

HOME ALONE

Finding the Gift of Love | Text: Luke 2:8-20

There Are Reel & Real Stories

When I was a child, one of our family's most memorable traditions was gathering around a blazing fireplace in our living room on Christmas eve. My grandfather (and later my father) would sit down in the high-backed chair by the fire. Clad in our flannel PJ's, all of us kids would settle on the carpet around his feet. And, then, Granddaddy would open a dog-eared book and read what we called the Christmas Story: *"Twas the Night Before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse..."*¹

I know now that as magical and wonderful as that tale was it wasn't the REAL Christmas story; but it was a pointer TOWARD the real one. My longing to hear of the gracious visitation of Old St. Nicholas prepared me, in a strange way, to long for the arrival (or as people used to say, "the advent") of an infinitely greater being. It got me readier to hear about the great God who one night long ago traveled a vast distance from the infinite North and squeezed himself down through the soot-soaked chimney between eternity and time in order to enter the life of the human family and bring to us such amazing gifts. Faint as they are, can you see the parallels between the stories? 'Twas the Night Before Christmas prepared me in some small way to better understand the true Christmas.

There are a lot of stories like that and quite a few of them have been made into movies. You'll see a lot of them rolling across the screen this time of year. Hollywood gets its most popular and enduring themes from the stories the Bible tells. For some people, I suppose, the REEL story never links them to the REAL story. Christmas becomes mainly about the obsessive decorating and family fighting and sort of sappy resolution we see portrayed in National Lampoon's, CHRISTMAS VACATION. For some people, the REEL story replaces the REAL story. Christmas becomes just about Santa and Rudolph and Frosty the Snow Man.

But there ARE movie reels – whether by intention or accident -- that take us so much closer to the meaning of what happened in Bethlehem long ago. And this month we're taking a brief look at a few of them – not to get stuck there – but to prepare our hearts to understand in a fresh way the stunning magnificence of the REAL Christmas.

Home Alone Can Help Us Find the Real Story of Christmas

Take the movie, HOME ALONE, for example. How many of you have seen that one? If you haven't, it's the story of Kevin McAllister – the youngest child of a large Chicago family -- who gets left behind in his house, amidst the chaos of the family's departure

on a European holiday. At first, Kevin (who is played by Macauley Culkin), is merely surprised to have been left alone. [Hands to face!] But, then, as he adjusts to the new reality he is sort of pleased. He sees that he can do and eat whatever he wants because he's what? That's right: Home alone! There's no parent to tell him to make his bed, no older siblings to pick on him. It seems like a pretty good deal, until it starts not to be.

It turns out that there are some bad guys in the neighborhood who, when they figure out Kevin is alone, decide to try and rob and hurt him. There's comedy and ingenuity in the way the boy gets the best of these wolves. But it's a pretty scary situation, if you imagine that was really YOU or one of your kids. And, eventually, being alone turns to being truly lonely and then to noticing the goodness of being part of a choir or a family – even an imperfect one. Kevin wistfully watches other kids who have a circle like that. He aches at the plight of a lonely old neighbor who is estranged from his kids.

At one point, Kevin gets into a conversation with the old man and says pensively: *"I've been kind of a pain lately. I said some things I shouldn't have. I really haven't been too good this year. I'm kind of upset about it because I really like my family. Even though sometimes I say I don't. Sometimes I even think I don't. Do you get that?"* "I think so," the man replies. "How you feel about your family is a complicated thing." The man continues, "Deep down, you'll always love them. You can forget that you love them. And you can hurt them, and they can hurt you. And that's not just because you're young" – implying, all of us can do that. And, Kevin comes to see that when you're ALONE – without the gift of love to warm you – you can have a house (even a big beautiful house with lots of candy) but it's not really HOME.

How many people feel the truth of that today? How many are surrounded by crowds who don't stop to learn their name – maybe even here? How many have a wealth of acquaintances who don't know their full story? How many people are embedded in families like the movie McAllister's, people so embroiled in anxious doing and going that they've stopped truly seeing each other... or listening to one another's hurts and hopes... or saying, as Kevin does: *"I've been kind of a pain lately. I said some things I shouldn't have. I really like you. Even though sometimes I say I don't or think I don't."*

Do you think that with all the technology we now have to connect us, there are more or fewer people feeling HOME ALONE? This week I read a fascinating interview with Ben Windle, an Australian pastor who is an expert in generational studies: *"You want to know a secret that Millennials and Gen Z know about the online world? We know something is wrong... Despite having more social interaction online than ever before, we have a loneliness epidemic. This loneliness sits on our culture like a heavy blanket. It is a social sickness. It is harming our souls. It is one of the major contributing factors to our decline in mental health."*²

Windle goes on to cite a 75-year study of adult development which found that a lack of true community -- of regular, intimate social relationships -- was equivalent in its

effect on bodily health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.³ Windle reports that 60% of people in their teens and twenties say, our generation spends too much time on screens.⁴ 44% of this same Generation Z say they feel lonely at least "some of the time," which includes 20% who feel lonely "a lot of the time."⁵ Now we're seeing less of each other in our workplaces. 50% of practicing Christians are doing church mainly online and many no church at all.

