praying for you" is the best sentence in the human language. And that is what Christmas is all about - giving hope to the hopeless.

#### HEALING FOR THE HURTING

And another thing to pick up on is that it is also about healing for the hurting. Listen again to those powerful words of Isaiah, read for the scripture and sung by the choir.

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord - the splendor of God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way and say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong. Do not fear. Your God will come....'

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongues shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs."

What a magnificent picture of healing and of new life! It's the very thing that many people long for more than anything else in life...either for themselves or someone they love.

Mark Cruikshank is a big, burly man who owns and operates two transmission repair shops in the Chicago area. Last year, Mark's wife, Debbie, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. As Mark watched the woman he loved suffer, he tried to think of some way he could possibly help her. Finally, he realized that all he could do was to pray and even then, he wasn't sure that was enough. Let me tell you what he did...

Last Spring, instead of advertisements for oil changes and brake specials, the signs at the Multistate Transmission Center read,

"Please PRAY for Debbie that the cancer will go away".

A stream of customers, many of them complete strangers, began stopping by to ask about Debbie and to offer their prayers. Mark also began personally to ask customers and business colleagues to pray for his wife. Soon people of every faith were stopping by to offer their prayerful support. And it meant so very much. Some even told Mark that they hadn't prayed for twenty years, but that they would be lifting her up in their thoughts and prayers. And as the months went by, Mark noticed a change in his wife, Debbie, as well as in himself. He had become pretty cynical about the human race. Nobody likes to get their car fixed and usually car-repair customers can be grouchy and rude. Mark was tired of dealing with unhappy people all the time. But after he posted the sign about his wife's cancer, he was amazed at the outpouring of love and support from his customers...and yes, even from total strangers.

A week or two before Christmas about this time last year, The Cruikshanks received some good news that Debbie's cancer was gone. On Christmas Eve, Mark Cruikshank drove to his shop to post a new sign:

"Praise God. Debbie is winning her battle with cancer."

Not everybody wins their battle for healing...whatever the illness may be. We know that, but we also know that God's will is for healing. He never withheld or withholds healing from anyone who asked for it - the blind, the deaf, the physically challenged. The coming of Christ is for the hopeless and it is also for healing for the hurting.

JOY FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE

One more thing. The coming of Christ is joy for all who believe. In a few moments we shall have the joy of witnessing the children's pageant...always a special moment for us.

I'm reminded of the little boy who was given a big role in his church's Nativity pageant. Cast as an angel, he was to deliver that very important line,

"Be not afraid...for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...for unto you is born this day in the city of David - a SAVIOR, Who is Christ, the Lord!"

That was his line. And for days in advance, he practiced that line. He would say it to his mother before heading off to school. He would say it to his father before heading off to bed. He worked hard on it and he had it "down". He was ready. He was set.

The night of the performance came. He stepped out on to the platform at exactly the right moment...and then suddenly seeing all those people sitting there...his parents, grandparents, brother, a sister...his friends from the church...looking out and seeing all of those people there...his little mind went blank and he couldn't remember how his line started. He stood there...and nobody offered a clue or cue....and after what seemed like an eternity to his parents, he blurted out:

"Say....have I ever got some 'GOOD NEWS' for  
you!"

He had the right idea. The coming of Christ is JOY for all who believe. To be in the presence of the Christ spirit is heaven. Isaiah wrote back there in the 8th century,

"And a highway shall be there. It will be called the WAY of holiness...no lion shall be there, nor will any ferocious beasts get up on it. They will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and JOY will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away".

His coming means hope for the hopeless. It means help for the hurting and deep joy for those who call Him Lord. That's the "Good News". Christ has come into our world in the form of a tiny babe. No wonder we stop to sing at this time of the year,

"JOY to the world! The Lord is come!"

PRAYER        Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Help us to be alert and aware of the glad tidings of this Holy Season, and to hear once again the song of the angels, 'peace on earth and goodwill to all people'. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we now pray. Amen