

I Believe Even When

Fill the Night with Music and Light!

Advent & Christmas 2020

Family Film Festival Home Devotion

There are many “Christmas Specials” that are loved by so many as we countdown to Christmas Eve and Day. This year, let us take an opportunity to watch a few with ‘new eyes,’ seeing the gifts of God in the timeless classics. The movies selected are:

A Charlie Brown Christmas – **Hope**

How the Grinch Stole Christmas (animated version) – **Love**

Frosty the Snowman – **Joy**

The Muppet Christmas Carol – **Peace**

The Polar Express – **Believe**

While the movies included are secular, each one does a wonderful job of embodying one of the core themes - Hope, Love, Joy, Peace, or Believe (faith). These can equip children and adults with ways to go beyond the walls of the church building to find the message of God’s love in the everyday, including Christmas movies.

There are a few old Christmas specials that...um...haven’t “aged” all that well and weren’t included. One movie that was not included because it’s a little harder to find, but that *absolutely* merits watching is *Emmet Otter’s Jug Band Christmas*. This is Jim Henson’s reimagining of O. Henry’s *Gift of the Magi* story and would be great for Epiphany Sunday! Each of the five sessions has the same basic elements:

- **Theme**
- **Movie**
- **Bible Verse** – to be read aloud
- **Talking Points** – These can occur before or during the movie.
The talking points can be before the movie, during the movie with a *brief* pause, or included with the other After-Movie Discussion points. Two movies are actual full-length films – The Muppets Christmas Carol and The Polar Express. It is recommended to take a break or two in those movies.
- **After-Movie Discussion**
- **Prayer** – which can be done as an echo prayer with children repeating after you each line.

Week 1

Theme: Hope

Movie: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*

Bible Verses: *Isaiah 40:1-2* –

Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid.

These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Isaiah was giving God’s people hope, reminding them that, even in captivity, God was with them and that there would be better days



ahead. Hope is such a powerful force. It's the belief in something happening and the *confident expectation* that it will. Let's watch a classic Christmas movie that embodies hope – *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Talking Points:

- Near the beginning of the movie, Charlie Brown feels certain he won't get a Christmas card...yet he looks in the mailbox anyway. Even though he's struggling with his feelings, we still see the flicker of hope in him.
- Charlie Brown goes to Lucy to talk. He's worried about not feeling happy during the Christmas season. Something feels missing.
- After Sally talks about what she wants for Christmas, this is a good opportunity to pause the movie for a moment and say:
 - Many of the characters have things they want.
 - What does Lucy want? **Real estate**
 - What does Snoopy want? **A prize for winning the Lights and Display Contest**
 - What does Sally want? **\$10s and \$20s**
- Charlie Brown wants to find what's missing in his life. All he knows at this point is that material things aren't going to fill the void.
- A want or a wish is different than a hope. Remember, hope means believing something could happen and having that confident expectation that it will. [Continue watching the movie to the end. Encourage the children to pay careful attention as Charlie Brown and Linus visit the Christmas tree lot.]

After-Movie Discussion:

- The great moment of hope comes when Charlie Brown and Linus go to a Christmas tree lot and Charlie sees the small, dried up Christmas tree. He sees potential in it, even when the normally-optimistic Linus isn't sure it's a good idea.
- Charlie Brown's heart is stirred. He sees something in the tree worth saving, worth investing in.
- How do the others respond when Charlie Brown brings back the little tree? **They criticize Charlie Brown, mock him, and laughed at him.**
- This almost causes him to lose hope, until Linus recites the Christmas story.
 - This is a powerful reminder that, just as we have our own hopes, so does everyone else.
 - We must be kind in treating one another's often-fragile hopes with care.
- After Linus recites the Christmas story, we see Charlie Brown's hope once again restored. What does he do next? **He takes the tree home and tries to decorate it, but it collapses.**
- At this point, it might seem like all hope is lost, not just for the tree, but for Charlie Brown feeling fulfilled. But his act of hope inspired all the others. They follow him home, and what happens? **They decorate the tree and it seems to spring to life. Then they all wish Charlie Brown a Merry Christmas as they sing a Christmas carol together.**

Prayer:

Loving God,
We have you,
And there is hope.
We have each other,
And there is hope.
We wait for Jesus,
With confident expectation,
And there is hope.
Amen.

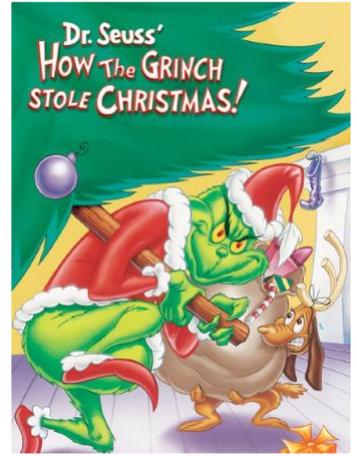
Week 2

Theme: Love

Movie: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (animated version)

Bible Verse: Ezekiel 36:26 – *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.*

Let's watch a movie that captures the essence of this lovely Bible verse.



