

Christmas At The Movie
The Polar Express

December 1, 2019

Introduction

Great Job Price Horn on that Christmas movie trailer.

How many of you when you were growing up had parents who would put out milk and cookies for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve? We did. I remember it like it was yesterday. In the Thomason house, Christmas Eve was

a big deal when I was growing up because we would go to a midnight candlelight service and then my sisters and I would come home tired and ready to fall asleep with "visions of sugarplums dancing in our wee little heads". Right before we would head upstairs to bed, my Dad would put out some milk and a couple of cookies for Santa. I was always so surprised the next morning to see that empty glass of milk and some cookie crumbs laying on the kitchen table. For years, waking up to the mysterious disappearance of milk and cookies was one of my fondest memories on Christmas day.

Then something happened. I do not remember when exactly but slowly, almost imperceptibly, my childhood excitement

surrounding Santa Claus began to fade. My starry - eyed wonderment gradually turned into a doubting skepticism. What was the truth about Santa? Where did he live? How did he get all those presents on his sleigh? How did he know my address? Most of all, how did he squeeze down the chimney or get into houses that had no chimneys?

If you've seen today's movie,

Polar Express,

you know what it's about: one young boy's struggle with belief. If there ever was a Christmas movie filled with metaphors about the struggle to believe, it is this one. We'll talk more about that in a bit, but first ...

Why Movies?

For some of you, “movies in church” might be a new experience, so I want to explain why we’re doing it. This is not our typical approach but we believe it’s a worthy departure from normal for two reasons:

1. Everyone loves a good story.

And a movie – if it’s any good – is good at telling a story. It grabs our attention and engages us in a way that opens us up to new thoughts and feelings.

2. Jesus was great at telling stories that opened people up to new thoughts and feelings.

Whenever large crowds gathered around him, He would tell an engaging story or a parable using that familiar imagery to help people understand and feel in a new and fresh way some truth about God ... or themselves ... or the world in which we live.

That's what we're trying to do in this Christmas at the Movies series – to use the familiar imagery of “holiday classics” to engage you and then lead you to understand and even feel spiritual truth in a new and fresh way.

Before we begin, I want to say a special thanks to Ashley Wooldridge, pastor of Christ Church of the Valley in Phoenix Arizona for his creative ideas associated with this movie.

With that's said, let's get started!

What you just saw was the opening scene of the movie where we are introduced to the main character...a young boy who is entering adolescence and he is dripping with skepticism about everything he believes about Christmas. And just to assure himself that his skepticism is justified, he pulls out his world book encyclopedia and reminds himself that the north pole is devoid of life.

I'm curious – how many of you have seen this movie? One of the amazing things about this movie is that there are so many biblical parallels running throughout it. As a matter of fact, the director Robert Zemeckis, when we was asked about all of the biblical parallels he just winked and said:

So what I want to do today is pull out some of those biblical parallels in the movie, but what I want you to know right up front, is that

This movie dives into what it means to believe. But not only that, it also explores the idea of what hinders us from believing in

someone or something. So that's what I want to talk about today.

Now let me ask you, "Have you ever questioned your belief in God? Is He real? Is He good? Does He even care about what happens to us?"

For me personally, there were probably two times when I had to face directly my belief (or rather disbelief) in God. The first one was when I was on a high school church youth group float trip in southern Missouri. I remember really looking forward to going on this trip and floating down the Jacks Fork River. Now the other part of this trip consisted of going back to a local church in Eminence, MO where we had to sleep as a

group because we couldn't afford a hotel. At this church we were told by the pastor that we had to "spend time alone with God". Since I didn't really believe in God, I was completely resistant to the idea. I came for a float trip, not some religious experience. My whole trip turned upside down when the pastor threatened to send me home on the nearest bus because I got so belligerent about participating in the religious activities. Long story short, my struggles with belief made for a miserable trip.

