

The other night, for the umpteenth time, they were showing “It’s a Wonderful Life” on television. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: they don’t make ‘em like this anymore. It’s hard to imagine a movie like this today, where old-fashioned virtues like sacrifice and love of neighbor and a sense of duty and loyalty trump personal ambition and a desire for material gain

There’s something else, too: the movie’s strong, almost insistent undercurrent of faith. It unfolds in an America where religion and simple piety were taken for granted. I was moved once more to see the scene where the Martini family moves into a new house, bought with a low-cost loan financed by George Bailey, the Jimmy Stewart character. And what do these humble Italian immigrants do? Before they enter the house, they pause and bless themselves, making the sign of the cross in a silent prayer of gratitude. Frank Capra, the director, was himself an Italian immigrant and Catholic. This was his world. He’d probably witnessed that scene countless times in his own life. He showed that moment in this movie without condescension or cynicism. It seems utterly natural and normal.

Nearly 70 years after its release, “It’s a Wonderful Life” is rightfully considered a classic. But, to me, it is more than a Christmas movie. It is an Advent movie. It is a movie about expectations and dreams. It’s a movie about waiting for a future that seems never to come—and it’s a story about finding, in the end, redemption.

Significantly— as we draw closer to Christmas— it reminds us of how one life can make a difference in the world.

At this particular moment, though, I'd like to suggest that it offers us another way of looking at this Sunday's gospel.

When I was watching it the other night, I noticed something that had escaped me the other times I'd seen it. Moments into the movie, after the opening credits, the first name you hear mentioned is George Bailey.

But the second name you hear is St. Joseph.

His name is invoked in a prayer. And from that moment on, "It's a Wonderful Life" becomes, like this gospel we just heard, the story of a "righteous man" and an angel.

It becomes a parable of sacrifice and self-denial, of generosity and love—the story of a man who spends his life providing for others, forsaking whatever dreams he might have had so that he can fulfill some greater dream, some greater call.

When you think about it, this isn't that different from the story of the righteous man in today's gospel, St. Joseph.

Reflecting on all this over the last couple days, I wondered if St. Joseph ever knew, like George Bailey, the frustrations, and anger, and temptations of life.

And I think he probably did.

He was human. He was flawed. He was probably prone to doubt, and anger, and selfishness, and sin—just like all of us. He may have spent a lot of his time praying for patience, or a job, or good health—just as we all do. He may well have known fear and even despair.

But —more importantly—St. Joseph also knew trust. And though he never uttered a word in the gospels, he spoke eloquently with his actions.

St. Joseph listened and he responded to what he heard. He dared to believe the unbelievable and surrender his doubt to God, taking to heart the message of an angel.

And not just any message. This particular message is considered so critical to the gospels that the great scripture scholar Raymond Brown has referred to this passage as “the other annunciation.”

Like Mary at the **FIRST** annunciation, Joseph took a leap of faith, echoing Mary’s own Magnificat: “I am the servant of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.” And as a result of this moment, a family was formed—a Holy Family. God’s great plan could be fulfilled.

Isn’t it that way with all of us?

God’s work can only be accomplished; his will can only be fulfilled, when we give our consent, when we say YES!. We are called, like Joseph, to cooperate with God—and to collaborate with him in his plan.

We are called to fulfill a dream: God’s dream for us.

Doing that often demands the hardest thing many of us can muster: **trust.**

But all we need to do is turn our eyes toward the manger to be reminded of what that kind of trust can accomplish.

All we need is to raise our eyes toward the consecrated host to realize, with a humbling clarity, what can come from dreaming, and listening, and responding to the will of God.

Do we do that? Can we even try?

These final hours of Advent offer us an opportunity to make ourselves fully ready for God to enter our world. But Advent also asks us to do something more than prepare the way of the Lord. It asks us to do what St. Joseph did: to prepare ourselves for God's will for our lives.

Pray that we learn from Joseph's example. Seize these days. Make them matter. Prepare. Get to confession. Find time for quiet reflection away from the noise and the distractions and the stress of the season. Listen. And trust.

We need to make ourselves ready for Christ—the life that came into the world and gave new life to all of us!

If we had any doubts, the approach of Christmas reminds us: *that* truly IS a wonderful life—the most wonderful, in fact, of all.