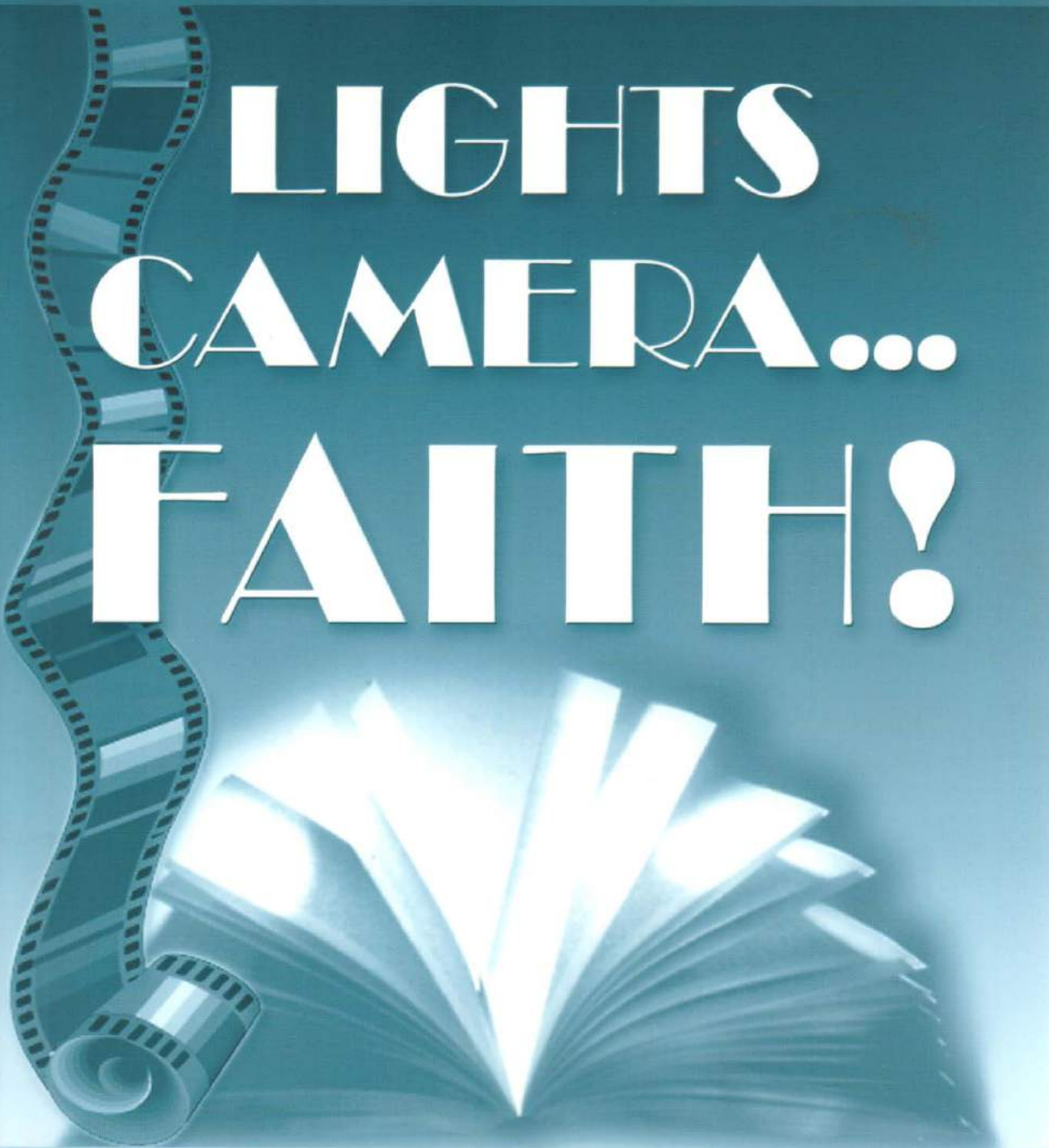


A Movie Lectionary—Cycle A



LIGHTS CAMERA... FAITH!

A Movie Lover's Guide to Scripture

Peter Malone, MSC with Rose Pacatte, FSP



Courtesy of Photofest.com

Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

CHRISTMAS DAWN

Isaiah 62:11–12; Luke 2:15–20

It's a Wonderful Life

U.S., 1947 / 121 minutes, B & W

Actors: James Stewart, Donna Reed, Thomas Mitchell, Lionel Barrymore, Gloria Grahame, Henry Travers, Beulah Bondi

Writers: Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Jo Swerling, Frank Capra

Director: Frank Capra



It's a Wonderful Life

What If?

George Bailey grows up in a warm family atmosphere in Bedford Falls. His father is a kindly, unsuccessful manager of a building and loan company who extends easy credit to his customers. George dreams of leaving Bedford Falls. He wants to plan things; to build modern cities, airfields, and bridges; and change the world. He falls in love with Mary.

George's brother has left town and when their father dies, George also has the chance to leave. But he decides to stay because the harsh Mr. Potter takes over the Bailey firm. George believes that he can influence Mr. Potter to continue treating customers well, as his father did.

