

Jimmy Stewart wants to jump off a bridge. That's where we find him in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Charlie Brown buys the ugliest tree you can possibly imagine.

"The Grinch hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season. Now please don't ask why, no one quite knows the reason."

Will Ferrell found that he just didn't fit in with the other elves and in fact maybe he wasn't meant to be living in the North Pole at all.

Macaulay Culkin's whole family boards a plane, leaving him *Home Alone* just as a couple of robbers begin to case the place.

Every good Christmas movie starts with some tragic event. Some sort of issue that gets resolved by the end credits. After all, it wouldn't be much of a story without a problem to solve. If it wasn't due to the journey it took to get there, we wouldn't feel it in our bones when we hear "Clarence, help me Clarence. I want to live." Or "Well in Whoville they say the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day."

If there weren't some issue to be overcome, I don't think we would smile so wide when Charlie Brown is loved after all or when Will Ferrell finds his real family or when Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern get loaded up in the back of a cop car after having sprung every last booby trap.

Good stories and especially good Christmas stories have to have a happy ending... I just wish somebody told Matthew.  
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See, we read some of it out of order during advent and Christmas, but this is the conclusion to Matthew's Christmas story. Right after this, Matthew will jump ahead all the way to John the Baptist some thirty years later. So, this is all we get for Matthew's Christmas. This is our supposed happy ending.

If we were to back up, see, Matthew starts out by relating Jesus (or rather Joseph) all the way back to heroes of the Old Testament. Then, we hear about Mary and Joseph. Then the magi, the unnumbered wise men (and quite possibly some wise women too) with three gifts following a star. We read about them for some time. See, as they make their way into Judea, for whatever reason, they stop by King Herod's and immediately put their foot in their mouth.

Some wise men, huh? Maybe we're just blessed with the gift of hindsight. But, personally, I don't think it's too wise to approach a king and ask "where is the newborn baby who is going to take your job?"

And of course, we know about Herod's sly response. "Tell me when you find this newborn king... I sure would like to worship him too." And truthfully maybe I'm being too harsh on the wise men because something there seemed to not sit quite right with them and they go home by another way, avoiding Herod entirely.

But, either way, the damage has been done. Herod has been tipped off. And so, Herod, in his clinging to whatever little power he had, orders all the newborn Hebrew boys to be killed. It's an echo of days long past but still etched into Jewish memory when the Pharaoh in Egypt did something quite similar to try to get after baby Moses.

And so, given all of that, here is our happy ending, here is how Matthew finishes his Christmas story. Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus escape to Egypt. Countless new born babies slaughtered back home while they wait in hiding for Herod to pass. And even then, the holy family are fearful to return to Bethlehem, having to instead head to Nazareth.

How's that for a Christmas story happy ending? Refugees fleeing to Egypt amidst dark, wicked politically motivated violence. Families grieving and gnashing their teeth back in Bethlehem. A tyrant on a self-obsessed murderous rampage. And all the while, Matthew goes to great lengths to demonstrate that this is how it seemingly always was and this is how it still is. Not too much has changed.

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But perhaps that is the happy ending, at least in a way. Perhaps God was reaching for something deeper here. See, God, here in Matthew's Christmas story, does not do much to solve our problems. He doesn't take them away. Instead, He adds Jesus in their midst.

After all, that's certainly the point our Hebrews scripture is identifying. See, I love what Hebrews does here to help us understand the mission of Jesus Christ. Because, we know that Jesus' coming to us means 1000 different, glorious things. But here, it tells us just one of those that I think goes unnoticed all too often.

It says that Jesus came to suffer. And before we start filling in the blanks ourselves and saying "he had to suffer on account of my sins," notice that Hebrews points us in a different direction entirely. It says that Jesus suffered so that he could truly be in one family with those he is calling, us Christians. It says that Jesus suffered so that he could unashamedly look at us in our own suffering and call us "brother" and "sister."

God did not enter into human life to solve all our problems and put a bow on it before the end credits roll. No, God showed up to be our companion, our merciful high priest in the midst of all our problems.

