

Christmas at the Movies 2019
“A Hallmark Christmas”
December 8, 2019

Good morning everyone. I'm glad you're here with us or watching online as we continue in our series *Christmas at the Movies*.

And I can't think of a song more appropriate to kick off this second message than the one we just heard because, if you've ever wondered "where are you Christmas?" ...

... you need to know that there is a place ...

- Where it's always Christmas (at least from Halloween through New Year's Day).
- Where there is always snow on the ground
- And where the troubles of the real world are lost in the smell of freshly baked cookies.ⁱ

That place, friends, is *The Hallmark Channel*.

Obviously, that "promo" was *not* produced by Hallmarkⁱⁱ

As for what Hallmark *has* produced ... counting the 40 brand new Christmas movies it released just this year, the total number of Hallmark Christmas movies is now up to 232.ⁱⁱⁱ

I'm curious: how many of you have seen at least one?

Don't be embarrassed to admit it because you're not alone.

- Last year, 85 million people in the USA *also* watched at least one Hallmark Christmas movie. That's more than 40% of the entire adult population of this country!^{iv}
- Before Thanksgiving of *this* year, the number of people who had seen at least one Hallmark Christmas Movie this season had *already* reached 40 million ... which puts Hallmark on pace for an even higher total this year.^v
- But *that* number falls short of the 52 million who have already watched a Lifetime Original Christmas movie on *that* channel which has, in just the past few years, also jumped on the holiday bandwagon.^{vi} Lifetime's Christmas movie collection is now up to 88.^{vii}

Point is ... whether we like to admit it or not ... we're suckers for this stuff. We love it.

Now, for me, personally, my first exposure to Hallmark Christmas movies came through my mom, who was crazy about them. She always loved "Christmas" in general, but what these movies meant to her was something else.

Many of you know that she passed away two summers ago after a long battle with cancer that had her in and out of the hospital. And every time she went in, one of the things that went with her was her collection of Hallmark Christmas DVDs.

I'll never forget one day when she was in the hospice at Liberty Hospital. It was late July, maybe two weeks before she passed, and she was really out of it. But at one point – it was just the two of us – she woke up just a bit and she motioned for me to come close so she could tell me something.

So I leaned over expecting her to ask for something like water or pain meds or something else.

She slowly raised her hand and pointed at the TV and said, "I want to watch *The Santa Suit*" (which was one of the DVDs she had brought with her).

So, I put in *The Santa Suit* DVD. And we watched it. In July. With her barely even conscious.

By the way, *The Santa Suit* is on Hallmark this afternoon at 2pm. Not that there's anything else you might want to watch later today.^{viii}

Why So Popular?

Anyway ... the fact that these movies are so successful ...

- In spite of their cheesiness
- In spite of their predictability
- In spite of their repetitiveness (I mean, they all wind up at a similar place in the end, right?)

... the fact that these movies are so successful is an indication that something much bigger is going on here.

There's a dynamic here which seems to be almost *transcendent*, meaning that ...

The way these movies affect us goes far beyond what the production itself would suggest ...

... which is why they keep making them and we keep watching them!

In fact, Michelle Vicary, executive vice president of programming and publicity for the Hallmark networks, was recently quoted as saying ...

“It’s almost our *obligation* to give people everything they want and need to celebrate this time of the year.”^{ix}

Now, I’m not a genius so I’m not the first person to notice this or to point it out. In fact, if you Google “Hallmark Christmas Movies” sometime, you’ll get a bunch of links to articles explaining the overwhelming popularity and obsession, even, with these movies.

For instance, one writer points out that ...

“Hallmark holiday films depict the rarest of all things, a woman-centered world ... an unapologetic soak in things that give women pleasure:

- o pretty houses
- o laughing children
- o warm communities
- o and the devoted attention of a man who bothers to groom himself.”^x

According to one behavioral scientist ...

“The human brain loves patterns and the predictability [of Hallmark Christmas movies] is cognitively rewarding.”

They offer comfort, she says, “by presenting life as simple and moralistic” which can serve as a much-needed break from the complexity of real-life.

Finally, one of the stars of many of these movies, Candace Cameron Bure (otherwise known as “DJ from Full House”) ...

... explains it like this:

“You just get tired of the bad news. You just want something that feels genuine, and heartwarming, and loving.”^{xi}

And I wouldn’t disagree with any of those assessments. I think they are all factors in the Christmas movie craze.

But I think there’s something even more significant going on here.

Specifically, I think the emotions raised by most of these movies actually point to something *beyond* the story itself.

