

**Christmas at the Movies 2019**

***Rudolph***

**December 22, 2019**

(Begin) Announcer: "On Sunday December 4th ..."

(End) Announcer: "... in color on most of these stations."

And that's pretty much what it looked like on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1964.

And I know because I was about 7 years old then and I saw it ... on our family's black and white TV.

I'm curious ...

- How many of you would say that *your* first viewing of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* was also in black and white? <show of hands>
- How many of you have never seen black and white TV? You don't even know what black and white TV is? <show of hands>

See, kids, back in the day, not only was TV in standard definition (not 4K, not 1080, not 720p, not even 480p – we're talking 240p), for most of us, it was also in black and white. Color TVs had just come out and they were super-expensive.

And not only was TV in black and white and standard def, the signal sometimes came and went because there was no such thing as cable or wireless internet. Basically we had an antenna that was two wires sticking out of the back of the TV.

If you were really desperate, you got some aluminum foil and you wrapped it around there and hoped that it would help ... which it usually didn't.

So, imagine watching this movie which is *Rudolph the what?* "Red nosed" reindeer ... in black and white!

They made his nose blink and it made that terrible squeaking noise but, still, the whole thing kind of lost something in black and white.

On top of that – and I know for some of you kids this is going to blow your minds – you had to actually watch it the night that it came on TV because, back in the day ...

- There was no such thing as DVR
- And no such thing as streaming on demand.

- Even VCRs hadn't been invented yet.

Which meant ... if you didn't see Rudolph *that night*, you had to wait 365 days before it came on again ...

... which is why schools didn't schedule anything the night *Rudolph* or *Frosty* or *A Charlie Brown Christmas* came on. It was like a national cultural experience to sit in front of your black and white TV.

So, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* was a pretty big deal when it hit NBC in 1964, although the story itself had been around since the late 1930s when a guy named Robert May wrote it for his daughter.

She loved it so much that he decided to share it with his co-workers at Montgomery Ward (which, back in the day, was the number one department store chain in the country).

And *they* loved it so much that Montgomery Ward bought the story from May and turned it into a coloring book that they gave to kids whose parents came in to do Christmas shopping. Two million copies were given away the first year and that grew to six million in 1946.

Not long after that, Robert May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, a highly successful musician and composer (who wrote many famous Christmas songs, including the one the band did just a few minutes ago), put May's story to music.

He tried to get Bing Crosby to record it. Bing said no.

Then he asked Frank Sinatra and Frank said no.

Finally, he went to Gene Autry and he said no as well. However, his wife urged him to reconsider and he did ...

... which led to him record what turned out to be the second-best-selling record *of all time*. The number one best seller? Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*.

Back in the day, something about Christmas made everybody want to buy records.

Anyway, that's a little bit of the history behind this classic Christmas movie.

## Cast of Characters

So let's get into it. And let's start by meeting the main characters in the story.<sup>1</sup>

### First, there's Rudolph.

Early on we see that Donner, his father, is ashamed of Rudolph's red nose so he instructs Rudolph to keep it covered at all times.

And Rudolph does, right up until he's old enough to go to his first reindeer games where, unfortunately, his secret is revealed.

Let's watch.

(Begin) Rudolph and Fireball playing

(End) Rudolph walks away

I'm not sure why a red nose would disqualify anyone from the reindeer games, but it did.

And Rudolph is definitely an outcast, a misfit, if you will and he decides to strike out on his own where ...

**... he soon bumps into Hermie.**

Hermie is an elf who would rather be a dentist than a toymaker like all the other elves. He tries to conform to the expectation but, eventually, he says "forget it" and runs off with Rudolph.

**Then there's Santa Claus ...**

... who might be better named "Crabby Claus" – at least in this movie – because he's just not jolly at all.

He's always stressed out and there's even this part where the elves try to cheer him up by singing him a song and he just kind of walks out at the end of it.

Evidently, the best way to spread Christmas cheer – at least with *this* Santa – is *not* by singing loud for all to hear.

**Then you have Yukon Cornelius.**

He's the comedy relief. He's looking for a silver. Then he's looking for gold. Then he's looking for silver and gold. And he's walking around the North pole *licking metal* to see what it is.