The second encounter with religion was during my first year in college. I was an athlete on scholarship at the time where my college life consisted primarily of going to class, playing sports, partying and hanging

out with guys and gals in the dorm. I remember not long after I arrived there, I met Norma and she invited me to attend a campus bible study with her and I said, "No way. I keep my religion to myself." But The REAL truth at that time was that I HAD NO religion. I didn't believe in God or Jesus and anything else so I certainly wasn't interested in connecting with other people who were seeking a religious experience.

What about you? What's your story when it comes to belief in God? Some of your stories about doubt and unbelief are playing out right now in this very room.

Now my guess is that some of you don't even believe in Christmas anymore.

Sure you believe a lot of things about
Christmas.

You believe in...

CHRISTMAS Day

CHRISTMAS Cards

CHRISTMAS Gifts

CHRISTMAS Parties

CHRISTMAS Lights

CHRISTMAS Eggnog

But what I want to ask you is this:

do you still believe in CHRIST -mas?

The first six letters of that word. CHRIST –
mas...which is what it was all meant to be
about.

That God loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,

that whoever BELIEVES in him shall not
perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

That's the real story of Christmas. But the
question for some of us here today is "do we
even believe in that?"

Let's face it. We live in a culture that is
increasingly more skeptical about God. This
message of unbelief has permeated our
culture. Nowadays, during Christmas, you

see more and more billboards popping up, like this one from the American Atheists Association.

Is Jesus a fairy tale? Is Christmas a fairy tale? For a lot of people, nowadays he is. According to research from the Barna research group, 92% of people in the US believe that Jesus was a real person who walked this earth but only 52% believe that Jesus was God's son... which is the central message of Christmas.

We see this same parallel theme in *The Polar Express*. Like I said earlier, this young boy is struggling with belief and is dripping with skepticism about Santa Claus. Just as

soon as he falls asleep, something happens that will start him on a journey which will change his life forever. Watch!

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“Are you coming or not?” the conductor asked the young boy. You see, the whole purpose of this train was to help kids who didn’t believe in Santa. What’s interesting is that all the other kids on the train had their own reasons why they didn’t believe, but every kid’s doubts were a little bit different.

Now what I want to do today is look at two of the main characters in the movie and examine why it is that they didn’t believe. The two kids I want to highlight are

representatives of two kinds of unbelief. So let's look at the first one.

As you watch this next clip, see if you can figure out what the obstacle is to the young boy's belief.

What is the boy's issue with believing in Santa Claus? It's an intellectual problem. He can't intellectually make sense of Santa. He meets this hobo character on the train who has a dialog with the boy about his struggles. "Seeing is believing. Right? How could you believe in something you can't

see? That's crazy! Nobody wants to be conned or duped."

This is probably one of the main things people struggle with today when it comes to believing in God. They have intellectual problems. We could re-phrase this struggle in a more personal way:

Struggle #1: Faith in God might make me look foolish.

I think this is a real issue for people who don't believe in God. One of their biggest issues is they don't want to look foolish...they don't want to look dumb!

Several years ago when we lived in Overland Park, my next door neighbor Bob struggled with this issue. Bob was a great friend and a great guy. Every morning, about 530am, we would get up and jog for about 2 miles and Bob would ask me question after question about my belief in God. You see Bob was an atheist. When I think back over his concerns about God, most of them were intellectual in nature. Like, "How can you be sure? How can you believe in a God that you cannot see?" I understood his intellectual struggles and did the best that I could to explain how I personally worked through those kinds of questions myself.

The young boy in the movie faced a similar struggle. In this next clip, listen as he

expresses his concerns to the girl and the train conductor. Pay special close attention to how the conductor addresses the boy's doubts.

I love the quote at the end:

Sometimes, the most REAL things in the world are the things we cannot see.

Now I know there are some people who say that they have to see God and prove He is real before they will believe in him. But can I ask you something? Are you or someone you know putting a requirement on God that you don't require in other areas of your life? Can I give you a real life example?

Almost everyone in this world these days owns one of these cell phones. How do you know it's real? Well duh I can see it Ladell! No I'm asking how do you know it's a cell phone and not just a piece of plastic that LOOKs like a cellphone, you know, like the toys you can buy for your little kids? When you dial a number and press talk, do you actually SEE the cell phone signal leave the phone and go to the cell tower and then on to the person on the other end?

