



*A WONDERFUL LIFE: "HOPE FOR IT"

Biblical Text: [Isaiah 11:1-6](#)

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Ready or not, Christmas is coming. Thanksgiving Day is barely over, **but there it is.** We haven't yet recovered from turkey dinner or too many pieces of pie. And that's not all. We're not fully recovered from the elections or conversations about it.

But ready or not, Christmas is coming! And we aren't ready, at least probably. I certainly am not, yet, ready, anyway. But I want to be. I want to be ready for a fresh infilling of all that Christmas promises. Hope, joy, peace, love – that stuff.

*So as I begin the Advent journey, my prayers have been haunted by this prayer found in almost the center of the Bible, from verse four of the 25th Psalm: **"Show me your way, O LORD, *teach me your path; *guide me in your truth..."* (Psalm 25:4)¹

That is a powerful prayer! *And isn't it what we all need - someone to show us the way? It seems to be true in all of life - positively and negatively. We learn to love or hate, trust or mistrust, to believe or doubt – when someone shows us the way.

Part of the joy of Thanksgiving for me wasn't just the family gathering or the turkey or the pie or the ball games. *My favorite thing was talking to my grandson about playing the guitar. I showed him what I know a few years ago, * now he plays better than I do, and is playing guitar in the pep band. Music seems to be one of his things!

What is true in life, is true in our spiritual lives. Except that it is God who we turn to. I believe that is the true beginning of spiritual growth for us. When our hearts cry out to God to, *"show me the way..."* - it is then that our lives are truly open to Him!

But most of the time that's not how we pray. Every now and then we sing one of my favorite hymns in Church, **"Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way..."*

But, if we are honest, most of our prayers sound a lot more like, **"I want my own way, Lord, I want my own way..."* **The song is infinitely harder.** * In fact, being open to God's way, and God's timetable, is one of the hardest things I know.

It often happens only when we come to end of our own wisdom, our own effort, or the end of our rope. And sometimes the people we think might help, can't or won't.

That's what happened to George Bailey, the character in the classic Christmas film, *"It's a Wonderful Life."* Let's look in on George Bailey about mid-point in the film.*

¹ Psalm 25:4-5. *New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan.

* When Ann watched that clip with me yesterday, she said, *“That’s depressing! Are you really going to use that in the sermon?”* It turns out most people in 1946 agreed with that sentiment. *“It’s a Wonderful Life,”* wasn’t wonderful for the producers – it was the biggest box office flop of the year, and lost big money.

* People were evidently tired of the depression era subject matter. They had lived through it, and they certainly weren’t interested in a movie about it.

But because of a loophole in copyright law, in the late 70’s network and cable picked up the film for free and began showing it over and over in the Christmas season. And somehow the message of hope in hard times spoke to people, *So much so that *The American Film Institute* named it the most inspirational American film ever made.

When I thought about what I might preach this year for Advent, there were a couple of other film candidates. But try as I could I just couldn’t get past the gag lines in **A Christmas Story* to anything of substance. Now, it would have been fun to preach a message called *“Stupid Stuff People Do!”* But, I landed on ** “It’s a Wonderful Life.”*

Let me tell you why I did. The first reason is that it resonates with the Biblical story. Not so much the Christmas story, but the *“getting ready for Christmas story”* of Advent. Sometimes we forget that the coming of Jesus as the Messiah happened only after a long hard journey for the people of God, the people of Judah and Israel.

When they heard our text from **Isaiah 11:4, “...with righteousness he (the Messiah) shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...”*² they held on to hope that their poverty, slavery, abuse, and days of fear would someday end.

In a world of instant satisfaction, and gigabit Internet speeds, we have trouble with waiting five seconds or five minutes longer than we think we should. So, it is almost inconceivable to us that God’s people had been waiting for Jesus for 700 years. *

But it is true. *And we are still waiting, and praying... Not for Jesus. He came! Thanks be to God! We know that. *We celebrate that hope and peace are possible, new beginnings are possible, and that *“a little child shall lead them.”*³ - lead us!

But in our hardest moments, we find it hard to wait and pray. *At least it was that way for me in 1977. It was one of those unforgettable years in my life. I left college. I was going through a divorce. That year Christmas and the holidays were particularly hard. I wanted to end it all. Three things made life bearable, endurable.

One was a Peter Frampton song - Rock music, go figure! *He’s still singing today.

² Isaiah 11:4, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ Ibid. Isaiah 11:5, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

He sang, ***“Oh won't you, show me the way. I want you. Show me the way.”**⁴ And his words became my prayer. I don't think it was an accident that it was then that my calling to ministry became clear. I also don't think it was an accident that the following spring I met Ann. I finally was open to God's way and not my own.

*We all have baggage that we bring with us on this journey. Sometimes all of that “stuff” can get in the way as we seek God's will and way. I believe we can pray no deeper prayer than this one, **“Show me the way.”**

The second thing that helped? You guessed it, **“It's a Wonderful Life.”** * It may have been made in 1946, but it spoke to my heart in 1977. I cried like a baby. Still do today. If you haven't ever seen it or seen it recently, it will be worth your time.

It's not by accident that George Bailey, by his own admission, not **“a praying man,”** found his help by praying that same prayer. Let's see it. *

*Life is too short to hold on to resentments, or try to go it alone. And yet too often that is just what happens. That's what we do. And any feelings of hurt or regret, or despair become more intense in this season.

We can feel like even God is an uninterested observer, watching us suffer from a distance. Or even that he doesn't exist. But nothing could be further from the truth. *

God promised to be with us. That's what Christmas is all about. And if we'll let him, God will show us the way! It can be a wonderful life. * That's the Good News.

This Word tells us that God moved heaven and earth to send his Son so that could happen, not to judge or condemn us but to love us, and save us. *

That's the third thing that made a difference to me. In a way, I had never really seen before, I saw the truth. John 3:17 says this... ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”**

We'll spend the rest of the time between now and Christmas unpacking just what that can mean for all of us, and how our life, every life makes a difference.

But it all begins with a cry of our hearts, a prayer: **“Lord, show me the way.”**
(Let's go to the Lord together.)

⁴ Peter Frampton, “Show Me the Way,” from the album, “Frampton, Live.” Copyright © 1974, Almo Music Corp.