



## Not a Christmas Movie

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### "Not a Christmas Movie"

#### The Rev. Stephen Elkins-Williams

It has become a phrase in my household, although I do not remember exactly how it started. In the dark of a theater, my wife and I had just watched the latest Hollywood offering, which was not a feel good movie. There was no happy ending. The protagonist had made too many bad choices, resulting in violence and death and the lack of hope. There was no sense of being lifted up, no experience of our horizons being expanded, no inner satisfaction from having willingly or even unwillingly shared in another's life and of being called to embrace more authentically our own. As the jarring music droned on over the rolling credits, I turned to Betsy and said only half-humorously, "That was not a Christmas movie."

A Christmas movie. That phrase has many senses. It can mean any film whose release date coincides with the higher audience demand and appetite in later December. More narrowly it refers to any of the number of movies rerun on television every year around Christmas time: "A Christmas Carol" in its various forms, "Miracle on 34th Street," "A Charlie Brown Christmas," "A Christmas Story," "It's A Wonderful Life." But in our house, "a Christmas movie" is not limited to a specific time of year. It means a story in which there is some redemption, some new life coming out of the death, some sense of hope, even in the midst of suffering. Without that element of grace, if a film is just meant to shock or scare or manipulate the bizarre, we look at each other and we know: "It was not a Christmas movie."

But make no mistake. That does not mean that we attend only feel good movies where they all live happily ever after. We do not exclude stories involving pain and suffering and great disappointment. We do not frequent the theater in hopes of escaping the tensions and the burdens and the ambiguities of our world. Life is not like that. True Christmas movies are not like that. The first Christmas itself was not like that.

For as much as we stunt the deep mystery of the feast of Christmas with layers upon layers of nostalgia, it was not simply a fairy tale. Rather, it was an adventure of the highest order, a saga fraught with pain and danger and the threat of death, a turning upside down of many presumed values and a call to all to change and to die and to choose life.

Into a broken world, unable to save itself from its own sinfulness and from the finality of death, God chose to bring new life. Keeping the Divine promise never to destroy the world again with another flood and simply to start over, incredibly God elected to send the gift of his only Son to sanctify and to heal from within, if you will, the human race. Vulnerable and unprotected, a reality most dramatically shown in the presence of a new-born baby, God opened himself to all the indifference and hatred and self-righteousness and love and faithfulness the human race had to give.

From these early days of Jesus' life, those reactions became apparent. Ordered from their home by a census &ndash; to satisfy the need of the occupying political power to calculate the taxes and the military conscriptions that could be demanded &ndash; a poor couple, the woman pregnant out of wedlock, had to travel on foot at a very inconvenient time. Even when they arrived, they found no room and had to be content with quarters fit only for animals for this most sacred event. Before long, Joseph realized that Jesus' life was in danger from a threatened and scheming political ruler, and he and Mary undertook an even longer trek with the baby &ndash; this time to Egypt, to avoid a killing rampage that sorrowfully deprived many of the families of that region of their youngest sons. Later, of course, John, Jesus' cousin, who had leaped in his mother's womb at their first meeting, was beheaded in a crude demeaning of human life. Jesus himself came up against the prevailing religious and political powers and suffered an ignominious death. "The world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not."

Through all this pain and death and rejection ran the transforming grace and forgiveness of God. Despite the suffering and the despair of the moment, hope was never completely lost. In the midst of opposition and hostility, the seeds of faith and love flourished in Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the magi and eventually in the disciples. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

On this Christmas day, we too come to behold his glory & not to sentimentalize a baby who never cried or a stable with no smells or mess or a world that received such a Divine gift with open arms. Conscious of our own indifference and rejection, we come bearing whatever gifts we can manage and fall down and worship him. Aware of the pain and the affliction and the death that continue to accompany us in this world, we ask for the grace of hope and of faith and of trust in a loving and ever-present God. Mindful of the hardship and the poverty and the injustice in the world, we pray for grace to be among those through whom God's light and grace can come to all people.

For this Christmas story that we proclaim today, this first Christmas movie, if you will & first in time but also first in meaning and importance and most significantly, primordially at the core of reality & invites us to respond. We are part of this story, and it is part of us. It tells us who we are. It tells us who God is. It tells us our relationship to all our brothers and sisters and how we are all to live together and look after each other. It calls us to share the life of Christ our brother and to embrace more authentically our own.

"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."