Have you ever seen a Wi-Fi signal connect with your phone? If you can't see that Wi-Fi signal, how do you know it's real? I've never met someone who said, "I can't see the

signal on this stupid phone. It's just a piece of junk."

How do you know it's real? That's simple. You see the effects of it when you press talk. Every time you press talk or send, it works. And each one of the presses on your phone is an act of faith in something you CANNOT see.

Same principle applies to our relationship with God. Do you know that belief in God always requires a step of faith...just like when you press send on that cell phone? It's faith because you don't see that cell signal and you don't see what's happening until someone answers on the other end. Nor do you understand it because 99% of us have no clue how the technology in our phones

really works when you lift the hood and look inside.

Do you know that you need to step out on faith in order to see God's work in your life? Just like the young boy in the movie. He took a "step of faith" to get on the Polar Express and begin a journey towards belief. Faith requires a tiny step out into the unknown.

Jesus said this in John 7:17:

Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.

John 7:17

Jesus was saying, if you want to understand THAT I AM WHO I SAY I AM and not some lunatic or liar, then you have to step out in step out on faith.

Another place in the bible it says the same thing. In Hebrews 11 it says this:

And without faith it is impossible to please God,

because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6

I love this quote from Martin Luther King Jr. He says:

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Now I know that there are still some of you here today who would say “faith” isn’t good enough for you. Some of you, like my neighbor Bob, have a lot of intellectual questions that need to be answered before you will believe in God. That’s a good thing. We are so glad you are here today. I was the same way before I became a Christian and I get where you are coming from.

One of Jesus’ closest followers, the apostle Thomas, was that kind of person. In fact, the phrase “you are being a doubting Thomas” originated with him. A doubting Thomas is a

skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience or evidence. He has to "see before he believes".

Thomas was this way after Jesus died.

Thomas told the rest of the disciples:

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

John 20:25

When Jesus appeared in person to the disciples the week after his resurrection, he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus didn't make fun of Thomas because of his "seeing is believing" mindset, but he did say to him later:

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

For those of you like Thomas, I need to say that there are books like "Case for Faith" or "Cold Case Christianity" and some of Rick's prior messages that may help you with the intellectual questions you have.

But here's the truth: even if I stood up here today or if I gave you a book that answered all of your intellectual questions about God, my experience is that's not what it normally

takes to get a person to a place where they now believe. It just doesn't happen that way normally.

I don't typically see someone come to church with a big check list of questions that are obstacles to belief and one by one they check off this list until they finally come and say, "I now believe in God." Nope that's not the way it normally happens.

What typically happens is this: People come to belief NOT because they have removed all of the obstacles or questions they are struggling with. They come to faith in God because their obstacles towards believing have "shrunk". As a pastor I still have unanswered questions about God. There are

STILL things about God and the bible that I don't completely understand...but this ONE THING I DO BELIEVE:

There is ONE event that occurred in history that changed everything... the resurrection of Jesus. And the followers of Jesus did exactly what any of us would do if we had seen a man come back from the dead: they talked about it to everyone they knew, and several years later they wrote about it. Upon this singular miraculous event rests the foundation of our Christianity.

Because of the resurrection, you and I can pray knowing God hears our prayers.

Because of the resurrection, you and I can live knowing there is life beyond this life.

Because of the resurrection, we can make sacrifices for God knowing our faithfulness matters.

And one more thing: we don't believe in the resurrection because the Bible says it happened. We believe in it because eyewitnesses and people who met eyewitnesses wrote about it.

The resurrection is why we can believe in God. I may not have all my intellectual questions answered but this one thing I believe: Jesus came back to life.

Obstacle #2: Pain and Disappointment

As I said when we started, I want to show how this movie illustrates two of the greatest

obstacles to belief. We just looked at the first obstacle: intellectual problems.

Let's look at the second one illustrated in this movie. That is the obstacle of...

Pain and disappointment.

Many people struggle with coming to a place of belief in God because of some kind of pain or disappointment in their life.

There is a sad little boy in the movie that represents this kind of struggle.