Mary and George get married. Over the years, George builds up goodwill among the townspeople and creates a housing estate for them. But he never leaves town to follow his dreams. Time passes, his family grows, but he feels trapped. When a large deposit is missing from the building and loan, George has to find money to cover losses. (George does not know that his good-natured Uncle Billy had mistakenly given Mr. Potter the day's deposit wrapped up in a newspaper.) George is in despair and is harsh to Mary and his children. He contemplates killing himself for the insurance money.

SYNOPSIS

Clarence, an angel, is sent to help him see the real meaning and value of his life. Clarence shows him what Bedford Falls might have been like had he not lived: a town of squalor and corruption. Coming to his senses, George runs home to Mary and his family to celebrate Christmas.

COMMENTARY

It's a Wonderful Life is probably the most referred to film in the history of cinema; it is either shown or mentioned countless times in other movies (even *The Gremlins* mischievously watch it). Though it was not warmly received in 1947, it has gained a reputation over the decades. In a sense, *It's a Wonderful Life* has become the American Christmas movie.

The film's pedigree is almost perfect. A Frank Capra movie, it immerses its audience into social problems of the times. Through the goodwill of the characters and plot, the film creates a hero who can break through great obstacles with integrity, like Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and James Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Hollywood golden era veterans Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, and Jo Swerling wrote this film, by adapting a story that Philip Van Doren Stern originally wrote on a Christmas card.

DIALOGUE WITH THE GOSPEL

Focus: It's a Wonderful Life has become one of America's favorite films, the quintessential and perennial Christmas movie. The film asks the audience to appreciate their blessings. Through the angel, Clarence, the movie promises peace to people of goodwill.

The readings for the Mass at Dawn on Christmas are about blessings: the hopes of a Savior from Isaiah, the kindness and love of God in Titus (cf. 3:4–7), and the revelation to the shepherds in Luke. The readings are full of comfort, joy, and hope.

The climax of *It's a Wonderful Life* comes at Christmas—for George Bailey and his family, a time of crisis. The present and the future are threatened if George kills himself.

George was and is a man of blessing for the people of Bedford Falls. He has dedicated his whole life to them, and has sacrificed all of his personal hopes and ambitions for them. But he believes his life has been dull and ordinary, certainly not very wonderful at all.

It takes God's special intervention for George to look at his life, accept it, and see the wonder of it. It is in the spirit of that first Christmas that the apprentice angel, Clarence, gently persuades George that his life has meaning as he takes him on a journey to the past and the future, similar to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. The reading from Titus describes George's blessings, if only he can open his eyes and see.

- The young George Bailey as the decent man: in his family, in the town, in his work; George's personal anguish over his choice to remain in Bedford Falls.
- George feeling that life is passing him by; George's ambitions, his lack of awareness regarding all his actual achievements.
- The crises: Uncle Billy's mismanagement, Potter's exploitation; Clarence as the apprentice angel, his saving and befriending George and guiding him through past and future; George running home to be reunited with his family.

KEY SCENES AND THEMES

1. Christmas movies seem to follow the pattern of Charles Dickens' archetypal Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*, written in 1843. Some essential ingredients include a family with burdens, forays or glimpses into past holiday memories before any problems existed,

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

images of the future, and someone to help resolve the difficulties, making Christmas once again full of family warmth, happiness, and peace. How does *It's a Wonderful Life* fulfill the conditions for a "traditional" Christmas story? What is the source of the Christmas joy that gives rise to a successful Christmas tale?

2. This film focuses on George's personal journey from despair to awareness to hope. How can contemporary people identify with George's plight? How can Clarence's message about what would have happened if George had never lived be applied to situations today?
3. Angels are among us in many ways if we but listen and look to the signs of goodness around us: the people we meet, the books we read, the songs we hear, and stories we see on television and in movies. In what ways can we contemplate divine mysteries and human goodness in daily life?

Prayer

Lord, on this day you sent us Jesus, your Son, as a gift of peace to the world. May he be a gift to those who are anxious, who suffer in this season of joy. Amen.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 56:1, 6–7; Matthew 15:21–28

Lorenzo's Oil

U.S., 1992 / 154 minutes

Actors: Nick Nolte, Susan Sarandon, Peter Ustinov,
Zach O'Malley-Greenberg

Writers: Nick Enright, George Miller

Director: George Miller



Blessed Are the Persistent

Lorenzo Odone, born in 1978, is a young boy suffering from adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD), a rare degenerative neurological disease that occurs only in males and is transmitted through the mother. The disease leads to seizures, paralysis and death. Struggling to discover a diagnosis and treatment along with the medical profession in the mid-'80s, Lorenzo's parents begin to study the disease and become experts in understanding how it affects the body. They discover a way to halt the progress of the disease, a remedy they call "Lorenzo's Oil."

