

INSOMNIACS FOR JESUS

Every year there are several new movies released with Christmas related themes. They range from the sublime, like last year's *The Nativity*, to the ridiculous, take this year's *Fred Claus*, for example.

The good ones, though, endure. They are shown on television year after year. People own them on videotape or DVD. And for some folks Christmas just wouldn't be complete without watching Jimmy Stewart's *It's a Wonderful Life*, or Alistair Sims version of *A Christmas Carol*.

A more recent movie that is on some must see lists in December is the 1983 film *A Christmas Story*. Set in the forties in a Midwestern town, *A Christmas Story* recounts the tale of nine-year-old Ralphie Parker as he attempts to convince his parents, his teacher and even Santa himself, that he should be given a Red Ryder Carbine Action Model Air Rifle for Christmas. The adults all try to convince him that it's too dangerous; he might shoot his eyes out. I'll leave it for you to rent the DVD and find out how it all ends.

But I will tell you that part of what makes the movie so endearing are all the authentic bit of life from the forties: *Look* magazine, candy root beer barrels and kids challenging each other with words like "I super triple dog dare you!" As Roger Ebert wrote in his review, "In a poignant way, *A Christmas Story* records a world that no longer quite exists in America." (Chicago *Sun Times*, 12-15-83)

Another of those authentic touches was Ovaltine. If you're of a certain age you remember it is a chocolate drink mix. It was promoted by none other than Little Orphan Annie.

To encourage sales, Ovaltine offered a Little Orphan Annie secret decoder ring as a premium if you saved up and sent in a certain number of proofs-of-purchase. The ring could be used to decipher secret messages sent out during Annie's radio program.

In the movie, Ralphie gets his ring, and works diligently to decipher the code, twisting and turning the dial, until he finally comes up with the secret message.

And what is the secret message? What words of wisdom have been encrypted and sent over the airwaves? "Be sure to drink your Ovaltine."

Our scripture reading this morning is an example of what's called apocalyptic literature, teachings about the future that are filled with metaphor and symbolism. Often such teachings seem to require a secret decoder ring to figure them out.

In this case Jesus is speaking. Our passage comes from a long discourse about signs and events that will precede the second coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the earth. Jesus uses terms and images that seem rather arcane, and at times indecipherable.

At the end of it all, he offers these words about the timing of the Messiah's return: "But about that day and hour," he says, "No one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36)

Put simply: only God knows the future. Only God knows when Jesus will show up again. Twist and turn your secret decoder ring all you want—in the end, you'll not be able to figure it out!

So what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to prepare for such a momentous occasion? Do we just drink our Ovaltine and go about our lives as if nothing was in the offing? Is it all just business as usual?

Not exactly, says Jesus. While we must continue to live in the here and now, while we must work in the fields and grind the grain, we must do so in a new way—a different way. It is not so much about what we do, as how we do it. For we must be alert. We must be paying attention. We must be on the lookout for the coming one. We must live in hope. "Keep awake . . ." says Jesus, "be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (24:42a; 44b)

Jesus, of course, lived and taught two thousand years ago. And those in his day firmly believed he was going to literally return to earth, probably in their own lifetimes. But that didn't happen—at least not in the way they imagined.

And it hasn't happened since. There have always been those who have insisted its' going to happen very soon. Jesus they say, is going to come swooping down from the skies on a white stallion surrounded by an army of angels. He's going to wipe out the forces of evil and establish a perfect government here on earth.

And who's to say? Maybe that will happen. But I think this passage, and other passages like it, can also be understood to mean that in and through the loving actions of others, Jesus does show up. Everyday. In the everyday. While we work in the fields, while we grind the meal, while we ride the train to work, while we take the kids to school, while we play tag on the playground. Jesus shows up any time someone reaches out in love. Our task is to stay awake! To be alert! To watch and wait for his appearance.

One of the services we offer as part of our Thanksgiving Feast is home-delivery of meals to those who are shut in. One of our members takes care of her elderly parents. They ordered

four meals for delivery on Thanksgiving—two for her parents, one for the daughter and one for a caregiver who was working that day. The meals were sent out, but the driver took longer than expected. The daughter called, wondering if they'd been forgotten. "No," she was told, "the meals were sent out a while ago. But we'll send some more, just in case."

Shortly after that the first driver showed up, and then a bit later, the second. The family ended up with nine meals! "We were stuffed, wrote the daughter in a note she sent me this week, "our freezer was stuffed. . . .We were extremely blessed and touched by the commitment of the crew."

Friends, it was love that got those volunteers up early on Thanksgiving. Love that prompted them to leave the comfort of their own homes to help out others. And so Jesus showed up. Here in Hoskins Hall, and in that home in Fairfield—not once, but twice. A second coming, if you will!

I once had a friend who kept a very neat and tidy house. Everything was perfectly placed. It was the sort of house that dared have a white carpet and a white sofa in a living room that was rarely used for fear of its getting dirty.

One day a youngster was visiting my friend, and she wanted to play with her dolls in the living room. "Oh no," said my friend, "We only use the living room for special days like Easter and Christmas."

Later that day, the little girl was discovered sitting very quietly on the sofa. She was rather embarrassed that her daughter had not obeyed my friend

"What are you doing?" asked the mother.

"I'm waiting for Christmas."

And that friends, is what the Advent season is all about. Waiting for Christmas. Waiting for Christ. But while we wait, we watch and listen. For Christ can come at anytime. Christ can show up anywhere. Not just in sterile white rooms, not just in the crèches and churches of life, but anywhere. At work, at home, at school. On the street, and in the mall, even at the movies!

You don't need a secret decoder ring. You don't need to be a shut-in. You don't even need to sit on the sofa. You just need to be alert. You just need to watch. For Christ will surely come. The question is, will you and I be awake when it happens?

Amen

John H. Danner