Here he is. We don't know his name because none of the kids in the movie are

given names. We don't know all the things that happened to this poor boy. But watch this clip and listen carefully to his reason for not believing in Christmas or Santa Claus.

Pain and disappointment must have been one of the reasons why he didn't believe. He just kept saying, "Things just don't work out for me."

For this reason, he struggled with belief. Maybe this is your story or the story of someone you know. You can't imagine why God would bring this amount of pain into your life if he was good. How could you believe in a God like that? Why did He allow this abuse or my divorce or the loss of

someone so soon in my life? People struggle all the time with severe pain and disappointment.

We don't have time to explore all the questions related to why God would allow this type of suffering in the world. But I want us to think about this: Why is it that the pain and disappointment in some people's lives draws them away from God and causes them not to believe BUT YET similar pain and disappointment in someone else's life draws them TO God like nothing else? How can both of those responses be true?

Here's the answer? I believe that...

Pain doesn't draw you away from God unless you allow it.

There are many reasons why pain drives people away from God but could one reason be that we, the church, aren't always there for people during their pain? One of the things that troubles me the most is when people in the midst of their pain say: "nobody was there for me. The church wasn't there for me."

Let's face it. We aren't perfect. We aren't able to be there for everyone but we need to be there for people. And I am NOT referring to just the pastoral staff here at NHCC. I'm referring to every member, every small group leader, every volunteer. As Rick said a

couple of weeks ago, the bible says we are all ministers. Not just the pastors.

When God's people are there in the pain and disappoint people are facing, God moves.

That was the story for this sad boy in the movie. What caused him to step across the line of faith was when the other kids on the train surround him and walked with him through some of his pain and disappointment in life.

I want to say this to those of you who are here today and struggling with some pain or big issues in life. I want to remind you right now that being here, TOGETHER, with other

people in this context, is exactly where you are supposed to be.

I know you have a lot of excuses as to why you shouldn't show up and why you should do things alone, but being with other followers of Jesus is exactly where God wants you to be. Maybe you are here today for me to remind you of that and tell you that.

So if you are going through pain and disappointment, let me share with you a word of encouragement from the bible.

The bible says this:

Come near to God and he'll come near to you. James 4:8

That is a promise. You might say, "But how do I come near to God? Where is God that I might come near Him?"

The answer to those questions is also in the bible.

For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them. Matthew 18: 20

Can I maybe phrase this in a different way?

It's in the presence of God's people that you experience God's peace.

I believe this with all my heart. Why?

Because I've experienced that personally

here at NHCC. People have been here for me during some of my deepest pain and darkest disappointments.

I got to thinking about all the objections people have to belief... if only there was a place where people with pain and disappointment could come and find peace, real healing and a sense of belonging so that they didn't feel alone. God designed just such a place. He called it the church. SO that's the second obstacle so beautifully illustrated in the movie. Pain and disappointment

Near the end of the movie, there's a dramatic scene where the main character, the young boy, finally comes to the end of his

struggles with Santa. Watch what happens to him that finally puts an end his struggle to believe.

Did you notice something? This reason the boy believed wasn't because he finally saw Santa, In fact if you noticed he couldn't see Santa in the crowd. It was him stepping out on faith and believing in that which he could NOT see that was the key. It was only then that he heard the bell.

Of all the people who have coming to saving faith at NHCC in the past year, the most important decision they ever made was to take the first step and come here. "They got on the train" so to speak. They decided to

seek God and begin their journey toward belief. Some of you are here today because you have done that. If that describes you, then you are right where God wants you to be. I want you to know that every movie in this series is geared towards helping you along your journey towards belief. Every week during this series we will try hard to help you understand more about God. Why? Because you were born to believe!

For the rest of us, we probably know some people who are wrestling with real questions about God. Does God exist? Is he real? Is he worthy of my faith and trust? This is the perfect time to invite those friends to NHCC because this movie series could be the beginning of a life changing experience for

them. Just like the conductor on the train said, "this could be their crucial year." So let's help them get started on their journey toward belief by inviting them to join us next week. Let's pray.