

A John Doe Christmas

A Message for Worship on Christmas Eve
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 24, 2017
Text: Luke 2:1-20

I love Christmas movies! Heaven knows there are plenty of them to watch these days. Personally, I love the old ones better than most of the new ones. What about you? What are some of your favorite Christmas movies? (pause for responses) Which ones have you seen so far this year? (pause for responses) Is there one movie in particular which you just have to see each year? (pause for responses) For me, that would be *A Christmas Carol*, the 1938 version with Reginald Owen. I like the George C. Scott one too. And, the newer one with Patrick Stewart. But there is just something about that 1938 one that just makes Christmas for me. Perhaps because it was one of the few Christmas movies my mom would watch with me. Perhaps because I always loved the scene in church where everyone was belting out Christmas carols, all the verses, and I knew them well enough to sing along.

Christmas movies are part and parcel of Christmas for most of us, I think. They run the gambit of plot-lines from the biblical to the ridiculous and beyond. There is the biblical extravaganza *King of Kings* starring Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus in 1961. Then on the other end of the spectrum is *Scrooged* with Bill Murray in 1988 or *Christmas with the Kranks* in 2004. And how can I fail to

mention National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation* released in 1989 or *The Santa Clause* from 1994. Then of course there is *It's A Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart from 1946 and *A Christmas Story* from 1983. I could go on and on listing Christmas movies, as could you, I'm sure. They are just part of Christmas for most of us, capturing in one way or another the experience of Christmas we remember or long for, the fantasy of Christmas we hope for.

I have two favorite Christmas movies which are, at first glance, not your conventional Christmas movies. In fact, you could argue that each is barely even a Christmas movie at all. But, they capture my heart every Christmas and I'd like to tell you why. First is the movie *Desk Set*, starring Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey. I trim my Christmas tree every year watching this movie. It's a must. I love this movie so much, I have been known to quote from it now and again. Even my children have been known to quote from this movie, that's how much it is imbedded into Christmas for us. Filmed in 1957, *Desk Set* provides a wonderful glimpse into the corporate world of the 1950's just as computers are beginning to make their presence known. So, it's an amazing reminder of what the world pre-computers was like. It also provides valuable insights into how rare it was in 1957 for a woman to function in a corporate position. Katharine Hepburn plays Bunny Watson, the supervisor of the research department for a television network. Spencer

Tracey plays a computer consultant who's retained by the network to install an "E-lectronic Brain" (that's what they used to call computers long, long ago) in the research department. A whole series of comedic adventures ensue including a key scene set during the office Christmas party. All are leading toward, as one would expect in the 1950's, in Bunny receiving a marriage proposal from Tracey's character, Richard Sumner. Bunny also has a marriage proposal from her boss, played by Gig Young. She turns her boss down when she realizes her professional aspirations meant nothing to him whereas Richard Sumner valued her as the professional woman she was. In 1957! I love this movie, in spite of its 1950's portrayal of women in very gender stereotyped ways. One female character even gives Mr. Sumner her measurements when she sees he has a tape measure! But all of that is trumped by Bunny's incredible strength as a leader, someone who is prepared to go to the mat for her staff even as she negotiates the minefield the corporate world was and still is today for women. Bunny Watson, like Katharine Hepburn herself, refused to be defined by her gender or what other people thought she should be. So, every year, watching this movie is a gift I give myself to remind myself of all the strong women whose efforts make possible the life I live each day.

My other favorite Christmas movie is one I just discovered this year, quite by accident. Peter and I had spent the day doing

chores around the house and then running errands. By late afternoon we were just exhausted and flopped down on the couch to watch a Christmas movie. We saw the last bit of *A Christmas Carol* -- the 1938 one -- and then the next Christmas movie came on the Turner Classic Movie network. We hadn't intended to watch it but somehow we did and it was incredible. Neither one of us had ever heard of the movie before -- *Meet John Doe* starring Barbara Stanwyck and Gary Cooper. Premiering in March 1941, before the US entered World War II, the movie is a fascinating exploration of how authoritarianism can sneak up on folks without them even realizing what's happening. Part of the Frank Capra trilogy which also includes *It's A Wonderful Life*, the movie is the story of how a young ball-player, John Willoughby, played by Gary Cooper, falls into portraying a character a newspaper writer, Ann Mitchell, played by Barbara Stanwyck, makes up in a column she writes. It seems a new publisher has just bought the newspaper where she works and sets out to fire everyone, herself included. She decides to go out with a bang so she writes a fictionalized account of a man whom she calls John Doe, a man so despondent over the lack of goodness in the world that he has decided to commit suicide on Christmas Eve.