What we feel when we watch them tells us something very deep about ourselves, which is why I included this topic in this series.

Three Christmas Stories

And to illustrate what I mean by that, I want to show you clips from three different movies that represent three typical plotlines that Hallmark repeats over and over in their Christmas movies.

Two of these movies, *A Princess for Christmas* (2011) and *The Christmas Secret* (2014) were actually in my mother's DVD collection. I wanted to use a third one from it called *Let It Snow* (2012), but the quality of the recording was too poor.

Fortunately, because the basic storyline of that movie shows up in about 20 other Hallmark movies, we can substitute *Return to Christmas Creek* (2018).

A Princess for Christmas

But let's start with *A Princess for Christmas* which begins in Buffalo, New York, where Jules Daly is struggling to single-handedly raise her niece and nephew in the wake of her sister and brother-in-law's death.

On one terrible day, because the economy is in the tank, she loses her job. And on that same day, because the kids are out-of-control, the nanny she has hired quits.

Later that evening, she receives a surprise visit from Edward Huntington's butler inviting her to bring his grandchildren to Castlebury which is a tiny country just this side of Lichtenstein.

It's a surprise because Huntington, who happens to be the Duke of Castlebury, has been estranged for many years after cutting off his deceased son, Charles, for marrying Jules' "non-royal" sister.

But now, the butler assures Jules, he is getting older and his heart has grown softer.

And Jules wants to believe him but she's not sure she should.

Let's watch.

Jules (crying): "We miss you sis."

Car stops in driveway.

And before you know it, Jules and the kids are charming the socks off Edward, his staff, and Ashton, his other son.

And, of course, because this is Hallmark, Ashton happens to be engaged to Arabella, a devious social climber who doesn't really love him.

And, of course, he begins to have feelings for Jules ... which becomes very apparent at the Christmas Eve ball.

Check it out.

Woman: "She's coming!"

Fades as they dance

When the dance ends, Jules realizes that she, too, is falling for Ashton. But he's engaged to Arabella, so she attempts to make a quick exit.

But then this happens.

Jules quickly walking out

Fade to black as they kiss (of course!)

Ashton, having seen the light and broken it off with Arabella, invites Jules and the kids to stay at Castlebury indefinitely.

She says "yes" and after enjoying a magical Christmas complete with a visit from Santa and fireworks, this happens a few months later.

Wedding party at front door of church

Fade to black as carriage rides away (of course!)

Now, doesn't that make you want to say "awwww"?

Let's all say it together, shall we? Awwww.

Alright, that's movie number one and if you were to summarize its main message I think it would be ...

"Rags can turn to riches."

- A commoner can win the heart of a royal.
- An unemployed dreamer from Buffalo can become a princess.
- And a dead-end situation can become a new beginning.

Rags can turn to riches.

The Christmas Secret

Ok, now let's look at *The Christmas Secret*.

In this movie, life is anything but easy for single mom, Christine Easley.

Because her ex is a deadbeat dad who won't pay child support, Christine has been forced to move to the small town of Wilsonville where she struggles to balance working with the task of caring for her kids.

Unfortunately, being a "mom first" means she is regularly late, which has put her job in jeopardy and will soon put custody of her kids in jeopardy as well.

One morning, as she is taking her kids to school, it all falls apart. As we watch, pay attention to what happens to her necklace.

Christine looking into car

Christine turns and walks away

And, of course, because this is a Hallmark movie we all know that, eventually, Christine and that guy, Jason (who she doesn't know and "just happens" to bump into), will end up together, right?

Right.

Turns out that Jason just happens to be the grandson of the woman Christine has just saved though he doesn't yet know what's happened. We'll get back to that in a minute.

As for Christine, she quickly finds a much better job with a much nicer boss at Betty's bakery across the street. As time goes on, she and Betty develop a relationship and begin talking about their lives.

Christine shares that she never knew her father – both he and her mother died when she was very young. And Betty opens up about her son, Dennis, whose pictures are all over the wall at the bakery.

Let's watch.

Christine: "So, tell me more about Dennis"

Betty: "I never got it."

Meanwhile, Jason is searching for the woman who saved his grandmother's life. At one point, he discovers that the woman's name is Christine.

However he doesn't know that Christine *is* Christine because of a mix-up that happened the first time he came into Betty's bakery and tried to strike up a friendship with her ... which did eventually happen not only with her but also with her kids.

Jason thinks her name is *Rosemary* ... until he finds out it's not.

Let's watch.

