

Tidings of Comfort and Challenge December 4, 2022

One of my all-time favorite Christmas movies is Bob Clark's 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*. You might be familiar with it. In it, a young boy named Ralphie navigates his school, neighborhood, and family life as they all prepare for Christmas, the day around which, as he says, "the whole kid year revolved." The movie, although it was made in the 80s actually takes place in the 1940s. And it is full of nostalgia, with old-time cars and those large Christmas lights (no LEDs), with radios instead of TVs and drab wallpaper. The movie has become a staple of Christmas-time films.

A Christmas Story, directed by Bob Clark (MGM, 1983), 1 hour, 33 minutes, DVD.

You might know that this year, they made a sequel to the beloved movie, called *A Christmas Story Christmas*. It features the same actor who played little Ralphie, Peter Billingsley, and he is now grown up, married, and has two kids of his own. Through a series of events (that I won't share), he ends up spending his Christmas this year back in his hometown, in the same house that he grew up in.

My wife and I did watch the movie this past week. And I have to admit, I had low expectations going into it. Surely, nothing could compare to the 1983 classic. But I'll admit, I was pleasantly surprised. It was not as good as the original movie, in my opinion, but it was close. The story was charming and engaging. The same storytelling quirks that made the original film so endearing are again included. And the characters are so relatable that you can't help enjoying yourself.

A Christmas Story Christmas, directed by Clay Kaytis (Warner Bros., 2022), 1 hour, 38 minutes. HBO Max.

But if I had to summarize the main reason for the sequel's success, it's that there was a good balance between nostalgia and newness. All the people you loved from the first film were there, and there was certainly a difference in hearing about Christmas from a dad's perspective than from a child's. Some sequels are just cookie-cutter copies of the original. Other sequels try to be super edgy and change everything. With *A Christmas Story Christmas*, there was a healthy balance of comfort and challenge.

That balance also shows up in our Gospel story today, believe it or not. On this second Sunday in Advent, we hear about John the Baptist (whom we'll also hear more about next week). John appears in the wilderness and starts proclaiming, "The kingdom of God is here!"

Our narrator Matthew makes a point to describe John the Baptist a bit. He wears clothes made of camel's hair, wears a leather belt, and eats bugs and honey. Both his clothing and his location at the Jordan would remind any Jewish reader/listener of Elijah, who was a hairy man who wore a leather belt and was swept up in a chariot of fire at the Jordan River.

John is purposely being nostalgic. He is embodying Elijah, taking on the role of a prophet from stories that were centuries old. And people come by the hundreds to see John, this new Elijah, and to be baptized and cleansed of their sins. It is a wonderful image that harkens back to prophets of long, long ago.

And yet, John isn't only there to relive memories. He's there to challenge too. The Sadducees and Pharisees show up, two groups of religious elites. John seems to think (correctly or not) that they're not there to confess their sins. They're not there to be contrite. They're there, John implies, because they think it's the right thing to do, religiously. They're supposed to be there.

John speaks to them harshly, "Don't rely on your status as Abraham's chosen children. Don't say to yourselves, 'We're good Jews.' Instead, bear good fruit." In other words, let your faith be shown in your actions. How do you treat the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the unclean?

And then, of course, John hints at someone who is to come soon. We immediately call to mind who is coming, but notice that John never says "Jesus" or "Messiah." There is something mysterious and powerful about this coming person. And he will bring challenge as well.

So in John we see this mix. There is nostalgia for the past, comfort, refreshment for sinners. And there is challenge and a call to repentance, to change as well.

We see this same combination in our reading from Isaiah. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse." From David's lineage will come a new king. Again a nostalgia. Remember King David? He was greatest, the wisest king of Israel! From his house will come a new ruler. He will be wise, understanding, mighty, faithful to God. He will help the poor and the meek.

But his words will have power. His words will strike the earth; they will kill the wicked. That's enough to make us shift uncomfortably in our seats. In this new king is wisdom, justice, and faithfulness, but also the power to destroy.

What are we doing, hearing this in Advent? We want *Silent Night* and stories about a baby in a manger and candlelight and hot chocolate and snow! Where are the Bible stories about those?

The writers of our lectionary, who decided the readings, don't let us off the hook so easily. Advent isn't just about comfort; it's also about challenge. Christmas isn't just about nostalgia; it's about stretching ourselves to love others. Darn.

And on a larger scale, that's not a bad description of church. I hope that when you come to worship, you experience a sense of peace and belonging and comfort. But if that's all we come for, you might as well go get a massage or a spa day (they have better lighting and more comfy seats in those places anyways). There, you show up, pay your money, and receive a service. You are a consumer.

At church, we come here to be challenged, to be prodded. We aren't consumers here; we are members of a community. Yes, we are comforted, but we are also called to share our gifts, both here and in the world throughout the week.

By the same token, if we only come to be challenged and not to be fed and nourished, we burn out. We act and act, but we don't take the time to rest, to care for our souls. And that isn't healthy either.

One of my clergy colleagues, Ben Motz, shared: Sometimes we view going to church like going to the dentist. We come in, make small talk, sit in an uncomfortable seat, hope that everything goes well, tough it out through the hard bits, then walk out relieved that it's over and that we don't have to come back soon.

We need both nourishment and nudging, both comfort and challenge. We hear that from John the Baptist, and we receive that all throughout Advent. This season is wonderful, hopeful, and beautiful. It is also meant to be uncomfortable at times, when we are pushed and nudged.

I'll close with poem by Ann Weems, called *Angel-Filled Advent*.

Wouldn't it be wonderful
if Advent came filled by angels and alleluias?
Wouldn't it be perfect
if we were greeted on those December morning
with a hovering of heavenly hosts
tuning their harps and brushing up on their fa-la-las?
Wouldn't it be incredible
if their music filled our waking hours
with the promise of peace on earth
and if each Advent night we dreamed of
nothing by goodwill?
Wouldn't we be ecstatic
if we could take those angels shopping,
or trim the tree or have them hold our hands
and dance through our houses decorating?
And, oh, how glorious it would be
to sit in church next to an angel
and sing our hark-the-heralds!
What an Advent that would be!
What Christmas spirit we could have!
An angel-filled Advent has so many possibilities!
But in lieu of that,
perhaps we can give thanks
for the good earthly joys we have been given
and for the earthly "angels" that we know
who do such a good job of filling
our Advent with alleluias!

Weems, Ann. "Angel-Filled Advent." From *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. Louisville: John Knox, 1993, 18.

Amen.