

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Philippians 2:1-11 and Luke 1:26-38

Sermon Title: "Assuming Nothing and Becoming Something" (*It's A Wonderful Life* series – Second Sunday of Advent)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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It's a Wonderful Life is one of those Christmas movies that my family and I must watch every year. If you have never seen the movie, it's about a man who is about to take his life. He is fed up with all the failures he has had to endure, and now he wants to jump off a bridge and drown in the freezing waters below.

George Bailey had big dreams. He had huge dreams. He wanted to explore the world and do big things for society. He even had a big suitcase to pack all his clothes in, because he was going places. "I'm shakin' the dust of this crummy little town off my feet," he once said, "and I'm gonna see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Coliseum. Then, I'm comin' back to go to college and see what they know. And then I'm gonna build things. I'm gonna build airfields, I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high, I'm gonna build bridges a mile long." When his father suggested that George should stay home and work for the family business, George's reply was, "Pop, I couldn't. I couldn't face being cooped up

for the rest of my life in a shabby little office... this business of nickels and dimes and spending all your life trying to figure out how to save three cents on a length of pipe... I'd go crazy. I want to do something big and something important.”¹

We don't feel much different from George Bailey. Maybe we don't want to travel the world like he did, or maybe we do. Maybe we don't have the ambition to build skyscrapers or bridges – we might not even know where to start. But we are the same as George Bailey, in that we want to do our own thing. We don't want anybody or anything holding us back. If we make a plan, we want to carry it out. We don't want negativity or discouragement to weigh us down. Maybe parents and friends have said no, but we say yes. We are going to do what we want to do, and we don't care what people think or say. Forget them. The world has no limits. We are the masters of our own destinies.

Trouble is: our destinies may not turn out the way we want them. We may not get to do what we want, because circumstances arise that change the plans. We may not get too far, because we are limited in our capacity to do certain things.

When George is ready to head off to college, ready

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/quotes> and http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/It's_a_Wonderful_Life.

to build skyscrapers and bridges all over the world, his father dies from a stroke. His father owned the Bailey Building and Loan Association, a company that lends money at a fair rate to people who hope to buy homes. With George Bailey's father dead, Henry F. Potter, that cantankerous slum lord, is now in the position to take over. Take over the Bailey Building and Loan, and take over that crummy little town that George loves. Our destinies may not turn out the way we want them. George Bailey is about to become the man he never planned to be.

Isaiah 9 tells us that at the right time a Child is born unto us. A Son is given. We read this almost every Advent season. What we might not read is Philippians 2, in which Paul describes the Child being born unto us in a different way.

At the beginning of the chapter, Paul is talking about humility, something of which we are usually in short supply. He wants the Philippians to be unity under Christ, full of love and fellowship, brimming over with affection and mercy. In verse 3 he says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." In another translation it says, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of

mind let each esteem others better than himself [or herself].”² I think I like that translation best: Let *nothing* be done through selfish ambition or conceit. In other words, it’s not about you. The world doesn’t revolve around me. If we are in a community of believers, then the interests of the group come first. Not what I can get from the group – not how I can impress the group and be its endearing leader, but what is best for everybody involved.

That’s very hard for us to do, because humility within us runs in short supply. Sin tends to absorb our humility and replaces it with arrogance, pride. Sin also tends to make us think we are better than others, and that we can do our own thing as long as people just leave us alone. That may even happen within a community of believers, in which people don’t like to working with others, thinking things will get done if they may handle it themselves. In my experience, things do not get done when only one person is responsible for it. Things get done when we are all involved.

The Lord created us for greater things. God created us not to do our own things but to do God’s things, which includes others. God absorbs our arrogance and pride, and replaces it with humility and

² New King James Version.

compassion. Humility and compassion build things greater than skyscrapers and bridges – they build character, relationships, and lives.

To emphasize this point, Paul turns to Jesus Christ. Paul never talks about the Babe born in Bethlehem per se – he is a little more mystical (supernatural) about the birth of Christ. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a [servant], being born in human likeness.”³

I love that one part, “Jesus, in the form of God, didn’t regard his equality with God as something to just assume and even exploit.” When children are asked how Jesus should have come down to save humanity, they answer that he should have appeared as a big important person such as a warrior with a gun or maybe a laser beam, or as a policeman who stops crime, or as Superman who would have done the job. Jesus Christ could have done any of those things. Christ is equal to God, because God the Son and God the Father are the same, along with God the Holy Spirit. If Jesus is God, he could enter the world in any

³ Philippians 2:5-7.

form, and wipe out sin with a word, and straighten us all out so that we would stop hurting each other.

But this is not how a *loving* God acts; and God our Father is a loving God, not a hateful tyrant. Christ was not born unto us in any form he liked – Christ was born in the exact way that God the Father wanted him to be born. Jesus didn't assume that he was God and then blind us with all his godliness, but instead Jesus “emptied himself,” taking on the form of a Baby.⁴ He made himself with no reputation so that people would not notice, but then he was born as a little Child, which would capture the attention of anybody. Nobody can resist a Baby.

Jesus was given unto us exactly how God the Father planned it. Throughout his life, Christ would always do as the Father wanted him to do. “I and the Father are one,” Jesus would say during his earthly ministry. “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”⁵ Jesus didn't go out to do his own thing – Jesus always did God's thing from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death and resurrection.

⁴ Cf. Philippians 2:7.

⁵ Cf. John 10:30 and 14:10.

George Bailey, in our movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, planned to do his own thing, and circumstances changed all of that. He had to scrap his plans for other plans. Dare we say that even in a Hollywood movie, the character George Bailey had to scrap his plans for God's plans? He had to become the man God wanted him to be in his crummy little town of Bedford Falls. God infused him with love for his fellow brothers and sisters, and God motivated him to do for others, placing them above himself.

We are not our own people. We are God's people, so that means we are obligated to do God's things. We are not obligated in that we are forced to do as God wants us to do. We can still do our own thing. We may still make our own plans. But where do they get us? Do our plans really make us into the people God wants us to be? Does "doing our thing" show to God that we trust God, we love God, and we follow God every day?

Jesus Christ was and is God, equal to the Father and Holy Spirit. He could have assumed everything, come down to earth in a blaze of glory and taken command of everything. Jesus did not do this, but was born unto us as a Child. Who are we to think we are better than Christ? Who are we equal to, certainly not to God? We do not have the power or presence

that gives us the right to do our own thing. We are God's creation – we are Christ's disciples. We cannot shake off God like dust from our shoes, and go our own way.

Do we know what Advent means? It is the Latin word *arrival*. Whose arrival do we wait for? Jesus' arrival. Why do we wait for his arrival? As that favorite Christmas hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, goes, "Cast out of sin and enter in, be born in us today." Christ arrives to cast out our selfishness. Christ arrives to change our mindset, so that we might focus on what God wants us to do more than what we want to do. Christ arrives to show us how to pray, to quietly pray for guidance and to deliberately sense the still small voice of God tells us which direction to turn. Christ arrives to make us into the people we ought to be, people we never planned on being but people nonetheless who faithfully carry out God's will and make things happen for God and God's people.

George Bailey argued and complained: "I'm going to college, I'm going to travel, I'm going to build things." He eventually gave up the arguments, and he submitted his will to the greater good. And what great things he did, when he gave up his will. Greater things we may do, when we become just as Christ

became: a humble servant, ready to move the kingdom of God forward.