The Odones are an ordinary couple living in Washington, D.C., who decide they will fight for their son's recovery, no matter what the cost is. As Lorenzo's health deteriorates, his mother spends all her time with him and voraciously learns more and more about his condition. She finds out that despite the disease and his difficulties in communicating, her son is maturing intellectually. She stops reading children's books to him and chooses more age appropriate material. She almost wills him to learn how to blink and move his finger to communicate. She is a relentless, formidable adversary to the doctors she believes do not do enough for her son.

SYNOPSIS

Michaela Odone died in 2000 of lung cancer, exhausted by her devotion to her son. Lorenzo is still living.

COMMENTARY

Lorenzo's Oil is a fine, although grueling, movie. It is not a so-called disease-of-the-week film. It is a human drama, a portrait of a family as well as a medical case study. The screenplay by Australians Nick Enright and George Miller was written as if it were a file report on Lorenzo's progress from 1983 to 1992. The screenplay received an Oscar nomination, as did Susan Sarandon for Best Actress in her role as Michaela Odone.

Director George Miller (*Mad Max* trilogy, *Witches of Eastwick*, *Babe: Pig in the City*) was a doctor before he became a filmmaker. He was in a unique position to employ his expertise to communicate the medical dilemmas of the situation on screen, such as the complexities of the illness, the criteria for testing of treatments, and the reaction of the medical profession and the drug companies.

The movie is mentally and emotionally demanding and is indeed a tribute to the extremes to which the human spirit will go for the sake of love. Susan Sarandon gives a fierce, intense, almost harrowing performance. Nick Nolte, with a more or less realistic Italian accent, is persevering, balanced, and solid. Peter Ustinov is believable as Dr. Nickolais, the only doctor who is sympathetic to the Odone's cause.

DIALOGUE WITH THE GOSPEL

Focus: If anyone in movies reminds us of the Canaanite woman and her plea for a healing of her daughter, it is Michaela Odone. Her quest for healing for her son, Lorenzo, was incessant.

The Canaanite woman who lived in the region of Tyre and Sidon has to be one of the most persevering characters in the Gospels. This woman reminds us of the widow in Luke 18:1-8 who kept pestering the judge until he became so irritated at her persistence that he granted what she asked. In

Gospel passages such as these, Jesus urges us to develop a spirituality of perseverance in prayer.

The apostles are annoyed by the woman who follows Jesus with her cries and pleas that he heal her daughter. At first Jesus ignores her. When she does not go away, Jesus continues the drama with some witty dialogue and bargaining in a style characteristic of his culture. He says it's not right to throw the children's food to the dogs, meaning that he has been sent to the house of Israel, not to foreigners. The woman is up to the challenge and retorts that even the dogs eat the scraps from the table. Jesus admires her faith and grants her prayer.

Michaela Odone is an outsider to the medical profession. The doctors seem to have given up on her son. Michaela has the gift of perseverance, however, and she pesters. She does her best to learn about her son's disease, perhaps because she blames herself for transmitting it to him. She challenges the doctors and, much to their irritation, does not go away.

Michaela shows incredible determination, and her Catholic background is the source of her faith that Lorenzo will make some kind of recovery. The Odone's persistence is finally rewarded when the combination of olive and rapeseed oil they develop seems to halt the disease's progress. Though ALD has a lasting effect on Lorenzo, he begins to communicate and move in small ways. The example of how his parents fought for him can inspire parents in similar situations and encourage people to follow medical careers. "Woman, you have great faith."

- The African prologue; Lorenzo: at play, his knowledge of languages, behavior at home in the Comoro Islands; Lorenzo's family: his parents and their work in Africa; Lorenzo at school, his angry outbursts, the teachers' puzzlement.

KEY SCENES AND THEMES

- Lorenzo's doctor visits, the diagnosis, the hospital, the treatment and tests, the nurses; the medical explanations, theories, treatments, diet; prognosis; Lorenzo's physical decline, in the hospital and at home, increasingly disabled; Michaela's continual care and tenderness, her ability to understand his signals, her perseverance in getting him to will to move his finger.
- Michaela's strength and sense of family, her reaction to the doctors; the friendship and struggles with Dr. Nikolais, the meetings, the awkward questions, Michaela's frustration; Michaela's research, the Odone's intense study, the international seminar, the experts and discussions, their mutual help and collaboration; the oil.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. Michaela Odone's persistence and seeming lack of social skills did not win her a popularity contest with the medical community. But no force on earth could stop this mother. What was the source of her perseverance?
2. For those inspired by love, there is no obstacle too great to try, work, and struggle to find a solution to a problem. How can a movie like *Lorenzo's Oil* inspire others to dedicate themselves to research and helping people? What are some other true stories told through movies that can inspire people to dedicate their energies to advance the cause of human knowledge and life through science and technology? (For more information about *Lorenzo's Oil* you can go to www.mylain.org.)

3. What about Lorenzo? We have little indication about what he is thinking all day long or what his hopes and dreams might be. So many people's dreams are limited by physical problems. In what ways can each of us help another person to fulfill his or her dreams and live in dignity?

Prayer

Lord, you told us to ask and we will receive. The Canaanite woman asked again and again, and you finally answered her prayer. Help us to be constant and persevering in our petitions to you. Amen.