Obviously the movie *Christmas Story* hadn't come out yet, so he didn't know the ramifications of sticking his tongue on frozen metal!

**Then there's the bad guy, The Abominable Snowman.**

Even in Claymation, he was scary, wasn't he?

As a kid, even though after the first time you saw this movie you knew he only had a toothache, you still were afraid of him.

## Finally, there was the narrator, Sam the Snowman ...

... who, if you think about it from the perspective of today's culture, was kind of creepy because he seemed to know just *a little too much* about everyone. And this was back before Facebook and Instagram!

Anyway ... the basic storyline – and you know this – is that Rudolph and Hermie and Cornelius run away to start a new life. But they unexpectedly wind up in the saddest place of all, The Island of Misfit Toys.

Robert Mays, who, again, wrote this story, said that it was based on his childhood. And as a child he was taunted. He was bullied. He was made fun of. He was teased all the time and so he wrote it with that in mind.<sup>ii</sup>

And when you realize that, and when you watch this clip, you'll understand why he did.

Let's watch.

(Begin) Cornelius: "Looky up there!"

(End) Charlie: "... til someone wants it."

We'll come back to King Moonracer in a bit.

But the reason I wanted to do this particular movie is because this thing right here – which some people call a Nativity and some people call a crèche ...

This whole thing is kind of like the Island of Misfit Toys because the "real" Christmas story has a lot of misfits in it, too, beginning with Mary and Joseph.

## Mary & Joseph Misfits

### Let me explain.

*This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Matthew 1:18 (NLT)*

*But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:18 (NLT)*

*Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. Matthew 1:19 (NLT)*

What does it mean when it says that "Joseph was a righteous man?"

It means that he knows what the word of God says and he's trying to follow it the best he can.

Specifically, he knows what the Old Testament law says about sex outside of marriage. He knows he's not supposed to sleep with Mary until they're actually married and he hasn't done so.

But he also knows she's pregnant, and he knows what the Old Testament law says the penalties are for a woman who commits adultery (which, technically, Mary would have if she's having relations with somebody other than him).

She could be stoned to death.

So, this is where Joseph is at this point in the Christmas story: "I'm a righteous man and I'm with an unrighteous woman."

But that's not the worst of it. How do you deal with a woman who is going to have a child that you *know* is not yours and she says, "God made me pregnant?"

I think you stop worrying about the infidelity for a bit and you start thinking about what it's going to be like to live the rest of your life with a woman who's on the crazy train!

And Joseph *does* think about all of this and he decides to be gracious towards Mary. He's going to break it off quietly and just move on with his life.

#### **However ...**

*As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Matthew 1:20 (NLT)*

*"For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:21 (NLT)*

That's awesome. Now Joseph knows what's really going on.

But there's still a huge problem. *God doesn't tell anybody else!*

I mean, you and I, we *know* the story. We understand what's going on, that everything is legit.

**Most of the artists who painted pictures of Mary down through history knew that, too, which is why they always put a halo around her head.**

That's understandable why they did that but, in real life, she didn't actually have one ... though I'm sure she would have *liked* to have had one.

That way, everybody would be like, "Who's that unmarried pregnant woman over there?"

"Oh that's Mary. She's carrying the son of God. See her halo?"

But she didn't have that.

Instead, everywhere she went, everyone assumed she and Joseph had broken God's laws. And, even worse, they're trying to pass it off as an act of God!

So what happens?

Mary leaves for a while because she can't handle it. She goes and hangs out with her cousin Elizabeth and then she comes back.

And then Caesar Augustus decides to take a census of the Roman Empire. And Mary and Joseph, who live in Nazareth, travel 80 miles south to Bethlehem where Joseph's family is from.

But here's something you may not know: *Mary didn't have to go*. Only Joseph did. Wives could stay where they were.

So why *did* she go?

Maybe she knows the baby's going to be born soon and she wants Joseph to be there.

Or maybe – and I know this is speculating ... maybe they both were like, "well, let's go to Bethlehem and get away from all the gossip because we're tired of being misfits."

And then they get to Bethlehem. And what happens?

There's no room for them.

And this is kind of strange because this is Joseph's town. He has relatives there. You would think that somebody in his family would have said, "you all can have my room."

But no one does.

