

Made Right
Matthew 1:18 – 25; Luke 2:8 – 20; Revelation 21:1 – 5a
Tuesday, December 24, 2019

For the past two months, our house has been filled with the constant sights and sounds of Hallmark Christmas movies. Any of you know what I'm talking about? At the end of October, the Hallmark Movie Channel starts showing these incredibly formulaic, sappy, highly addictive Christmas movies that they make. They're always about the young, career-driven woman in the big city who has forgotten the true meaning of Christmas, until she somehow gets stuck in a small town named Evergreen or Garland or something like that, and she falls in love with the ruggedly handsome local handyman who shows her what Christmas is all about, and she ends up *staying* in the small Christmas town, where they live happily ever after.

Or the handsome fireman who doesn't believe in love and says he'll never get married, until he takes in a stray cat at Christmastime and begins falling in love with the woman at the pet store who *also* has a cat, and their *cats* start falling in love, and they kiss for the first time (the people, not the cats) under the mistletoe and live happily ever after.

Or there's always one about an American woman who's a housekeeper or a tailor or something like that, and she falls in love with a European prince, but she's not sure that she's *good enough* for him, and his mother the queen is *certain* that she's not good enough for him, until the big Christmas ball when they all discover what love really is and live happily ever after.

Every single Hallmark Christmas movie has some variation of those three plotlines. And they have been on our televisions nonstop for the past *two months*. And not just *this* year. Year after year. I have seen *all* of them...not entirely by my choosing. I have given in to the fact that these movies are just going to be our constant background noise for two straight months every year.

And it's actually *more* than two months, because the Hallmark Channel also does a Christmas in July, where they show all of these movies during the summer. And we have about 30 of them on our DVR so that Jen can watch them whenever she wants.

There was a time when I resisted and made fun of these movies. I *still* make fun of them, but I have stopped resisting, because I love my wife and I want her to be happy. And yes, they are sappy and formulaic, and they always end with every problem impossibly solved, everything that was wrong in everyone's life is fixed, and they *always* live happily ever after. But when the alternative is the reality of the world around us – a constant stream of bad news and violence and political fighting and fear and hatred and sickness and suffering and death as depicted non-stop on social media the 24-hour cable news networks – I can understand wanting to live in the small Christmas town where everything that's wrong is always made right.

And so with that in mind, our scripture reading for Christmas Eve is from the book of Revelation! I know that we're used to coming here every year and hearing about angels and shepherds and a baby in a manger, lighting candles and singing our favorite Christmas carols, being wrapped up in the mysterious peace of this night and being transported back to the Christmases of our childhood. The *last* thing we want to hear about on Christmas Eve is the end of the world!

But bear with me for a minute. Because Christmas is not just about celebrating the way that Christ *came* 2,000 years ago. It is *also* about expectantly waiting and hoping for Christ to come *again*. It's not just about the *first* coming, it's also about the *second* coming. And *that* is what we see in Revelation. Matthew and Luke give us the story of the *first* coming of Christ, when God began this process of redeeming the world, while Revelation sets forth a vision of the

second coming of Christ, when that redemption is made complete and all things are made new. The problem is that we get so caught up in the strange, confusing *imagery* of Revelation – dragons and fire and plagues and all of that – that we end up viewing it as a *terrifying* book about the end of the world. But it is actually an incredibly *hopeful* book about everything that is *wrong* being made *right*.

Revelation was written somewhere around the year 100 AD (although no one knows for sure), in a time when Christians were beginning to be persecuted by the Roman government. It was illegal to be a Christian – they viewed Christians as a threat to the social order – and so the Roman government was starting to crack down; they were oppressing, arresting, and even killing Christians. Most Christians worshipped and practiced their faith in secret. John, who wrote Revelation, had been arrested and imprisoned on the Greek island of Patmos. He is a leader in the early church, and he sees his fellow Christians suffering and living in fear of the Roman Empire, but he can't be *with* them to support and encourage them. So he writes a letter to seven churches in seven cities that are close by.

In the letter John tells them about this vision that he has seen from God, and the vision is filled with all of this strange imagery – dragons and beasts and angels blowing trumpets and strange men riding horses, war between heaven and earth, between the powers of *good* and the powers of *evil* – imagery that would have meant something to *them* at the time, but 2,000 years later is mostly *lost* to us. You see, they had to practice their faith in secret. John couldn't just write what he *wanted* to say. He had to say it in a way that, if any Romans read his letter, they wouldn't understand what he was talking about and the Christians he was writing to wouldn't get in trouble.

So he uses imagery to convey his message. And when you start digging into that imagery (which we don't at all have the time to do here tonight), you start to see that these dragons and beasts are really *symbols* for Rome. And what John is saying to his fellow Christians is, "It won't be like this forever. I know that it is hard right now. I know that it's scary and you're suffering. But a time is coming when God is going to defeat the evil powers that are oppressing you. So hang in there and trust God. Stand firm in your faith. Keep holding on to God and to each other. Don't give up, because God is going to make *right* everything that is wrong."

And we end up with the passage that we read tonight, where John says, "God will wipe every tear from your eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. See, I am making all things new." And the reason this will happen, John says, is because "the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them. They will be God's people, and God himself will be with them."

What we celebrate tonight is that the home of God is among mortals. That in Jesus Christ, God dwells with us, we are God's people, and God himself is with us. That in the birth of a baby 2,000 years ago, God began the process of redeeming the world, *healing* the world, making *right* everything that is *wrong*. But Christmas is *bigger* than one day 2,000 years ago. It's about God's promise to overcome all the powers that keep us from living the fullness of life.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than *cancer* or *Alzheimer's*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than *death*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than *divorce* or *broken relationships*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than our political differences and disagreements.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than *addiction*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than our sins and our mistakes and our failures; what we have *done* or what's been done *to us*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than our *doubts*, about *God* or about *ourselves*.

The promise of Christmas is bigger than our *pain* and our *secrets* and our *sadness* and our *anxiety* and our *fear*.

It's about all the ways that God enters in to this world and enters in to our lives and makes everything new. The promise of Christmas is that God is *with us* in all the sin and suffering of life, and that God is working to make it all *right*. That process *began* in the birth of Jesus. It will one day be *fulfilled* when Christ comes again. But for *now*, it is up to *us* to bear witness to the light of Christ in the world today; to tend the flames of hope and peace and joy and love in the midst of the darkness.

Author Howard Thurman wrote, "I will light candles this Christmas – candles of joy; despite all sadness; candles of hope where despair keeps watch; candles of courage where fear is ever present; candles of peace for tempest-tossed days; candles of grace to ease heavy burdens; candles of love to inspire all my living; candles that will burn all the year long." We're getting ready to light *our* candles in just a moment. And when we *do*, may it remind you that the

promise of Christmas is bigger than tonight or tomorrow or whatever challenges you're facing in these days. May the light of Christ's hope and peace and joy and love shine among us *tonight* and *all the year long*, until Christ comes again to make all things, even *us*, new. Amen.