

“O Little Town of Bedford Falls”

Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon Series: It's a Wonderful Life Week 3. Your Life Has Purpose

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The Woodside Church

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One of the most famous small towns in America doesn't even exist. Bedford Falls, the hometown of George Bailey and the setting of *It's a Wonderful Life* was created out of nothing. It took two months to build the quaint little hamlet on four acres of a studio ranch in California. One of the most elaborate sets ever built, Bedford Falls featured 75 stores and buildings, 20 fully-grown oak trees, factories, a subdivision and a Main Street as long as three football fields.

A real town claims to be the inspiration for George's hometown – Seneca Falls, New York. They host an annual “It's a Wonderful Life” Festival. This year Katherine Grimes, who plays Zuzu in the movie, will make an appearance.

One scene in the movie, however, was shot on location: the famous dance in the gym. The retractable floor with a pool beneath is located in the Beverley Hills High School. It's called the Swim Gym. And the jilted boyfriend who activates the floor to get revenge on George for stealing Mary is none other than Carl Switzer – better known to the world by his more famous role: Alfalfa from the Little Rascals.

As beautiful as Bedford Falls is, George's one driving desire is to get out of there. Go around the world, go to college, go anywhere besides Bedford Falls. It's an urge many Americans were feeling at that time. *It's a Wonderful Life* debuted right after World War II – a time when Americans were on the move. Many left small towns and farms and took jobs near major cities. Thousands moved into a new thing called a “suburb” or “subdivision” like Levittown which was built at that time.

Many of us are moved to move from our hometown. Why? Lots of reasons. Chief among them is the desire to find the purpose of my life. I go off to college, move to a new town, state or country, meet new people, find a new job so I can discover why I am here, what I am supposed to do, what difference can I make, what mark will I leave on this world, what they will say at my funeral.

George Bailey knows his purpose. He wants to build great skyscrapers hundreds of stories high. He feels he is put on this earth to construct great monuments probably so people will remember him long after he's gone. If we are honest, there are times we are driven by the dream of accomplishing great things. We are convinced our purpose is to break school records, build an impressive resume, write an award winning book, compose a song everyone is singing, close a lucrative deal, ascend to the highest levels of corporate leadership. Maybe we simply live for admiration, affirmation, appreciation, adoration, atta-boys. Those things are fine. Nothing sinful about any of it. Trouble is they just don't do what we hope they will. Many whose dreams come true say it feels as empty as a dream. Others call success and fame a nightmare. Most of us face disappointment

when our dreams don't come true and discouragement when we settle for what seems like a dull and ordinary life that's anything but wonderful.

George Bailey never leaves Bedford Falls. He reaches such a low point of disappointment and discouragement he wishes he'd never been born. And that's how Clarence, his guardian angel, reveals George's true purpose. Clarence shows him a vision of a world without George Bailey. His beloved hometown Bedford Falls is transformed into a corrupt, tawdry, dark place called Pottersville.

George: Why am I seeing all these strange things?

Clarence: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were not born.

George: Then if I wasn't born, who am I?

Clarence: You're nobody. You have no identity.

George: What do you mean, no identity? My name's George Bailey.

Clarence: There is no George Bailey. You have no papers, no cards, no driver's license, no 4-F card, no insurance policy . . . (he says these things as George searches for them. George looks in his watch pocket). They're not there, either.

George: What?

Clarence: Zuzu's petals. (George feverishly continues to turn his pockets inside out.) You've been given a great gift, George. A chance to see what the world would be like without you.

George wasn't there to stop the druggist Mr. Gower from accidentally poisoning a child. He didn't make loans and build homes for the struggling neighbors in town. He didn't stop Mr. Potter from taking over the town and literally remaking it in his image. He couldn't keep his Uncle Billy from descending into madness. George didn't save his brother Harry so he could save hundreds of lives during World War II. And he didn't marry Mary and, with her, give life to their four children.

That's one of the great Ah-Ha! moments of this movie. The very thing George so wants to leave – the little town of Bedford Falls – turns out to be his true purpose in life. Through hundreds of quiet, simple, sacrifices over a lifetime, George makes it a community of kindness, opportunity, hope and friendship, a hometown where people help each other, pray for each other, love each other. George discovers his purpose is not building hundred story monuments to his ego. His purpose in life is helping, loving and saving his family and friends.