It's almost like their reputation precedes them. It's almost like everybody's saying "Hide your kids, hide your wife, here they come."

That's what it feels like when they get to Bethlehem.

## **Jesus the Misfit**

And even as an adult, Jesus never gets away from this.

One day, according to his best friend, John, Jesus was arguing with the religious leaders and it got pretty intense.

At one point Jesus tells them that their true father isn't the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. Instead, he says, their true father is the devil.

That's really what he says: "your father is the devil."

**In response, John tells us ...**

*They replied, "We aren't illegitimate children! God himself is our true Father."  
John 8:41 (NLT)*

You know what that was? That was a shot.

"Say what you want, Jesus. At least we know who our daddy is."

And Jesus never really outran this reputation.

Later on, after He's gained a huge following because of his teaching and his miracles, he goes back to his hometown of Nazareth.

But, everyone there is resistant to Him and even offended by Him. Why?

**Listen to what they say:**

*"Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"  
Mark 6:3 (NIV)*

"Isn't this *Mary's* son?"

That was not a compliment. No man in that culture was referred to as "the son of mom" ever.

It was always the son of the father, and especially back then, because women didn't count for anything. You never said who the mom was because it didn't matter.

Even if Joseph was dead (which he may have been by this time), you still would have referred to Jesus as the son of Joseph unless ... unless you were taking a shot.

From the days of his childhood until the days before his death, it was always the same.

- "Your mom got pregnant before she was married."

- “You’re an illegitimate child.”
- “You don’t even know who your father really is.”

Can you imagine what a misfit Jesus felt like?

But I wonder if maybe the reason that Jesus had no problem touching the untouchables is because he grew up as a misfit Himself.

Maybe the reason he had no problem with going to Samaria and talking to a woman at a well in the middle of the day – you know that Jews didn’t go to Samaria and Jewish men didn’t talk to women in public, right? – maybe the reason he could do that was because He understood what it was like to be a misfit like her.

Obviously, that’s just the heart of who Jesus is, but maybe the heart of who Jesus is was shaped by the way He grew up.

And we’ve talked about it many times, how Jesus’ nickname was “friend of sinners.” That’s what the religious leaders called him and they didn’t mean it as a compliment. But He took it as one.

He always had his own little Island of Misfit Toys walking around with Him everywhere He went – the tax collectors, prostitutes and other notorious sinners. They were always gathered around him because they always felt welcomed.

I think part of the reason Jesus was comfortable with *them* is because of His own background.

Then there’s the story of the woman who’s caught in the act of adultery. Even if you’re not a church person you heard this one.

She’s brought to Jesus and the religious leaders ask Him, “The Law of Moses says we should stone her. What do you say?”

And Jesus says, “absolutely, you should stone her. Whoever is without sin should go first.”

And one-by-one, everyone walks away because no one is qualified to throw the first stone. It’s brilliant on the part of Jesus.

And Jesus, full of grace and truth, says to the woman “neither do I condemn you” (which is grace). “Now, go and sin no more” (which is truth).

And I know this is speculation but it’s hard not to think that, in the back of his mind, Jesus was looking at that woman and thinking “that could’ve been my mom. I mean, she was innocent, but they all *believed* she was guilty. She could have suffered the same fate as this woman.”

Jesus was a misfit. I think that why He understood what it felt like for others to be misfits.



## Other Misfits

So who else was on this little island when Jesus was born?

We've talked about Mary and Joseph and even Jesus himself. What about the rest of the people in this little scene?

Well, there's the shepherds. They're misfits for two reasons.

First of all, *they're unclean*. In that culture, if you lived with the animals (as they did), you've touched things that are unclean which means that you are unclean which means that you can't go into the Temple. You're excluded from the place of worship.

Secondly, the shepherds were misfits because they smelled bad and nobody wanted to be around them! (Just keeping it real today).

But look what happens.

Luke, the first century historian who researched the life Jesus, tells us that on the night He was born, there were shepherds living out in the fields near Bethlehem doing what they always did: keeping watch over their flocks.

### **Suddenly, he writes ...**

*An angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. And they were terrified!* Luke 2:9 (NLT)

### **But the angel reassured them.**

*"Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all the people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!"* Luke 2:10-11 (NLT)

Question: what kind of a statement do you think God is making by sending His angel to *them*?

