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Spirituality Living the Faith

Friday, December 18, 2009

What's to 'believe' in 'The Polar Express'?

By Rev. Anthony Scannell, OFM Cap.

text only version

A very popular Christmas film from a very popular Christmas book, "The Polar Express" is the story of a journey: a boy's journey on the "magic train" from doubt about Santa Claus to a "dream" (or was it?) that leads him to say, "I believe." The film wants to make believers out of all of us.

But we need to ask, "What's there to 'believe' in The Polar Express"?

I enjoyed immensely this marvelously-made film, because it creates for us everything we dreamed as children that Santa Claus and the North Pole would be like: thousands of elves making our gifts and Santa with his flying reindeer, strung with bells, zooming off in a flair of flares at midnight, Christmas Eve, to deliver them to us.



You can hardly have any doubt about Santa after seeing the 100-minute film (or reading the very short illustrated book), after the boy, who cannot hear the reindeers' bells because of his doubts, finally says, when one of the bells flies off and lands at his feet, "I believe." At that moment he hears the bell ringing, and Santa, when he gives the bell to the boy as "the first gift of Christmas," says, "This bell is a wonderful symbol of the spirit of Christmas, as am I. Just remember, the true spirit of Christmas lies in your heart."

But the boy loses the bell through a hole in his pocket, until he finds it under the tree on Christmas morn. And it rings again for him, "as it does for all who believe." Does that ring a bell for us?!

The film has many things to say about Christmas: in the song, "When Christmas Comes to Town," or when Hero Girl tells reluctant Billy, "But Christmas is such a wonderful, beautiful time. It's a time for giving and being thankful, for friends and family People hang decorations and lights. Santa leaves presents under our Christmas trees."

Or the song of the Elves: "You can hear it if you listen, everywhere so much care. Like a prayer. Whatever it is you need to share it. It's the spirit of the season." Or Santa's words to Billy --- "Friendship is the best gift of all" --- and especially Santa's words to the boy, quoted above.

The theme song, "Believe," puts it all more succinctly: "When it seems the magic's slipped away, we find it all again on Christmas Day... Believe in what your heart is saying... Believe in what you feel inside... You have everything you need, if you just believe, if you just believe."

If we "just believe"? In what? I guess the answer in "The Polar Express" is: Believe in the Spirit of Christmas. It's an inner feeling, a wonderful emotional high, it's all those things mentioned above --- on Christmas day. Maybe even believe in Santa Claus as a symbol of generosity and kindness (based on the real Saint Nicholas story); we live in a Santa Claus culture. But is that enough for the day, or especially the day after?

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Is that enough to keep the bell ringing?

Maybe for some people. "The Polar Express" is another one of those popular Christmas films that has no religious symbols, no Nativity Scene, no mention of the birth of Jesus. Just a marvelous Santa and a bell. And a plea to "Just Believe."



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Thank God we Christians have so much more than that, even as we enjoy every magic minute of Christmas. No presents left by Santa (or St. Nicholas) under the tree will ever speak of the meaning of Christmas as much as a crèche there. And in our hearts.

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Christmastime (and even "The Polar Express") remind us that our faith is a life-long journey, and must grow with us, as we are called to hear the sound of the bell at every stage of our lives.

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Capuchin Franciscan Father Tony Scannell, the former executive publisher of The Tidings, leads the "Soup and Cinema" series of film presentations and Scripture reflections during Advent and Lent at St. Francis De Sales Church, Sherman Oaks; St. Bede the Venerable Church, La Canada-Flintridge; and Holy Family Church, South Pasadena.

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