

Christmas in the Movies

“The Polar Express - Belief”

[John 20:29](#)

In this age of well-advanced science and technology, believing in miracles seems antiquated and incompatible with modern life. In fact, Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor and outspoken atheist, writes in his book, *The God Delusion*, “the 19th century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment.”

Yet, belief in miracles is still strong even in the 21st century. A survey finds that many people, about 80 percent of Americans, both young and old, those with and without religious affiliations, believe in miracles. From our own experience or that of others, we know miracles can occur -- that we encounter extraordinary events which happen that are inexplicable by natural or scientific laws.

There are many miracle stories in the Bible. Some of the famous miracle stories are in the Old Testament. There is the birth of a son to an old couple, Abraham and Sarah, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the fall of the city of Jericho. And, in the New Testament, Jesus turns water into wine, feeds the masses with a little boy's packed lunch, and heals numerous people with lifelong, permanent conditions. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, believers in the early church continue to experience miracles as they carry on Jesus' ministry of healing and restoration.

But, the most remarkable miracle story is the virgin birth of Jesus which is at the center of our Christmas celebration. God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, a virgin who was engaged to Joseph. The angel told Mary that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit, that her child would save his people from their sins. Year after year, we hear the story of this extraordinary birth through the ears of faith and believe. Despite all the efforts that have been made to explain it away, the story of Jesus' birth still remains a mystery, leaving us in wonder and awe.

In the 2004 computer-animated film, *The Polar Express*, which is based on the beloved children's book of the same title by Chris Van Allsburg, we find a story about a boy who experienced a Christmas miracle. On Christmas Eve our unnamed hero lies awake in bed at night. He struggles to fall asleep, wrestling with doubts about the existence of Santa Claus. Suddenly, he hears the sound of a steam locomotive. He runs outside in his bathrobe and slippers to discover that a train has come to a stop in front of his house. The conductor of the train comes out and invites him on board. And, our Hero Boy hops on the Polar Express and joins other children already on board in a magical adventure to the North Pole.

Among the children on the train is an unnamed girl who becomes the boy's friend, and Billy, who initially did not want to get on board and sits alone by himself in another car. Soon, our Hero Boy finds himself on the rooftop of the train, in search of the unnamed hero girl and the Conductor who disappeared. There, he meets a homeless man, who offers him coffee and discusses the existence of Santa Claus and ghosts, testing our Hero Boy's faith in Christmas. Yet, he also comes to the boy's rescue. Skiing through the tops of the cars, this gentleman takes the boy to the front of the locomotive to the coal tender, where he is reunited with our Hero Girl and the Conductor. Together, the Hero Boy and Hero Girl navigate the train with the

Conductor, going through numerous adventures. And during the journey, the conductor speaks words of truth to the children.

Let's take a look at the first clip from the movie. (*clip #1*)

"Sometimes, seeing is believing, but sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can't see." We want to believe, but at the same time, we need to see to believe. We want evidence. We want proof. That's what Thomas demanded when his fellow disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" What did he say to them in response? He said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger in where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later, Jesus appeared to his disciples again and said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Friends, our faith is not based on what we see but what we believe. The world we see is filled with suffering -- violence and destruction, poverty and injustice, sickness and death. But, we do not base our faith on what we see, but rather on what we do not see. Even in the midst of darkness and death, we still anticipate light and life. Even in the midst of our doubts and questions, we still believe. That's what our ancestors of faith did and they prevailed, as they were sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see (Hebrews 11:1).

Finally, the train arrives at the North Pole, and Santa appears in their midst. Children are so excited to see him in person and jump with joy. But, our Hero Boy cannot see him. He desperately tries to locate Santa who is blocked by the other children. He sees a bell fly loose from the reindeer's reins. He picks it up and tries to hear it ring. Initially, he cannot hear its sound. And he only eventually hears it when he believes it will ring.

Let's take a look. (*clip #2*)

"The bell is a wonderful symbol of the spirit of Christmas, as am I. Just remember, the true spirit of Christmas lies in your heart." As Santa said to the unnamed boy, the true spirit of Christmas lies not in the things we see, but in our hearts. The true spirit of Christmas is found in the things that we can see and hear only through the eyes and ears of faith. So, we pray not for what we see, but what we do not see. As Jesus said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (Matthew 21:22).

Our Hero Boy puts the bell in his pocket as Santa allows him to keep it. But, he loses the bell because of a hole in his pocket. The next morning, he and his younger sister are busy opening up the Christmas gifts they find under the Christmas tree. After all the gifts are opened, the sister finds one more for her brother. Inside the gift box is the bell our Hero Boy had lost the night before and also a note from Santa. Our Hero Boy and his sister joyfully ring the bell and hear the beautiful sound. Do you think their parents can hear the sound of the special bell?

Let's take a look. (*clip #3*)

"At one time, most of my friends could hear the bell. But as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found, one Christmas, that she could no longer hear it's sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me... it does for all who truly believe."

This Advent season, while we wait for Christmas, I invite you to listen for the magic of the bell, the bell our ancestors of faith heard through their ears of faith. Whenever you cannot hear the sound of the bell, simply say, "I believe." Whenever doubts rise in your heart, simply say, "I believe." And ask Jesus to come into your heart. Invite Christ to come into your life and be your Lord and Savior.

In a moment during the time of offering, our Choirs will sing a couple of songs from the Polar Express. Here are the partial lyrics of the first song, "Believe":

We were dreamers not so long ago
But one by one, we all had to grow up

When it seems the magic slipped away
We find it all again on Christmas Day

Believe in what your heart is saying
Hear the melody that's playing
There's no time to waste
There's so much to celebrate

Believe in what you feel inside
And give your dreams the wings to fly
You have everything you need
If you just believe ...

When it seems that we have lost our way
We find ourselves again on Christmas Day

Believe in what your heart is saying
Hear the melody that's playing
There's no time to waste
There's so much to celebrate

Believe in what you feel inside
And give your dreams the wings to fly
You have everything you need
If you just believe
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