Talking Points:

- The Grinch wants to keep Christmas from coming. Why? **His heart is two sizes too small.**
- What seems to bother the Grinch most of all? **The noise.**
- The Grinch can't stand to hear the Whos experiencing and expressing joy. He is only concerned with what he wants.
- On Christmas morning, when the Grinch is standing in the snow, and hears the Whos singing, what happens to him? **His heart grows three sizes.**

After-Movie Discussion:

- The Grinch tried to keep Christmas from coming. Can anything really stop Christmas? **No. Not a Grinch, not a virus, nothing can keep the great gift of love that is Christmas from coming.**
- When the Grinch's heart grew, what else changed? **He found the strength of ten grinch...plus two!**
- Love is the strongest force in the world. When we open our hearts to love, and then share that love with others, we find a strength we never knew we had.
- Christmas is not about things. When we let go of what we think Christmas is "supposed" to look like, what Christmas is "supposed" to sound like, we open our hearts to what Christmas already is – an amazing gift from a God who loves us very much.

Prayer:

Loving God,
Thank you for the gift of Christmas.
Thank you for the gift of love.
Thank you for the gift of you.
Amen.

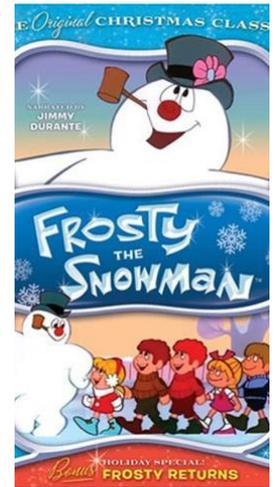
Week 3

Theme: Joy

Movie: *Frosty the Snowman*

Bible Verse: Luke 1:46-47 – *Mary said, “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior.”*

Mary has just learned that she is going to be the mother of Jesus, and she is overcome with joy. Joy is more than happiness. It goes deeper. When we're happy, we smile with our faces. When we have joy, we smile with our hearts. Because joy runs so deep, it helps us get through the ups and downs of life. Let's look at some examples of real joy in *Frosty the Snowman*.



Talking Points:

- At the beginning, point out how the children find **joy in simplicity** – the wonder of the first snow.
- As the children build the snowman, point out how they are experiencing the **joy of working together**.
- When Frosty comes to life, the first thing he says is *Happy Birthday!* Frosty models for all of us the **joy of being alive!**
- When Frosty first says, “Happy Birthday,” this could be an opportunity to pause the movie and read: Job 33:4 – *The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the almighty gives me life.*
- Before continuing the movie, say – One of the greatest sources of joy is the joy that comes from reaching out to help others. See how many ways helping others is shown in the movie. [Continue watching to the end.]

After-Movie Discussion:

- What were some examples of characters reaching out to help others?
[Allow children to respond. Below are a few examples.]
- Hocus Pocus, the rabbit, brings the magic hat back to the children.
- The children help Frosty get on the train so he can go to the North Pole.
- Frosty and Hocus Pocus take care of Karen when she's shivering in the refrigerated boxcar.
- The woodland animals build a fire for Karen.
- Santa ensures that Frosty stays alive by not allowing Professor Hinkle, the magician, to bully Karen and Frosty.

Reaching out and caring for (and about) others is one of the best ways to find joy. In fact, the one character who continues to think only about himself until the end is Professor Hinkle. And he is clearly the least joyous character in the movie.

When was a time you did something for someone else?

How did that make you feel?

Prayer:

Loving God,
Thank you for the gift of joy –
For the joy of simplicity,
For the joy of working together,
For the joy of helping others,
For the joy of being alive! Amen.

Week 4

Theme: Peace

Movie: *The Muppet Christmas Carol*

Bible Verse: Isaiah 9:6 – *A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

This week we will explore peace through *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Along the way we will find that peace isn't necessarily about being "nice and quiet." There is an outer peace and an inner peace that only come when we do as Micah 6:8 would remind us – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.



Note: Unlike the first three "movies" which are really 30-minute television specials, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is a full-length movie (86 minutes).

Talking Points:

- Like Professor Hinkle and the Grinch, Ebenezer Scrooge is the "bad guy" in this Christmas movie. Both of those other characters experienced change. I wonder what will happen with Scrooge.
- In the opening song, we learn about Scrooge that "He never gives. He only takes." Scrooge has way more wealth than he could spend in a lifetime, while so many others go without enough food or the warmth of a home. It is hard to find peace on the inside or the outside when so many suffer unjustly.
- He has nothing good to say about Christmas and refuses to give to charity.

The Ghost of Christmas Past [Consider pausing right after the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past ends to discuss the following.]