The kind of love God has for us looks less like Him shipping us some package, a Christmas gift or a check in the mail while he sits on the beach. No, this is the God who at great cost to Himself wants to visit, wants to sit with us, have Christmas morning with us, see how tall the kids have grown, all of that. This is the God who draws close to us, becomes like us.

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I want to draw our attention specifically to verse 17 here in Hebrews. It says that Jesus is our merciful and faithful high priest. And truly that is the case. Jesus is the one who stands between us and God the Father, who tells us what He is like and tells Him what we are like. And I believe that when He tells God about us, He has just as much mercy as He has glory when He tells us about God.

In fact, later in Hebrews it will go to great lengths to tell us how prayer really works. It will tell us that the Holy Spirit who lives within us, who abides and comforts us, Himself uplifts our prayers to no one other than Jesus Christ Himself. And from there, Jesus Himself advocates on our behalf to His Father.

Church, I want us to really think about that. I want that to inform our prayer life. When we pray, first of all, we pray to a God who knows. We pray to a God who gets it, who's been there, done that, got the t-shirt. When we pray and we say, for instance, "God I am hurting," it is Jesus Christ Himself who receives that. And it is this same Jesus Christ who knows about it. Who can empathize with us in it. Who himself has hurt and suffered. Who himself has been through what we go through.

We do not pray to some far off, distant god. We pray to the God who loved us so much that he wanted to know us deeply. Who wanted to feel what we feel, experience what we experience, warts and all.

And what's more, this same Jesus Christ then goes to His Father. This same Jesus Christ petitions for us on our behalf. This same Jesus Christ is our merciful high priest.

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Life's problems, real problems like suffering, like political violence, like the murder of infants, the gruesome stuff we don't like to talk about; it doesn't always get wrapped up neatly in 90 minutes. And really, none of us needs a preacher to tell us that part. We know that about life. That's pretty self evident.

But even still, there is good news. Even still, we have something of a happy ending but one more fitting of real lives than of a Christmas movie. We don't necessarily have God come in to solve all our problems, to show us in a flashback how many lives we've touched, or to send along Cindy Lou Who, or even show us how to rig a paint can onto a rope so it hits the bad guys square the in the face. We have something better.

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See, briefly, there are at least three promises from God we receive here in our scripture readings today.

First, we need to know that there is absolutely nothing you can go through, nothing you can experience, no mistake, no obstacle, no setback or hardship or anything else where you are distant from God. Things may not always feel peachy keen in life but every single step of the way, God is there. Jesus Christ is with you. You don't have to find Him, He finds us just as we are. That's the first thing.

The second thing is this: when you pray, you pray to a God who gets it. You pray to a God who isn't looking down on you or ashamed or wishing you could just fix it and move on. No, you pray to the God who deeply understands it and in fact has freely chosen to step into our midst.

Finally, the third thing. We need to know that Jesus Christ remains our high priest. We need to know that Jesus Christ Himself petitions for you in heaven. No matter what life looks like. No matter our present circumstance, know that's what's going on in heaven. Jesus Christ Himself is advocating for you.

Once again, there is nothing you go through that God is not present with. Nothing at all. In fact, God deeply knows. You can talk to Him. You can trust Him. Because he gets it. And not only does he get it, he himself in and through His Son Jesus is fighting for your case in heaven right now. He himself calls you his brother, his sister, and advocates for you.

Let's pray...

Oh God, you know well that the human story is not always a pleasant one

Our own stories can be hard.

Our lives with others can be hard.

Our lives as people in a system, in an empire, in this world that is not always fair nor nice.

And so we thank you that you have shown up in our lives

Not just around our lives

Not floating just overhead of our problems

You show up in Jesus Christ right there with us

Thank you, Lord.

Thank you, that we are not left alone. And that just as you have sought to know our condition, warts and all

You now know us so well that you yourself, Jesus Christ, advocate for us as our merciful high priest.

We pray this in your holy name. Amen.