

The post-World War II years of 1946 and 1947 produced 4 great Christmas movies. The best known are the beloved classics, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Miracle on 34th Street*. The least well known is *It Happened on 5th Avenue*. I must confess I'd never heard of *It Happened on 5th Avenue* until I stumbled over it a year or two ago on Turner Classic Movies. If you haven't seen it, I'd highly recommend it—it's delightful.

But in between these 2 famous and 1 obscure classic Christmas movies is, *The Bishop's Wife*.

In *The Bishop's Wife*, David Niven plays a young Episcopal bishop, and Cary Grant plays an angel who is sent to help him. Originally when they started filming, the roles were reversed, with David Niven cast as the angel and Cary Grant as the bishop. But early on, they switched parts.

The Bishop's Wife shares some overlapping themes with its two more famous contemporaries. Like *Miracle on 34th Street*, there's a large sub-plot of "is he, or isn't he"? Is Cary Grant a genuine angel or an imposter?

And of course, like *It's a Wonderful Life*, we have the involvement of an angel seeking to help a human. But as I said last year when I preached on *It's a Wonderful Life*, that beloved, wonderful movie is hampered by a completely non-scriptural and actually heretical view of angels.

In the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, the angel is a dead human being who is now a bumbling AS2—Angel Second Class. And he's trying to earn his wings to become a first-class angel.

But there's nothing in scripture that says that human beings become angels when they die. Angels are a separate created order. They are powerful spiritual beings created by God. Angels are different from us, just like we're different from elephants. Humans are not dead elephants who have moved to a higher level. Likewise, angels are not dead humans who have moved to a higher level. All that stuff about the deceased getting wings, and playing a harp, and sitting on a cloud all day comes from cartoonists. But it's not in the Bible.

While Jesus does say is that when we are resurrected, we will become LIKE angels in that we will be immortal and never die again.¹ But he never says that we will BECOME angels.

And that's why I love the portrayal of the angel in *The Bishop's Wife*.

The angel who goes by the alias of Dudley turns out to be a powerful being. He serves in the classic angelic role of being an intermediary between God and humans. And yet, he is also kind and genuinely concerned for the human beings he encounters. And, though this is not a classically biblical part of being an angel, he also lives out St. Paul's advice of trying to meet people where they are. Whether the angel is dealing with an atheistic professor or a believing bishop, he treats everyone he encounters with lovingkindness. Sometimes he has to

¹ Mt 22:30, Mk 12:5, Lk 20:36

engage in tough love. But he's always loving, nonetheless. And of course, since Dudley is played by Cary Grant, he is arguably the most suave and debonair angel in the history of cinema. And compared to the dark seriousness of the situation in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Cary Grant is able to play angel Dudley with much more of a light touch and much more fun and a twinkle in his eye.

Dudley comes in response to a prayer by Bishop Henry Brougham. Henry is a young bishop. He was a successful and able parish priest. But now he's overwhelmed by his responsibilities as bishop. Plus, he finds much of his time is spent wrangling with donors over plans and fundraising for the construction of a new cathedral. Henry sees building that cathedral as the number one goal of his episcopacy.

Parenthetically, Henry is not alone. During this time the Episcopal Church along with our sister mainline denominations went through a period of rapid expansion in the post-World War II era. At one level this was a good thing. While our building is a few years older than that, we are in a real way the beneficiaries of the dreams of our ancestors at St. Paul's who saw to it that we had this wonderful space to worship in.

However, this emphasis on building cuts both ways. While there are benefits to having these buildings from this era, in many ways building these buildings became something of an obsession during this period. The Episcopal Church of the 1950s has more than once been described as having an "edifice complex."

Henry is certainly obsessed and certainly has an "edifice complex" for building a cathedral. And what he's not really aware of is that he's sacrificing his relationship with his family to do it. He has a wonderful wife, Julia and a sweet little daughter.

Parenthetically, the daughter is played by the same actress who played Jimmy Stewart's daughter in *It's a Wonderful Life*. And what's more, the kid that excludes her from the snowball fight in this film played Jimmy Stewart as a child in the other film. Plus, two other actresses had small roles in both films.

But the bishop's wonderful family certainly is suffering due to his focus on building that cathedral. And when Bishop Henry is at an impasse, he prays to God for guidance. And angel Dudley appears.