Think about it. This angel ...

- Flies over Jerusalem, which is the center of religion
- Flies over Rome, which is the political center
- Flies over all the important people in the world
- Flies even beyond Bethlehem (which is among the least of all the cities of Israel)

... and out into the boondocks – into a literal field – to deliver a divine message to the night shift of the lowliest profession that existed in that culture.

And once they get over the shock, I can imagine the shepherds are all looking around saying, “wait a minute – who’s he talking to?”

And the angel goes “No, no, *you guys*. I’m talking to you misfits! I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

“That’s what I’m here for. All the people. That means *you*.”

**“All the people” means all the misfits.**

Say that with me. *All the people means all the misfits.*

One more time. *All the people means all the misfits* ... and maybe especially the misfits.

I’ve lost count over the years of the number of people who have said something to me like “Rick, if I walked into your church, the roof would cave in. You don’t know what a smelly life I have lived. You don’t know what a mess I’ve made.”

Maybe some of you who are watching online right now or watching the video later or listening online, that’s how you feel. That’s why you aren’t here with us today.

But the truth of the matter is *you should walk in* at some point and be here with us because we’re all a bunch of messed up misfits sharing life together in the grace and truth of Jesus; the one who came to build a church for the Island of Misfit Toys.

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But there’s more people on this little Christmas Island, right? What about these guys in the turbans? The wise men. What about them?

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, magi from the East came to Jerusalem and said ...*                      *Matthew 2:1 (NIV)*

*“Where is the one who’s been born King of the Jews? We saw a star in the East and we have come to worship him.”*                      *Matthew 2:2 (NIV)*

And you know how the story goes, right? They bring gold, frankincense and myrrh as presents for Jesus; presents which are incredibly expensive.

Interesting isn't it, to find both the very rich and the very poor welcomed on our little island?

But that's not what's *most* fascinating. What's most fascinating is that these guys are wearing turbans, meaning that they're not Jewish. They're Gentiles – outsiders.

Furthermore, they're astrologers (which is what "magi" means). They don't worship the god of the Jews. Most likely they worship many gods.

And when Matthew – you know, that guy who was a tax collector ... one of those misfits who ended up following Jesus ...

When Matthew recounts the story of their arrival, notice that ...

- He doesn't say anything negative about their background.
- He doesn't say anything critical of their astrology or their religious beliefs.
- He doesn't even gripe about the fact that when they showed up, they tipped off King Herod which led to him killing a bunch of babies and running Jesus and his family off to Egypt.

Nope. He doesn't do any of that because it all goes back to this:

**"All the people" means *all* the misfits.**

And that includes even rich Gentile pagans from a faraway land.

### **Worth Saving**

So, let's step back and look at the big picture concerning our little Island of Misfits here in this Nativity.

From a purely human point of view, *none* of these are the right people to experience what they did except for his parents. But even they felt like misfits.

According to the Law of Moses, neither the shepherds nor the Wise Men would have been welcome to come into the inner part of the Temple in Jerusalem. The shepherds were unclean and the magi were the wrong religion.

But at Christmas, both groups are not only *welcomed* by God they are *called* by God through an angel and a star because, contrary to what everyone thought, both groups mattered to God.

**Misfits matter to God. And misfits are worth saving.**

And in the end, that's the message that comes across loud and clear in this movie, and in two ways.

First, and most obvious is the way the story ends.

Instead of Rudolph's red nose being a handicap, it turns out that it's actually a very helpful tool which allows Santa to see through the horrible blizzard. Rudolph guides his sleigh and Christmas doesn't have to be canceled.

And in the original version of this movie – the first time they showed it – that's how it ended, with Rudolph guiding Santa's sleigh off into the night.

But they got so many letters from so many kids saying, in essence, "did they stop and get the misfit toys? What about that cowboy with the ostrich. Is he okay?"

A lot of kids and parents were upset about the way it ended, so they rewrote it. And when they showed it again the next year – in 1965 – and in every year since, here's how it ends.

Check it out.

(Begin) Fade up on snow falling

(End) Rudolph leads sleigh into the night

I wish his nose didn't make that sound, don't you?