Joseph may have wondered why he was put on this earth. After all, he left his hometown of Bethlehem to seek his fortune up north. Though he is descended from a long line of kings going all the way back to the great David, he is not a king, a priest or a prophet. He carries a saw not a sword, a hammer not a scepter. He is a carpenter, a builder, a blue collar laborer. Joseph never sent army formations into battle. He builds on foundations and battles with stones and timbers. His palace is a one room house and a carpenter shop he builds with his own hands in the tiny village of Nazareth. Maybe he has dreams like George Bailey of building great cities in the Holy Land. Like George Bailey, his greatest treasure is a young maiden named Mary. He is just an ordinary, average Joe. A good man, an honest man, a man who follows all God's ways. Soon, his

devotion to God will be hammered, stretched and tested. A war is about to erupt between his head and his heart.

“You heard me,” she said, “I’m pregnant.” It’s no joke. Mary would not play such a cruel trick on her beloved. When Joseph recovers enough composure he asks the dreaded question. “And who’s the father?” She replies with one word: “God.” It still sounds ridiculous to Mary. She pauses to let the unbelievable news sink in to Joseph and then adds, “An angel named Gabriel told me the Holy Spirit would bring it all about. The Child will be the Son of David and the Son of God. He will be the Messiah, the King we have so long awaited. He will reign forever. His kingdom will never end.”

Joseph runs from the house. He cannot bear to hear such lies any longer. Kings are born to queens in palaces, not to peasant girls in one room hovels. They are the sons of kings, not carpenters. One thing is clear. Mary has sinned. She broke God’s commandments and broke Joseph’s heart. Now what should he do? Marry this adulteress? Condone her sin? His neighbors will think he could not wait until their wedding night. Should he risk the condemnation of his village? Or should he expose Mary’s sin. He knows the verdict of that trial: this poor fallen girl would fall under a deadly shower of stones. No, despite her faithlessness, he cannot send her to her death. He still loves her. Since he can neither condone nor condemn what she did, he resolves to quietly break their engagement. He will wash his hands of the whole affair. Perhaps both of them can quickly leave town. Like George Bailey he wants to run away.

But God has a purpose for this average Joe. In his dreams that night, the angel lays out a different plan.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

Now we don’t know what Joseph saw in that dream. But let’s be like director Frank Capra for a minute. Imagine for one brief instant that Joseph is allowed to glimpse all the multitudes, in every nation, in every age, in China, Peru, Kenya, Norway, Australia, Russian and America, the endless sea of faces who will not be saved from their sins if Mary’s Child is never born. Perhaps he is even able to look down the long years, across the vast miles and see your face. So the decision is clear. Will Joseph give in to his fears and run? Or will he accept God’s mission, will he make sacrifices and do his part to bring Jesus into the world? Will he fulfill his true purpose? Will this average, ordinary Joe risk his life and reputation so Jesus can give His life for you and me?

God gives a great purpose to you and me – the same purpose He gave George Bailey and Joseph – to help, love and save people. And the highest and greatest way we can fulfill that purpose is to introduce them to Jesus – the One who can help, love and save them now and forever. What makes people afraid to share their faith, to bring Jesus to others? Leighton Ford lists the following fears:

- I am afraid I might do more harm than good.
- I don't know what to say.
- I may not be able to give snappy answers to tricky questions.
- I may seem bigoted.
- I may invade someone's privacy.
- I am afraid I might fail.
- I am afraid I might be a hypocrite.

The most common fear of all, however, is the fear of being rejected.¹ We worry about how others will react to us. Now of course there are inappropriate ways to share the Good News. Pastor William Sangster had an eccentric member of his church who tried to be a zealous Christian. While working as a barber the man lathered up a customer for a shave, came at him with the razor and asked, "Are you prepared to meet your God?" The frightened man jumped out of the chair and fled the shop with lather on his face!² Obviously there are better ways to tell the Good News about Jesus.

Our goal is simple: to help people welcome Jesus Christ into their hearts. Joseph and Mary welcomed Jesus into their lives. Can we do any less? According to Stuart Briscoe, there are four steps to this goal.

