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The Reigning Christmas Movie
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Anyone who watches television during the Christmas season (which now seems to begin on the day after Halloween) has probably noticed that the once archetypal Christmas film, the one we "older types" saw year after year as a central part of the holiday drama, has now been replaced. In short, "A Christmas Carol" has been put into second place by Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life."

One reason for this change is that Capra's film takes place in an America that, no matter how fictional, is more familiar to audiences than the Victorian England of Dickens' classic narrative. More important, though, is the way "It's a Wonderful Life" transforms the key thematic elements of the Dickens tale to produce a fundamentally less threatening story than the earlier one.

Both stories remind us that one powerful implication of Jesus' story is that a single life has immense consequences. In each film the central character is given a vision of that fact. Scrooge's revelation impresses upon him the disastrous error of his life, wasted in miserly, loveless self-interest.

Scrooge's tale is essentially a version of the story of the prodigal son. His repentance and redemption at the end of his dark night of the soul returns him to the human community with a revitalized sense of his power to affect the world for good or ill. We are invited to participate in the restoration of one who once was lost but now is found. Scrooge is in essence terrorized into alteration by the vision of the waste of his life, the damage he's done to others, and the vision of his unvisited grave.

By contrast, George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life" is no prodigal. His failing is not to see the

wide reaching effects of his virtuous, if at times trying, dedication to others before himself. As the angel reveals to him, his absence from the world would have resulted in a multitude of miseries he has prevented through the daily exercise of simple virtue and sympathy.

It is useful to recall that "It's a Wonderful Life" was released in the late 40's, after the end of World War II. The story includes the return of Harry's brother, a war hero, to the small town of Bedford Falls. The film recognizes the heroic accomplishment of Americans in the war. It also reminds us that the quiet, often unrecognized heroism exercised by ordinary people in their everyday lives also crucially shapes history for good or ill. It's not a bad lesson, for then or now.

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