

"That's What Christmas is All About, Charlie Brown"

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⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

During December, we have been viewing the promises of Advent and Christmas through the lens of some of our most beloved holiday films. And tonight, we conclude this journey with a beloved TV special that almost never happened.

In 1965, most TV executives were skeptical about animated specials. But the year before, NBC had done pretty well with a stop-motion story about a misfit reindeer named Rudolph, and ABC had hit gold with their animated sitcom about a modern stone-age family from the town of Bedrock, who were a page right out of history. CBS was feeling left out and wanted in on the action.

The president of the network loved the "Peanuts" comic strip and was a friend of its creator Charles Schultz, so that seemed like a promising place to start. But right from the beginning, there were concerns: the pace seemed slow, the kids' voices did not seem polished enough for TV, and some even worried that jazz didn't really jive with Christmas music. And when producer Lee Mendelson and animator Bill Melendez gathered with a group to screen the finished product, most of them thought the special would be a huge flop. As the screen went black, Melendez turned to Mendelson and said, "I think we've ruined Charlie Brown."¹

But then one guy at the back of the screening room stood up and said, "You guys are nuts. This is going to run for years and years!"

Obviously, the unnamed man in the back was right. That first season, it is estimated that fifty percent of all the television sets in America were tuned in to "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It seems that the nation's psyche, which was deeply burdened by the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and embroiled in conflict over the Vietnam War, was craving a simple story of hope and light. Perhaps part of it was that America itself could really relate to Charlie Brown – the guy who

¹ Carrie Hagen, "The 'Charlie Brown Christmas' Special Was the Flop That Wasn't," <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/charlie-brown-christmas-special-history-television-classic-cbs-180957490/>, December 9, 2015.



couldn't win a baseball game to save his life, who goes trick or treating but gets a rock every time, who never once kicked that football, and who felt like everything he touched got ruined. Maybe they needed assurance that, in the end, even the Charlie Browns of the world catch a break and get a peaceful, happy ending.

Or maybe people felt more like that sad little Christmas tree Charlie Brown picks out for the play – meager, weak, broken, inadequate. Perhaps they craved the message that, as Linus said, it never was “such a bad little tree” ... that “it’s not bad at all really... and “maybe all it needs is a little love.”

But I think the real reason that “A Charlie Brown Christmas” remains an enduring and cherished part of this season is the answer it gives to the central question that it asks. While it was in production, Charles Schultz happened to be serving as the teacher of the adult Sunday School class at the Sebastopol Methodist Church near his home. So, for him, it was natural, even obvious, that the emotional heart of the special had to be the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke, told word for word, in a single spotlight, at center stage. Most of the production team thought it would be a huge mistake to use biblical scripture so overtly. Bill Melendez spoke for all of them when he pulled Schultz aside and warned him, “That is just not done.”

Charles Schultz’s reply was simple and resolute. “If we don’t do it, who will?”²

This point was clearly non-negotiable for the Peanuts creator. So now, every time this special airs and a frustrated Charlie Brown asks aloud whether anyone really knows what all the hustle and bustle of December is all about, the answer that is given is not a fiery sermon, a list of rules, or some pithy piece of wisdom that can fit neatly on a bumper sticker. Instead, the special answers that all-important question just as the Bible does: with a story.

“Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

“Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.

Lights, please.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not' ...

I’m going to pause right here, because something happens in that instant that I had never noticed before. After watching this Christmas special at least once a year for most of my life, I had never noticed that, as soon as Linus says, “Fear not,” he drops his blanket. He lets his comfort, his sense of security, his sense of safety and reassurance fall to the floor as he utters these ancient words...

“Fear not, for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'”

We have all come here tonight for different reasons, but I am certain we all have some questions... questions about life... what our purpose is... why things happen to us or people we love. At some level, we all wonder from time to time what it’s all about. Those questions are hard to answer. But one thing I know tonight is this – whatever your question might be, the answer can be found somewhere in the story. In fact, the answer is the story.

² Jean Schultz, “Reflections On A Charlie Brown Christmas,” <https://schulzmuseum.org/reflections-on-a-charlie-brown-christmas/#:~:text=The%20reviewer%20continued%20to%20praise,this%20season%20that%20bears%20repeating.%E2%80%9D>

To those who feel like the world is dark and cold, it is a story about the light of the world – a light that is so bright that the darkness can never overcome it.

To those who feel helpless or powerless, it is a story about a lowly peasant girl who is lifted up and made great by a God who promises that, someday, those who are last will be made first.

To those who worry that they will never be strong enough or have enough faith, it is a story that a tiny baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger who will say that a tiny mustard seed may be the smallest of all the seeds on earth, but when it grows up it becomes so full, and so great, that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade, and that even if we have just a seed's worth of faith, we can move mountains.

To those who feel like losers, or who never seem to catch a break, it is a story of the birth of a Savior whose life and death will show the world that what looks like foolishness can be wisdom, and that divine strength can be found even in human weakness.

To those who feel vulnerable and unsafe, it is a story of the coming of the Good Shepherd, who is so committed to being with us in faith, hope and love, that even though we may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear, for he is "God With Us," and his rod and his staff will comfort us and protect us.

To those who are living in fear, it is a story of a glorious message from heaven that we need not be afraid, good tidings of great joy for all people, because divine help is on the way.

And to those who wonder how or why the Creator of the cosmos could even know that we exist, let alone pay us any attention, it is a story of how God so loved the world that he would give his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

The answer is a story. But not just any story... THE story... that, no matter what your struggles or questions may be, God loves you so much that He would break open the heavens and come down... that God is willing to move heaven and earth just to be with you, to find you and lead you safely home.

Amen.