1. **Care:** Show concern for a person and be concerned about setting a good example.
2. **Dare:** it takes courage to witness – courage if the person is a stranger to you and even more if the person is a close friend or relative.
3. **Share:** If you want to make a lasting impression, share yourself with the person. Get involved in his interests, get your shoulder under her burdens. Then share how Jesus can help.
4. **Prayer:** Don't forget the power of prayer and the Holy Spirit to prepare someone's heart for the Good News.³

The choice for Joseph is clear. Either give into his fears or make it possible for Jesus to save the world. He is just an average Joe. Yet his mission is greater than all the great Kings who come before him. Joseph briefly walks onto the stage of the Bible, fulfills his mission and then disappears. The last time we see him is when Jesus is about twelve years old. Most likely, he dies long before Jesus begins His ministry. He never lives to see the fulfillment of his purpose. He is just an average Joe. But that's all it takes.

Now you and I are just plain simple folks. But we have a similar mission: to bring Jesus into the lives of our family, friends and coworkers. Will you give into your fears or will you open the way for Jesus to save them? All it takes is an invitation from you to worship. You can invite them to Christmas Eve services. You can be in the parking lot to help them find a space. You can be a greeter on Christmas Eve who helps them feel at home. This Christmas you can give the greatest gift of all – the abundant, eternal life of Jesus.

¹ Leighton Ford, *Good News is for Sharing*, p. 25-7.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching & Preachers*, p. 215.

³ Adapted from Stuart Briscoe, *Getting Into God*, p. 92.

Until the end of the movie, George Bailey had no idea all the neighbors he helped in the little town of Bedford Falls.

I had the opportunity to witness God working through what appear to be chance and coincidental connections. This month a man I've never met named Mike came to our lobby and asked to see me. He wanted to thank me and you the people of Woodside.

The story begins with a conversation in a coffee shop. Mike leads an organization called The Mid-Atlantic Blind Golf Association. The program teaches young people who are blind or sight-impaired to play golf. There was just one problem. Mike needed a place to store all the Association's clubs and equipment. While sharing this with a friend at the coffee shop, he was gently interrupted by a stranger. It was none other than Sue Rushing who leads A Special Way Ministry at Woodside. After overhearing the conversation, Sue offered to reach out to her network of friends and see if anyone had the space to store the clubs. Mike thanked her but probably thought that would be the end of it.

I was one of the friends Sue emailed. As you may be aware, the closets at Woodside are packed to the ceiling. I was about to email Sue and politely decline the offer when a thought occurred to me. Dave Kovalick loves golf, loves helping people, and has a warehouse he generously allowed us to use when the Parkland church campus launched. I emailed Dave and he immediately responded with a strong affirmative. I was happy to see this problem solved and I thought that was the end of the story.

Then Mike came to visit me and he told me something I didn't know. Apparently he and Dave were not able to connect before Thanksgiving because Mike had to take his wife to the emergency room at St. Mary's. Mike gave me permission to tell the story. Here is an email he sent to Sue Rushing.

Tuesday night before Thanksgiving my wife got a call from her doctor telling her to go to the emergency room immediately. The next day we anticipated her surgery. At the last minute they cancelled her surgery. They told us Penn was best equipped to do that type of complicated surgery. So the next day they sent us home and told us to call Penn ourselves.

It was Thanksgiving weekend and so no business was being done. Come Monday we started calling to find a doctor we knew with a Penn connection. On Tuesday I found myself with a few minutes of time and decided to call Dave as I had stopped emailing or calling him when my wife was hospitalized. In talking about golf clubs and storage he asked when I could come by and meet the warehouse manager and I said, "I would like to do it but we are struggling trying to get my wife into Penn with the right surgeon." He says... "I can help you with that!"

Dave is a board member at Penn Medicine. He knew who to contact. So, not only did you help me find a place to store my golf clubs (which I am grateful for) but you also helped me find a surgeon for my wife which I am even more grateful for! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

I might never know why you or Dave offered to help a stranger but I will always be grateful for your help. You have both reminded me that there are good people who will offer to do the right thing for someone with no real connection or reason, just because it's the right thing to do. Thank you.

This week, Mike sent this email to me:

I spent some time considering what I could do for Sue and Dave to show them my thanks and decided that the best thing I could do was to thank them and let them know of my gratitude and then to go out and help strangers I come across who I can positively affect in some way in much the same way they helped us.
Thank you again, Mike