“It’s a Wonderful Life”

(Acts 20: 32-35 and Psalm 112: vs 1-9)

How many of you have seen It’s a Wonderful Life? How many have seen it more than once? It’s part of family Christmas traditions. It’s a popular Christmas movie referred to in other Christmas movies and TV shows. It’s often named one of the most inspiring films ever made, and it’s been a staple of Christmas TV programming from the 1970’s up to and including the next few weeks. It’s all over the place in the Christmas season.

Why has this movie stood the test of time? Why is it so significant to so many of us? Perhaps because it’s a Christmas story that reflects the Christmas story. It taps into something that we know deep down is true. It expresses the gospel message of Jesus-- that being it IS more blessed to give than to receive. That gospel message rings throughout our scripture readings for today. Psalm 112 declares that the righteous are merciful and full of compassion they lend generously and give freely to the poor. This Psalm also declares that the righteous manage their affairs with Justice and also that they give generously to those in need. And as Acts 20 recounts the Apostle Paul saying goodbye to his friends from Ephesus reminds them that he did not covet other people’s wealth but he worked with his own hands. Paul financed his ministry by working as a

tent maker to support the weak remembering the words of Jesus himself – it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Now in the film, whether he knows it or not, George Bailey is guided by that gospel message. As a young man growing up in the small town of Bedford Falls in the 1920s, George cannot wait to leave home and go out and make his fortune. He tells his father that he doesn't want to be cooped up in the shabby little office of the Bailey Building and Loan because he wants to do something big - something important – he wants to travel the world -he wants to build airfields and skyscrapers and bridges a mile long. That's not what happens. Time after time George is faced with a decision. Do what he wants to do or be there for the people in his life. Head off on his solo adventure or stay and help his community. Make money or build relationships. Time after time George stays home and helps others at his own expense. George gives up his dream of building big things in big cities to stay at the small building and loan in his small hometown of Bedford Falls so that there is at least one place in town building homes for families for families who otherwise couldn't afford their own place to live. When Mr. Potter criticizes George for giving a loan to Ernie the cab driver even though the bank turned him down George says that the loan is sound because he can vouch for his friend. And when Mr. Potter criticizes

George's late father Peter for running this business like a charity George defends his father because people were human beings to him.

George and Mary, his wife and the love of his life, give up their honeymoon trip to keep the building and loan afloat when there's a run on the banks. This is the 1930's. George says to his small investors "we'll get through this all right. We need to stick together. We need to have faith in each other." And then he and Mary loan out the $2000 they had planned for their honeymoon trip to help dozens of people weather the storm.

Just before he does so George glances at a portrait of his late father that's hanging just above a sign that reads "All we take with us is what we've given away." And George turns down several lucrative job offers to stay at the decidedly not lucrative building and loan One of those job offers comes from George and Mary's childhood friend Sam Wayne Wright who makes a fortune in plastics during World War II and who visits George and Mary as they are welcoming the Martini family into their new home in Bailey Park with gifts of salt and bread and wine. Another one of those job offers comes from Mr. Potter– a merciless businessman who doesn't seem to have any family or close friends and consistently enriches himself at the expense of others. He is frankly tightfisted against his neighbors in need. And he does covet other people's wealth and he does see the generosity of the Bailey's and it makes him angry.

He tries for years to close the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan so that all the people who are thriving in their own homes in Bailey Park will have to pay him excessive rents in Potter's Field. One of those job offers plays out essentially like a temptation scene. Mr. Potter offers George a job making 10 times the salary he's currently making. And the opportunity to live in the nicest house in town and maybe even travel to New York on business trips or even Europe. All the things George dreamt of as a kid. But George clearly wrestling with his conscience turns him down.

Years later, on Christmas Eve, when George's Uncle Billy loses $8,000 in the bank which Potter finds and keeps and doesn't tell anyone, George goes to Potter desperate for a loan with his only equity $500 in a $15,000 life insurance policy and it's Potter who suggests to George that he's worth more dead than alive. It's here at the lowers point in his life, sitting drunk in a bar wondering if all that he gave up truly worth it. Discouraged and thinking about throwing his life away that George Baily prays "Father in heaven, show me the way." You know Jimmy Stewart shared with reporters that those tears are real when he was overwhelmed with what that prayer was expressing.

And it's not just George Bailey who's praying. Mary makes some calls and its people all over town who are praying for George Bailey – all those people he helped over all those years. All the people whom he loves and who love him.

All the people with whom he shared his life - his wife, his kids, his mother, Mr. Gower the pharmacist and the Martini's in their own home and Ernie the cab driver. It's the prayers of these people that in the beginning of the film that open the movie It's a Wonderful Life. And God answers though not in the way that we and clearly George might expect. The Angel Second Class Clarence Oddbody is the self-described answer to George's prayer. His guardian angel who gives George a great gift. Clarence shows George what the world would be like without him. The difference that he's made in so many people's lives. The awful hole he would leave if he had never been born. It takes divine intervention for George Bailey to realize that he did do something big – something important in being merciful and compassionate. In helping to support the weak. In giving generously to those in need. That his life has meaning and significance and value beyond measure - that he really has a Wonderful Life after all!

The same is true for you. The gift that George Bailey receives in this film is a gift that this film can give to us. It expresses authentic spiritual truth. It makes clear what is sometimes unclear in this broken world. Life is the greatest gift given to us by the Lord God. Your life – my life – every life has significance meaning and value beyond measure and life is lived most fully in relationships with our family and friends in community. And Jesus is the divine intervention

who makes this known to us. Jesus, Emmanuel, God With Us and for us forever. Jesus came in the flesh, made his home with us – lived among us. A baby born to Mary. A boy who grew up in a small town in a poor family. A teacher who showed us the way of life. The savior who suffered and died on the cross. The Lord who rose again to life and gives us life now and forever. Jesus came that we might have life and life abundant. Jesus shows us that the fullness of life is lived in giving and receiving love. Jesus teaches us, as George Bailey learns, that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Life consists in the abundance of God. The good gifts that the Lord gives to us – the good gifts that we share with each other. As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, "do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth." They don't last. Store up for yourselves treasurers in heaven. Or as Harry says in his toast at the end of the film after George Bailey has embraced his life and joyfully reunited with his family and friends, "to my big brother, George, the richest man in town."

In this and every season may you embrace the great gift that is your life in Jesus Christ. May you be there for your family and friends and your community knowing that the Lord God is always there for you. May you be merciful and compassionate and help to support the weak and give generously to those in need knowing that it is more blessed to give than to receive. May you live the

gospel message. All we take with us is what we give away. That being there for our community does make us the richest person in town. That it really is a wonderful life.

Amen

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, Thank You for reminding us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Give us generous hearts, willing hands, and a spirit of love that seeks to bless others. Help us give freely - not just of our money, but also of our time, kindness, compassion, and encouragement. May we never give just to receive recognition, but out of genuine love for You and others. Let our lives be a blessing to those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.