Christine: "So, I'm not Rosemary."

Fade as Christine smiles

And again, we have to all say "awwww." Right?

Here we go ... "awwww."

Now, Jason goes back to tell his grandmother that he has found the woman who saved her life. And Christine goes back to work and tells Betty what happened.

As we watch that scene, again pay attention to the locket – which Christine has recently recovered (through another set of coincidences we don't have time to explain).

Here we go.

Christine: "I can't believe everything that's happened ..."

Betty hugs Christine, fade to black

That's a tear-jerker.

And so is the conclusion of the movie where Betty and Christine and her kids and Jason and his grandparents all have a wonderful Christmas Eve together and remember the true meaning of Christmas.

So that's movie number two and if you were to summarize the main message, I think it would be ...

"Suffering isn't merely random; there can be purpose and meaning in it."

Christine had a lot of bad things happen to her that she didn't deserve.

But in the end, it all connected and allowed her and her kids to find a family and, most likely (though we don't see it), a husband in the process.

Return to Christmas Creek

Ok, let's quickly look at the final movie, *Return to Christmas Creek*.

Instead of traveling the world over the holidays (as is her custom), Amelia Hughes has returned to her small hometown of, you guessed it, Christmas Creek.

And, of course, because this is a Hallmark Christmas movie, she rekindles a relationship with her childhood

best friend Mike who, of course, has never left.

Everything is going well until Amelia's father, Dan, accidentally discovers that she *isn't* traveling but, is instead staying at the inn he used to run with his estranged brother Harry. The two have not spoken for almost 20 years because of a conflict that happened when Amelia was a child.

However, because they want to see her, Dan and his wife, Helena, come to the inn at Christmas Creek anyway where, as you might expect, things are still cold and awkward between the brothers.

Helena tries to smooth things over by preparing a Christmas dinner which, unfortunately, doesn't go so well.

Check it out.

Mom: "So, here is to our family ..."

Mom: "Amelia, honey, wait."

But she doesn't wait. Instead, she packs her bags to leave.

Remember what she said? "This is not my feud but I feel like I've been in the middle of it my entire life. I'm tired of it."

However, instead of leaving, Amelia has an epiphany and decides to call everyone together for one last try where she shares some of her thoughts on what Christmas means.

Here we go ...

Amelia: "It has nothing to do with gifts ..."

Bill: "I've never wanted anything more."

And, again, doesn't that make you want to say ... nah, we're not going to do that.

Now, if you were to summarize the main message of this particular movie, I think it would be ...

"Broken relationships can be restored."

A Deeper Meaning

Now, at this point, I know that some of you are thinking, "wow, this isn't much of a sermon. All this time and not even one Bible verse!"

And I do realize that and if that's your concern, I certainly understand it. Of course, if this is your church, you know that this isn't typical of how we do our messages.

But I'm doing it today and *I'm doing it intentionally* ... because *I want you to feel something* ... and then I'll give you a verse.

I want you to *feel* some of the emotion associated with what these movies (and the dozens of others with similar messages) are communicating.

So, let's put those messages up again so we can see all three of them together.

- "Rags can turn to riches."
- "Suffering isn't merely random; there can be purpose and meaning."
- "Broken relationships can be restored."

Look at that list and just ponder it for a moment

Let me ask you:

- Have you ever been in a position where you longed for those things to be true in real life?
- Where you longed for one or more of those to be true in *your* life or in the life of someone you love?

I've been there. And I'm sure you have, too.

In fact, I'd bet big money that more than a few in this room or watching online are there right now.

- You're longing for it to be true that rags can become riches.

You're longing for a world where someone will swoop in and invite you, like Jules (just as you are with no strings attached) to leave behind your financial or emotional or physical poverty and live on a higher plane of existence than you ever dreamed possible.

- Or you're longing right now for it to be true that what you suffer isn't merely random.

You're longing for a world where it's all connected somehow (like it was for Christine) which means there is a higher purpose to the pain you're going through or have gone through.

- Or you're longing for it to be true that broken relationships can be restored.

Like Amelia, you're longing for a world where people admit how they've sinned against one another and they forgive one another and they rebuild trust with one another ...

... maybe because you're tired of watching others feud others or because that's what you need

someone to do for you.

And because we all long for those things at some point and at some level, we keep watching these cheesy movies over and over and over. They hit us in the heart. They connect with our deepest longings which is why we are often moved to tears.

But where do these longings come from? Why do we feel them? Why are we moved by them?