- Fozzywig tells Scrooge, "Stop working. Enjoy yourself."
- There is a peace that comes when you realize that you are a person of worth, not because of what you do, or how much you make, but because of who you are – a child of God.
- You don't have to earn God's love. You don't have to deserve Christmas.
- From time to time, stop, rest, play, and find peace knowing that God loves you no matter what.

[Continue movie.]

The Ghost of Christmas Present – [Consider pausing right after the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Present ends to discuss the following.]

- At this point, we already see Scrooge warming up, even smiling and telling a joke.
- They look in on Bob Cratchit's house. What do Bob and Tiny Tim do when they mention Scrooge? **They toast Scrooge as the "Founder of the Feast." Even though Bob Cratchit gets paid so little, he is still grateful and kind.**
- This is a real turning point for Scrooge. We see the glimmer of the possibility of healing and reconciliation.

[Continue movie to the end.]

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (Future) –

- We learn that Scrooge dies with no friends and having never made a positive difference in the lives of those around.
- He dies rich, but completely empty.

After-Movie Discussion:

- When we see Scrooge on Christmas morning, what has changed? **He realizes there is a chance for healing and for reconciliation.**
- We learn from Charles Dickens (Gonzo) that “What made Scrooge happiest of all was that his life lay before him, and it could be changed!”
- What are some of the things he does that show us he has changed? [examples below]
 - He speaks kindly to others, wishing them Merry Christmas.
 - He donates to the charity he had refused the day before.
 - He receives a scarf for his donation, and accepts it with real gratitude.
 - He sings.
 - He leaves gifts for his workers.
 - He brings gifts to his nephew Fred and Fred’s wife.
 - He brings gifts to his old mentors.
 - He buys food for the needy.
 - He brings cheese to the mice (mouses).
 - He surprises the Cratchit Family with a feast, gifts, and gives Bob a raise.
- One thing we can’t change is the past. But we can change what we do today and throughout our life when we choose to live a life of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Prayer:

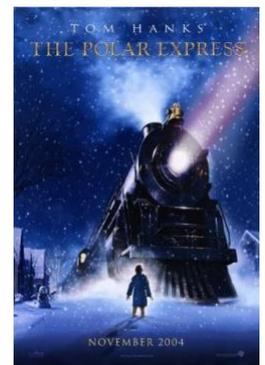
Loving God,
 We choose to live in hope,
 In love,
 In joy,
 In peace.
 God bless us everyone.
 Amen.

Week 5

Theme: Believe

Movie: *The Polar Express*

This is a full-length movie, rather than a 30- minute “Christmas special” like so many others in this series. But the theme of *belief* runs throughout. If you are facilitating a group of children, virtually or otherwise, and don’t have enough time to view the entire movie, consider starting at Chapter 14. This is the scene where the Polar Express has made it to the North Pole. Hero Boy (the main character), Hero Girl, and Billy have been separated from the other children. Hero Girl and Billy can hear the sound of sleigh bells, but Hero Boy cannot.



Bible Verses: Luke 2: 29-30 – *Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation.*

These are the words of a good man, Simeon, who has just seen the baby Jesus with his own eyes and held Jesus with his own hands. Now let's watch a movie that asks if we can believe in things...even things we can't see.

Talking Points:

- [Note – I always love pausing the movie at the hot chocolate scene to make hot chocolate myself!]
- A good place to pause – Following the scene where the Polar Express gets back on track after sliding on the ice, it spirals up the tracks around a mountain. The conductor is talking to Hero Girl and Hero Boy (the main character) and says, “Sometimes seeing is believing. And sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we *can't* see.” Pause and say:
Listen to these words from Hebrews 11:1 – *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

What are some things that we might not be able to see with our eyes or hear with our ears, but are real? [below are a few examples]

Air

The way a song makes you feel

The memory of something funny your pet did

Love

Hope

- And we can believe in the amazing power of God who makes all of those blessings, and many more, real. [Continue watching the movie but note – right after this pause is a scene where Hero Boy gets disoriented in a train car with lots of marionettes and a Scrooge puppet. It might be a little intense for the very young, so this could be a spot where you fast forward a bit. Just wanted you to have a heads up.]
- As you reach the scene where Santa makes his big entrance, encourage the children to pay careful attention to the main character and how he responds to the sleigh bell he finds.

After-Movie Discussion:

- When Santa entered, all the children and elves were excited, except the main character. He still couldn't see Santa through the crowd. He wanted to believe so much, but still wanted to see first. Then a sleigh bell rolled his way. What happened next?
He tried ringing it but couldn't hear anything. He said, over and over, “I believe.” Then he could hear the bell ringing...and he saw Santa's reflection in the bell.
- There's a saying that “Seeing is believing.” The main character discovered in that moment that sometimes, believing is seeing (or hearing).
- For the rest of his life, he would be able to hear the bell – “Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me, as it does for all who truly believe.”

Prayer:

Loving God,
We believe in Jesus.
We believe in love.
We believe in you.
Amen.