

Text: [Mark 1:1-8](#)
Date: December 8, 2019 – 2nd Sunday of Advent
Title: John the Baptist & George Bailey: On Hope >
Bethlehem Blockbusters 2
Theme: Hope happens when we keep our focus on God’s purposes.

Intro

I know after last week’s sermon, a lot of you took the time to watch or re-watch *Elf*
I hope that you enjoyed it

This week, we’re talking about another classic: *It’s a Wonderful Life*
It was a lot of fun for me this week to dig much deeper into that film
I talked about that some in my Friday email
And I hope that – and what we’ll talk about today – gives you new eyes for watching the film sometime this Advent

1

My sister and her family live in Indiana, Pennsylvania
Which is the birthplace of *what* famous actor? - Jimmy Stewart

There’s a Jimmy Stewart Museum, a 9-foot statue of him, and even some crosswalks where the “walk” sign speaks with his voice
(technically, it’s an impression of him, but you get the idea)

Jimmy Stewart became famous early in his career for his work with director Frank Capra

Capra’s style was to always have a kind of messianic character – a savior
People sometimes think of his work as kind of corny, as too sweet
It’s easy to think of Stewart’s roles playing honest and idealistic characters like George Bailey and Jefferson Smith as simplistic

But George Bailey is actually pretty complicated
He's like many of us – he does the right thing, but sometimes VERY
reluctantly

Think about how he starts out at the beginning of the movie
This scene – with his future wife Mary – pretty much sums it up

<clip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x20XTm76FRo>>

2

There's a lot of ego in George
But there's a lot of idealism in him too

He takes over the Building & Loan his father & uncle started after his father
dies suddenly from a stroke

He stays in Bedford Falls while his brother goes to first to college, and then
to war, even though he dreams of doing great things in faraway
places

He remains committed to the Building & Loan because, as much as he
complains about it, he believes in helping working people own their
own homes

And because he believes in the value of community, of people caring for
each other

He loans money to people whom the bank, led by the ruthless Mr. Potter,
turns down

When people get behind because they're out of work, he's understanding
and isn't quick to foreclose

He makes personal loans to friends in difficult circumstances, even at the
risk of inviting scandal

He does all the right things

But there are many times when he wishes he would have chosen to follow
the path to success like his friend Sam Wainwright, who's making a
ton of money in the plastics business

So he is already in crisis when Uncle Billy loses the \$8000, which is the central problem in the film

It's really telling in that scene from the beginning of the movie, where the angels are talking to each other – remember, when you just see these stars blinking on and off (1940's special effects)?

In that scene, Clarence – the angel that goes to help, asks, “What’s wrong with George – is he sick?”

And Joseph, Clarence’s superior, says, “No. Worse. He’s discouraged.”

Discouraged to the point where he’s contemplating suicide

Where he has lost sight of what his life is really worth – where he thinks his only value is in the \$15,000 life insurance policy

“He’s discouraged” - to me says that what this movie is about is hope

Finding it, and keeping it

So let’s see what the scripture says about that

3

Remember, last week we talked about Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist

How John came as a late-in-life surprise to two devout parents

Today, in the reading from Mark, John is all grown up

He’s already embraced his mission to preach repentance

People are coming from all over to hear him

John was incredibly important

Not only because he was leading a spiritual revival in Israel – one that was recognized by historians of the day

But also because scholars believe that several of John’s disciples later turned to follow Jesus – including Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter (John 1:40)

It’s fascinating to me, to observe John’s humble acceptance of his role

People see him attracting all these crowds and naturally wonder: “what if he’s the Messiah?”

To which he always replies: “No.”

John understood what he was about, what God was calling him to
He told everyone who would listen: “Look for the one who is coming”
“THAT’S the person you need to follow”
“I’m not even worthy to untie his sandal”

Now that last reference, about untying the sandal
Do you remember I said a few weeks ago that you couldn’t ask a Jewish
slave to wash your feet?
This quote goes right along with that
You really couldn’t ask a Jewish slave to do anything associated with your
feet
It was seen as too demeaning

John fully expected to see someone greater
Maybe even from among his own disciples
Other rabbis of the time used this same phrase about not being worthy to
untie the sandal to talk about their students who surpassed them
This suggests John was looking for the Messiah among *his own followers*
That he was willing to accept that one of his students would surpass him in
every way

Do you want to talk about someone who carried out God’s work in HOPE
and EXPECTATION?
With HUMILITY and PATIENCE?
You’re talking about John the Baptist

4

It takes something special to maintain that kind of focus
Because it’s easy to get discouraged
It’s easy to lose hope

Imagine for a moment you are John
You come from a family of insiders – his Dad was a priest and his Mom
was from a family of priests
And yet he’s called to the most outsider ministry there is: living in the
desert, wearing rough clothing, eating whatever he can find
Preaching in the wilderness
Did John ever feel like George Bailey? I have to imagine he did

Especially at the start
We read about John after he's already begun to draw big crowds
Imagine what it was like at the beginning
Who was he preaching to then?

I heard a story yesterday about Bert & John Jacobs, the two brothers who
founded the company that makes "Life is Good" clothing
They started selling t-shirts on college campuses in the 90s
They would bring them around to lounges in a dorm – maybe sell a few
dozen, maybe sell half a dozen, maybe sell zero
And sleep in their van at night
They did this for years

5

When God calls us in a direction, the hardest thing to do is remain
committed to that direction
Because it often leads us against the tide
Swimming in a direction opposite the current
Opposite even what we thought we wanted for ourselves

We look around and see others so much farther ahead
And it seems like this thing that we've been called to do is floundering
That it's not making any difference
That it's a waste of time

How do we stay encouraged?

There's only one thing for it
Hope happens when we keep our focus on God's purposes

It's easy to get caught up in our own purposes
Thinking we need to make a big impact, a big impression, reach a lot of
people, make a lot of money
It's George Bailey wanting to lasso the moon, right?

But God knows something we don't: that none of the things we want can
really satisfy us

We struggle with them, we struggle for them
We're convinced they can satisfy us, but they can't

That's why God put eternity in our hearts and minds
So that we might stay focused on God's purposes
That we might be able to see beyond the here and now

To the enduring value of relationships
Of loving people, watching them grow
Even watching them grow PAST you to become who God made them to be
– like John was

If we are following God's path
God's calling on our lives
When we look around – really look – for the evidence of these things
We will always find it
George Bailey's friends were right there for him when he needed help –
they became the answers to each other's prayers

It is easy to become discouraged
Discouraged even to the point where we feel like none of this is worth it

But it's just not true
There is ALWAYS hope
It happens when we keep our focus on God's purposes

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