



*A WONDERFUL LIFE: “GOD’S PRECIOUS GIFT”

Biblical Text: Matthew 1:18-25

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***Life is a gift.** At our core, most of us know that. But my guess is that I am not to only one who, from time to time, has wondered if my particular life makes a difference. I don't spend every day thinking about that. *Almost all the time, I'm a “cup half-full” rather than a “cup half empty” kind of person. I mostly live life on the upside! *

But sometimes those fleeting thoughts have come. Sometimes it was during the *stress of a tough semester, or more recently, when *middle age** came to visit. It happens to many of us. Like the times we have *no time for ourselves. Or feel chained to a **“dead-end job.”* It can happen when our hopes for retirement* turn out to not be as much fun as promised.* Or when the holidays, which are supposed to be filled with joy, just don't feel like it.* However it happens – the feelings are real.

***That's what happened to George Bailey** in the film, “*It's a Wonderful Life.*” George is at his wits end. *Nothing is going as he once dreamed. He can't see the worth of who he is or what he has, not even the petals in his pocket from his youngest daughter Zuzu's flower on Christmas Eve. *Eventually, George learns that his life matters - but it is far from an easy lesson. Not for him, or for most of us.

***At Christmas, we spend most of our time talking about Jesus' life and not ours.** And Of course, we should. His life made an incredible difference. That's why we take time to tell his story. That's why we sing the songs of Christmas, and light the candles. That's why we read the ancient story of Angels and Shepherds, and Mary and Joseph.

But even in those stories, we are reminded of the worth of every life. *Take our Bible passage from Matthew 1:18, Joseph's story. It says: **“Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”*¹

That's kind of a big deal, then and now. But there's a verse that is often missed, look at Matthew 1:19, * *“Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”* Her life mattered to Joseph.

And both their lives mattered to God. So much that, **“An angel of the Lord appeared to him - and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.”*

The lives of all people matter. As the angel said, * *“This child is from the Holy Spirit ... and you will name him Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins.”*²

¹ Mathew 1:18, *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.

² Ibid. Mathew 1:19, Matthew 1:20, Matthew 1:21, *adapted*, from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

The best news of Christmas ...is the Good News that Jesus came so we could know that our life matters to God. He was born so that we might know salvation, experience new life, find forgiveness, discover hope, live again. **“He will save his people from their sins!”*

Later in John 10:10, Jesus said that he came that we might have life. That we might live it abundantly. * In other words, the mission of Jesus life – the reason he came - was to remind us of the worth of our lives! We often miss that.

***We often stress the eternal life dimensions of that abundant life.** Don't get me wrong, that's a wonderful thing. I love the good news that heaven waits for me some day at the end of life. But that's only part of the message. Abundant life is not just a someday proposition. Life is a wonderful gift, every day!

That's why Jesus came. Every precious moment of life has incredible treasures within it. We just get so wrapped up in ourselves, or our busyness, or our struggles that we can't see it! I think that's why the message of the film speaks so strongly to me.*

God doesn't leave any of us at our lowest point. In the film, George Bailey wishes he had never been born, and for a few agonizing hours, he gets his wish. * *(play film clip)*

But it is an awful and horrible gift. *George wish erases every moment of trouble, disappointment and struggle, including the busted lip he got earlier in the evening. But it also erases every forgotten good he had ever done. Saving his brother from disaster as a child. Helping his father with a struggling loan company and helping hundreds become home owners. Meeting his wife, Mary, raising their family, building a host of friendships, seeing the faces of his children.

***Doesn't it help us consider the worth of every life?** I wonder how valuable it might be for you to remember the best moments of your life. For you to think about the joy you've brought to others. The friendship that people cherish from you. The people in your family, or circle of friends who love you.

It's a helpful spiritual exercise. You might just realize, like I did when I thought back over my life, that it is a pretty wonderful life. Not a perfect one. Not a trouble-free one. But wonderful, precious one - a gift of God – never-the-less.

When George realizes what he would leave behind - It drives him to his knees. Let's listen in on his prayer. * *(play film clip)*

It's a powerful prayer. I want to live again. I want to live. In a way, it's the cry of all our hearts, isn't it? *When we get the end of ourselves, our disappointments with ourselves or one another, or life. We need the help of God to appreciate what a precious gift that life is. **To see that every life, including ours, is sacred.**

And that's about as good a definition of salvation as I know. So often we think salvation is about being sorry for our sins, and it can be. Back to Matthew 1:21. * We also think of the sacrifice Jesus made when he gave his life for ours, and it was an amazing gracious gift. It was. Or we think of salvation as our entrance pass through the pearly gates when we die someday. And it is that too. *

But salvation is more than that. If we get it, if we understand what Christmas is all about. If we get the purpose for it all, we remember Jesus' words from John 10:10. * Salvation is about Him giving our lives back to us. But not the same. Reminded of how precious we are. Reminded of how important our lives are to others and to God. Knowing that is what makes our lives abundant, full, and worth living. *

In the film, George discovers that it is "A Wonderful Life." *(play clip)

That's what will truly make for a Merry Christmas. *And is my prayer for you. That today, somehow you will have overheard the message I am convinced comes from the heart of God, just for you...

- *Your life matters. And it matters eternally to God.*
- *You make a difference. God has a purpose for you.*
- *Your life is and will keep on being ... precious.*
- *It is ... a wonderful life*

*Let us pray.