God Cares Deeply for the Lonely & Homeless

I don't know if all this matters to you, but I'm certain it matters to God. I know it because in the second chapter of the Bible, we're given this movie clip. We see the first human being wandering around a home so beautiful and full of bounty that history has called it "Paradise." Yet even in the midst of Eden, Adam felt HOME ALONE. And though God had labeled everything else he had made as "**good**" or "**very good**," God now says, in effect, something's wrong here: "**It is not good for the man to be alone**" (Gen 2:18).

Wind the video forward many millennia and we find another story, one that gets told around Christmas. I bet you've seen this reel before. Luke's gospel puts it this way: **And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night (Luke 2:8)**. For years, when I came across this clip from the Christmas story, I got the warm fuzzies. I pictured this sort of radiant communal scene involving this group of handsome guys. There was the Tom Brady shepherd and the Denzel Washington shepherd and the Ben Affleck and the John Legend and the Mario Lopez shepherd -- and a whole lot of other guys with great bone structure. I saw them lounging around the campfire, eating and drinking, joking and telling stories -- one big happy fraternity in the field.

But then I learned the REAL Christmas story. When Jesus famously says, "**I am the Good Shepherd**" in John chapter 10, he knows he has to qualify the term because the stereotype of shepherds in his time was as bad people. Because their job required them to spend months out in the fields, far from supervision or contact with "regular" people, they were viewed as lazy, filthy, and dishonest people. "*They're probably out there grazing other people's land or selling off lambs born in the field.*" In fact, Jewish rabbis frequently instructed their congregants: "*Don't buy anything a shepherd tries to sell you; you can assume it's stolen.*" The word of a shepherd was considered so unreliable that they were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court. Their work made them ceremonially unclean and therefore prohibited from religious gatherings. One rabbinical commentary of that time said: "*There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd.*"⁶

I hope this picture is coming through in 4K. THESE are the people the Bible is talking about when it says: **And there were *shepherds* living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night (Luke 2:8)**. And please notice that the

word "flocks" and "fields" there is plural. This was no fraternity gathering. The Bible is describing individual people... isolated from one another in different fields... wandering from place to place to find grass and fresh water... trying not to get close to one another so their flocks didn't get mixed up... each shepherd like some first century and much poorer version of Kevin McAllister, doing their best to fend off the marauders trying to do them harm. These are people with no real HOME and very much ALONE.

Until... **An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them... But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great JOY that will be for ALL the people...** even for YOU, my lonely, homeless ones. You are seen. You are loved. You are included. You will play a part in the unfolding of God's magnificent plan to help every lonely soul find his or her ultimate home. **Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. (Luke 9-16)**

We're going to return to this story next week and unpack it further but let me leave you with a final lens for appreciating it. There's a scene at the end of HOME ALONE in which young Kevin wakes up on Christmas morning to discover that he has been remembered after all. His siblings pour over the top of him like puppies. He parents enfold him with all the love and delight you could imagine. Flooded with great JOY, Kevin looks through the window and sees across the street the lonely old man, reconciling and embracing his family. Maybe there's a force at work that wants to extend LOVE for ALL the people.

This is something like the scene that Luke's gospel is trying to describe – only bigger. It's a picture of the unexpected, undeserved, Gift of God's Love and the power it holds to redeem everything. Even though they are dirty and smelly and imperfect, the shepherds find they are welcome in the home of Mary, Joseph and the baby. A child has come who will not only reconcile people to their heavenly Father, he will start a new kind of family that will puts its arms around the lonely and give them a home that will even outlast this world. The shepherds can't hold this good news in. **When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed (Luke 2:17-18).**

How Can You Keep the Real Story Moving?

Let me ask before we go today: How does this whole experience we've shared here become more than like watching a movie? I wonder what it might look like if we didn't just hear or view the Christmas story but entered into it personally. How might you and

I spread the Gift of Love that came down and began a life-changing movement at that first Christmas?

For example...

- Who's the stranger around you whose name and story you might learn today?
- Who's the lonely soul you could invite into your home or your group or to sit at some table this week?
- Who might you send to FindingJoy2021.com?
- Who's the person in your own family whose worth and good heart you may have forgotten or forsaken?
- Who's the neighbor across the street who might become like a family member to you if you reached out?
- Is God inviting you to reconcile with someone?
- Is God calling you to put down the screen and be truly present to others in the flesh, as he did?
- Might God be calling you to leave the online channel and come be part of an in-person church once again?
- Is this the day that you say to God:
I know I'm far from perfect. But I know you see me and love me. So I ask for your forgiveness. I put my trust in Christ and the love of his family. Today's the day I come HOME and am no longer ALONE.

If you do that, as I hope some of you will, talk to me or one of our pastors or online hosts after the service today. We are so excited to welcome you into the family.

Let's pray together...

Lord amidst all of the noise and distraction, help us to find the REAL Christmas story, to enter into personally, and to help keep the reality of your life-changing love moving in this world. For this we pray in the name of Jesus, saying together, Amen.

¹ Clement Clarke Moore, *A Visit From St. Nicholas*, 1823.

² Ben Windle, "Online, Together & Lonely," *Barna Access Plus*.

³ Charles Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging*.

⁴ *Gen Z Volume 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2021), p. 34.

⁵ Barna, *Gen Z Volume 2*, p. 10.

⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (SCM/Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 304-311.