But I love how, in the end, the darkness, the storm, the depression, the distress, is changed by a single light.

The light of Rudolph's nose, this thing that was thought to be a problem, turns out to be the thing that brings joy and happiness because they know that they're going to be part of a home.

And you can't help but see the parallel, right?

Long before the story of Rudolph was written and turned into a movie and a song, that's what God was up to. That's what he did for us. He sent his son into this dark world – and we know it's dark because we see darkness all around us in our culture, in family and friends, all the time.

But not just "out there" because a lot of us have our own darkness in here; things that *have* happened or *are happening* that make us feel hopeless and lost, like we're stranded on the Island of Misfit Toys.

But God sent his son into this dark world *as a misfit himself* to save other misfits because misfits matter to him and misfits are worth saving.

## Jesus once said ...

*"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* John 8:12 (NIV)

Jesus is saying that whoever you are, in whatever way you don't fit, you don't have to be overcome by darkness. Jesus came for you. Jesus came to bring you the light of life ... because misfits matter to God and misfits are worth saving.

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Now, earlier, I said that we would come back to that oddball character, King Moonracer.

## Remember him?

I don't know if it was Robert May's intention when he wrote the story to do this, but I think it's fascinating that Moonracer is both *a lion* and *a king* ...

... because whenever the biblical prophets spoke of the coming Messiah of Israel (who turned out to be Jesus), they consistently spoke of him as being both a lion (metaphorically) and a king (literally).

Even more fascinating (at least to me) is what Charlie in the Box says that King Moonracer *does*. Remember what he said?

"He searches the world every night for unwanted and misfit toys and brings them home."

Whenever Jesus was accused of hanging out with unwanted and misfit sinners too much, He would say something similar, like ...

- "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."
- Or "it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
- Or He would tell stories about people who lost things they valued like sheep and coins and sons, and how they diligently searched for them or anxiously waited for them ...

... and, then, were overjoyed when those sheep and those coins were found and those sons and daughters finally came home.

The point is that God is searching for all of us like Moonracer did those misfit toys.

By the way, as a church, that's our vision, too. As I said before, we're all a bunch of misfits who have been found by Jesus. And we're here for other misfits who haven't yet found Him and been found by Him.

Now, I suppose that those unwanted and misfit toys that King Moonracer found *could* have chosen *not* to go with him if they wanted to.

And I suppose that you can choose not to accept the light and life that Jesus offers. But why would you do that?

I know, I know. Religion isn't your thing. Church isn't your thing. God isn't your thing. Christianity isn't your thing.

And I get that. I understand it.

But the whole point of this message and the whole point of this movie (at least as I'm using it) is to encourage you that maybe you should see things a little differently.

Because wherever it is that you are or you *think* you are that's so far away ...

- Maybe the truth is ... you're in exactly the right place.
- Maybe the truth is ... you fit into this following Jesus thing way *better* than you ever thought ...

... because God is way *bigger* than you thought. He loves misfits. They matter to Him. And they are worth saving.

Now, I've asked Richard to come back out and lead us in just a part of a song we sang earlier in this service which expresses that idea.

And I'm going to invite everyone to sing it again but this time as more of a prayer. The words are going to come up on the screen let's just sing along while Richard leads us. And then I'll come back very briefly and we'll be done.

Would you stand together?

### **Congregational Song – Bigger Than I Thought (v2/ch)**

Prayer

God, 2000 years ago, you sent your son, Jesus, into our world as a misfit among misfits because you love misfits; because misfits matter to you and misfits are worth saving.

Some of us believe that and have experienced that. But some of us think we're too far gone. Some of us are in darkness so great it's hard to imagine seeing a light.

So, in this moment and in the days ahead, help us in our unbelief. Come to us, search for us and call

us to yourself as you did those shepherds and those magi at the birth of Jesus.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS (2)**

1. Christmas Eve – 3:00 / 4:30 – childcare through K
2. Next week – Groundhog Day / Potluck & Praise
3. Offering at door

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Much of the rest of this message is based on a similar talk by Tim Harlow of Parkview Christian Church which can be found here: <https://media.parkviewchurch.com/454/8009/36056>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://time.com/5479322/rudolph-the-red-nosed-reindeer-history-origins/>