The article strikes a nerve and soon people are clamoring to meet Mr. Doe only he doesn't exist so she has to come up with somebody to play the part. Enter Gary Cooper's character who is

a professional baseball player down on his luck after a shoulder injury. The original thought was that he would just meet the publisher and then that would be that, except people kept clamoring to meet him so a national tour and speaking engagement was arranged. By this time both Ann and John are panicking, but she writes him an incredible speech and both of them are launched into this unexpected whirlwind of speaking engagements, parties and money, all financed by the mysterious publisher. Soon John Doe Clubs spring up all over the country with the sole purpose of spreading kindness and good cheer far and wide. As it turns out, the publisher is actually someone with designs on taking over the government through the rise of a new political party which he plans to call the John Doe Party. But John finds out about it and refuses to go along with the plan. His intention is to expose the publisher's evil plot at the John Doe Convention, but instead the publisher denounces him as a fake and the crowd quickly turns on him. John becomes despondent and decides the only way to get people to pay attention to the original purpose of the John Doe Clubs is if he does indeed commit suicide on Christmas Eve. But, a few loyal John Doe fans, along with Ann the reporter, figure out what he plans to do and race to the top of the skyscraper to stop him. They apologize for turning against him and tell him they believe that his message of love and kindness and justice for all is still true. The publisher's

plans are thwarted and the John Doe Clubs resume their task of spreading goodness across the country.

This movie was obviously intended to persuade movie goers that the US did have a reason and responsibility to enter World War II to fight against fascism and authoritarianism around the world. For that reason, it is definitely a period piece. Yet its message rings so true today. This is partly because the parallels between John Doe and Jesus, especially in the scene where the crowd turns against him so viciously, are so strong. But it's also because in many of the scenes involving the publisher and his entourage, he tells them over and over again how easy it will be to fool people into doing what they want if they just pretend to care about people long enough to pull them into the movement. Then, once power was attained, those same people would be discarded once the new regime was in place.

How timely this message was in March of 1941! And, unfortunately, how timely it is today as well. Dissension and disagreement abound in Washington, and around the country. The government seems out of touch with the feelings and most basic needs of the people and we are at a loss as to how to get things moving in a positive direction again. So many people are hurting and anxious and afraid that Christmas itself seems to be couched in shadows. We could use a good John Doe Club meeting right now! We could use the extra encouragement to go out and

do something nice for someone, just because it's a good thing to do. We could use time spent in conversation with other people trying to do the same. We need to put that John Doe effort into going the extra mile to be kind, especially when the easy thing, the simple thing, is to just walk away. We need to find those John Doe supporters who were willing to hear his story of subterfuge and forgive him because, after all, they were imperfect too. We need a John Doe Christmas!

But, wait, a John Doe Christmas is already here. And it doesn't have anything to do with John Doe or Gary Cooper, but it does have everything to do with a little baby born this night two millennia ago. It has everything to do with faithful Joseph using all his strength to make the journey to Bethlehem where his young bride soon gives birth to the baby in a dirty stable because there was no place else to go. It has everything to do with fierce Mary, daring to believe she could partner with God to bring the Redeemer into the world so desperately in need of God with us. It has everything to do with angels singing tidings of great joy to trembling shepherds on a long ago hillside, reminding them there was nothing to fear since God was in the midst of everything.

Meet John Doe, this odd Christmas movie invites us. Meet the every-man who was no one, really, until the people convinced him otherwise. When you think about it, we are all John Doe. We are, each one of us, just average people trying to get by the best we

can in a difficult, scary world. We all have hopes and dreams that are sometimes so real we can almost touch them, and then life happens and many of them fade away. We all have those moments of fear and discouragement when the promise of the angels seems too far-fetched to apply to us. We all have those times when we feel like there's no room at the inn for us either.

Dear friends, this is why the only story we need remember on Christmas is the one about a tiny baby nestled in a manger. This is our story from start to finish because we are right there. The truth is, dear friends, we are the Christmas story, each one of us. We are Mary and Joseph struggling through difficult days relying on strength we never knew we had. We are the shepherds, trembling with fright yet trusting the message of the angels is true, that fear can be banished and hope for new life, new beginnings for all, is born this night. We are, each one of us, John Doe – the every-person – for whom the Christ Child was born. The miracle of Christmas is our miracle, dear friends. Have no doubt of this! Emmanuel – God With Us – is our gift from God this very night. May we claim it and live its light-filled promise every day for the rest of our lives. Merry Christmas. Amen.