Earlier I said that these emotions point to something beyond the story itself. They tell us something very deep about ourselves – about the human condition.

And here it is:

We were never intended to experience “rags” or suffering or broken relationships. We were made for something better. We were made for more.

And deep down, we know it.

That’s why we feel these longings. That’s why we’re moved when we see them fulfilled, even if it’s just in a silly movie.

The ancient Hebrews had a word that describes what we were made to experience. The word is “shalom” which means “fully flourishing.”

Now, as I said in a message several weeks ago, “flourishing” is not a word we use very often but it’s an awesome word because it describes the kind of life you want to have and I want to have and, in fact, the kind of life God wants us to have. It’s the kind of life we were made for.

- It means thriving
- It means growing
- It means prospering
- It means being at peace emotionally and relationally and spiritually
- It means being able to bless others because you are so blessed yourself.

And whenever we see someone go from “rags” or suffering or broken relationships to “shalom,” that moves us because we know deep in our soul *that’s what life is supposed to be like*. That’s what we were made for.

Of course, the reality is that shalom – or fully flourishing in all ways – is *not* our reality. Oh, we may taste fleeting moments of it personally or see it in someone else’s life or even in a movie.

So what are we to do?

Jesus of Nazareth once said – and by the way we only care about what He said because He predicted His own death and resurrection and then pulled it off, and when someone does that you ought to listen to what they say ...

Jesus of Nazareth once said ...

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;

In other words, there is a force in this world that puts us in rags (physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially). It causes us to suffer and breaks relationships. It's called *sin*.

However, Jesus says ...

I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:10 (NIV)

In other words, "I have come to fix that problem. I have come to restore everything that has been stolen, killed and destroyed by sin."

And He began that process in his death on the cross and in His resurrection from the dead and He will complete it when He returns one day.

"So, Rick are you saying that Jesus is can make our lives like a Hallmark Christmas movie?"

Eventually He will when He returns. One day all of us who trust in Him and follow Him are going to experience something like that final scene in *A Princess for Christmas* when Jesus, bridegroom receives His bride, the church.

Ultimately, Jesus *will* provide the "happily ever after" we long for because we were ultimately made for that kind of ending in Him.

But, until then, what Jesus will do (if you follow Him) is to make your life better by making you better at life. He'll make your life better by making you better at life.

What that means is that ...

- You'll experience moments of riches instead of rags in the form of a contentment that transcends your circumstances.
- You'll experience meaning and purpose in your suffering because God will use your suffering to mold you into the person you were made to be.
- And you'll experience healing in some of your broken relationships as you admit your faults and ask for forgiveness and do what it takes to restore trust.

Jesus will make your life better by making you better at life.

So, the invitation today is pretty simple: if you're a Christian stay close to Him and his people – the church – and continue to trust Him.

If you're not a Christian, the invitation to you is to test Him on this. You've tried everything else to fill the longing in your soul. Why not come and join us as we follow Him and see what happens?

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus is that he constantly invited people to follow him before they believed. And that's our invitation as well.

Conclusion

Well, there you go. Didn't know that there was anything more than just a feel good story in those silly movies, did you?

But there is. And as you go through the rest of this season, pay attention to those emotions and longings. And be thankful that they point you to something much deeper – the person you were meant to be and can be in Christ.

With that, let's stand for closing prayer.

<Prayer>

Closing Comment

Next week, we'll look at *Home Alone* – the first one. I hope you'll be here and that you'll bring someone with you who thinks church is boring and irrelevant.

As you leave today, if you're a guest please give your information card to an usher ... if this is your church, you can drop your offering in the basket.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/14/16752012/hallmark-christmas-movies-explained>

ⁱⁱ <https://ew.com/tv/2017/12/21/james-franco-snl-hallmark-christmas-movies/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/movies/christmas-movies-television.html>

^{iv} USA > 18 yrs pop is 206M according to <https://www.infoplease.com/us/comprehensive-census-data-state/demographic-statistics-342>

^v <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/appetite-christmas-movies-hasnt-peaked-1260336>

^{vi} <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/appetite-christmas-movies-hasnt-peaked-1260336>

^{vii} <https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/g29238/lifetime-christmas-movies-ranked/>

^{viii} I'm referring to the KC Chiefs playing the NE Patriots which is a really big deal for many of us.

^{ix} <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/movies/christmas-movies-television.html>

^x <https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201812/unlikely-antidote-male-centered-world-hallmark-movies-31576>

^{xi} <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-hallmark-channel-christmas-movies-20171207-story.html>