A fun plotline in this movie is the fact that only Henry knows that Dudley is an angel. AND what's even more fun is that Henry is basically the only character who doesn't find Dudley charming. He finds his presence to be a nuisance in fact.

This is often a spiritual reality. We ask God to act. But then when God does act, we're not always happy with the way God is acting. What we want is for God to act within our narrow parameters of the way we would choose to do thing. But of course, God's is not constrained by these limitations.

And Dudley's strategy is brilliant. He lavishes attention on Henry's neglected wife and daughter. And that makes the bishop somewhat jealous. When confronted, Dudley tells him that it was Henry's own choice. Henry chose to go spend his time with the wealthy potential donor, Mrs. Hamilton, at the expense of keeping a date with his wife.

Dudley says point blank:

"If you'd sent me to Mrs. Hamilton, I would have gone. You didn't. So, I represented you with your wife."

In the end, Henry realizes how important Julia is and that he's been taking her for granted. He says, "Julia means more to me than my life."

Henry is miffed, however, that the cathedral won't end up being built. And when Dudley is taking his leave, he tells Henry,
"Your prayer has been answered."

"That's not true," Henry says, "I was praying for a cathedral."

Dudley replies: "No, Henry. You were praying for guidance. That has been given to you."

The Rolling Stones famously sang,
"You can't always get what you want...
But if you try sometimes, you just might find
You get what you need."

Dealing with dashed expectations and disappointments in life can be very challenging, spiritually. And they can be especially difficult when we think we're doing things according to God's will, and then find out, it's more complex than that.

Case in point is our Epistle. Not our Epistle lesson for today, but the entire Epistle to the Romans.

Today we read the introductory verses to the book of Romans. Romans is the greatest attempted fund-raising letter ever written to solicit support for something that would end up not occurring.

Paul was hoping to visit Rome to collect support for a missionary trip to Spain. But it didn't pan out that way. Paul got arrested. And he ended up going to Rome in chains to stand trial. All of his hopes and dreams and plans went out the window.

Now, there are some suggestions that Paul was later released from imprisonment and was eventually able to get to Spain. But this is not in scripture, and it is somewhat conjectural.

And yet, in spite of Romans not functioning in the way Paul originally intended it, it nevertheless became a vitally important Christian document that has spoken about the realities of

faith for many, many generations of Christians for almost 2,000 years. That is undoubtedly not what Paul intended originally. But God has used Romans in powerful ways, nonetheless.

In a real way, we often deal with disappointment in life. The 21st century has been tough so far for our world. The last few years have been very tough. Probably not what any of us would have planned for, and almost assuredly not what we would wish for.

But it happens on a micro scale as well. During this time of year, we often have plans to enjoy a perfect celebration of the holidays. But since we're imperfect people, we and our friends and family members are also imperfect, the holidays rarely can live up to our romantic ideals and expectations.

In a few years, I'll preach on another great holiday movie, *Christmas Vacation*. The protagonist's main goal is to host a perfect old fashioned family Christmas. And time and time again things go wrong.

But perhaps we shouldn't worry so much about having perfect holidays. Instead, maybe we should just try to simply enjoy our time with those we love.

That's actually the final message of *The Bishop's Wife*. Bishop Henry is preaching a Christmas Eve sermon at his old parish, and unknowingly ends up preaching a sermon written by angel Dudley. Henry talks about the gifts we try to give each other at Christmas. But then he talks about someone we forget to put a stocking out for, the infant Christ child, even though it is his birthday we are celebrating.

But then the bishop talks about gifts we can give God that are gifts that will also help others in our world. He calls them the "shining gifts."

He says,

"Let us ask ourselves what (Jesus) would wish for most" if had a Christmas stocking.

"And then," Henry says, "let each put in his share, lovingkindness, warm hearts, and a stretched-out hand of tolerance. All the shining gifts that make peace on earth."

In the end, Henry realizes that what God wants most from him is not for him to raise millions of dollars to build a glorious cathedral.

Rather, the most important thing is to attend to the relationships he has with others.

As we approach our own celebration of Christmas, pay attention to the shining gifts Bishop Henry mentions. Tolerance. Warm hearts. Lovingkindness.

And may the Prince of Peace offer us his a sense of his peace, as we seek to do his will.