

"Rough Places"

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- ¹ *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*
- ³ *A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*
- ⁶ *A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*
- ⁹ *Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"*
- ¹⁰ *See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*
- ¹¹ *He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.* (Isaiah 40:1-11)

If I were to say that Frank Capra's 1946 movie *It's a Wonderful Life* is a Christmas miracle, you might think it is because of the special place it holds in so many hearts around the world. And that is true. But it is also a miracle because of how it all started out.

In 1946, America was still very much in recovery mode from World War II. People just weren't going to movies. Despite five Academy Award nominations, the film lost tons of money, so much money that it bankrupted the movie studio Frank Capra and some of his army buddies had founded. Liberty Films and its owners gambled everything it had on this first movie, and they lost it all.

That would likely be the end of a tragic story, had it not been for a minor clerical error. After its demise, the intellectual property of Liberty Films passed to Paramount Pictures, then later to Republic Pictures. Although studios know very well that, in order to protect their copyrights, they must renew them within 28 years of the release date, Republic failed to submit the required paperwork. Maybe it was a mistake, or maybe they didn't think it was worth the trouble to keep the copyright on a flop. Either way, *It's a Wonderful Life* passed into the public domain in 1974. That meant it could run on television for little to no cost, and the rest is history. Like its main character George Bailey, the movie made it through a very rough patch and was miraculously given a new lease on life.¹

¹ Jared Canfield, "How *It's a Wonderful Life* Went From Box Office Dud to Christmas Classic," <https://screenrant.com/its-a-wonderful-life-box-office-flop/>, published Dec. 25, 2016.



That is the hope of the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 40. It is a word spoken to a people who had been conquered by an invading army, suffered terrible injuries and tragic losses, and then carried off into exile in Babylon. The monarchy that God had promised would last forever was ended by regicide, and many feared that their families, their faith, and their heritage were lost forever. But then Isaiah's word is shouted from the mountaintop -- *"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Tell Jerusalem that her pain is about to end, that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, and that help is on the way... Every valley shall be lifted up, every rocky mountain will be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."*

Most of us know pretty well the mountains, valleys, and rough places that George Bailey has to walk in *It's a Wonderful Life*: his plans to explore the world are foiled by his father's death and his duty to the family business; his honeymoon is wrecked by a run on the bank; and then Uncle Billy's absent-mindedness with a large sum of cash threatens George with bankruptcy and criminal prosecution. The story still resonates after nearly 80 years because his struggles are real and known to many. All of us have difficult mountains to climb. All of us must navigate dark and dangerous valleys. All of us go through rough patches.

Rev. Theresa Thames, an African-American Methodist pastor and the Associate Dean of Religious Life and the Chapel at Princeton University, tells a powerful story about one of those patches in her life. She had been invited to officiate a wedding at a resort in Hawaii, with the family paying all travel and lodging expenses to get her there. [Just to be clear, if any of you are considering a destination wedding in Hawaii, I want you to know that I am here for you.] But seriously, this invitation came at a critical time in Rev. Thames' life. She was recently divorced, and it had been painful. And as beautiful as Hawaii was, that beauty just reminded her of all that she had lost. "When I looked around," she said, "I realized that Hawaii is for lovers, for families. That's where people go to honeymoon and for family vacations." And that realization broke her heart.

She took her broken heart back to the hotel, ordered room service, and just sat there for a long time, eating and crying in front of the TV. Eventually she forced herself to rally. "You have to get out of this hotel room," she said to herself. "You are in *Hawaii*."

So she got up and went down to the concierge desk. She looked through all the tourist pamphlets and one jumped out at her. "Hike Diamondhead Mountain," it said. "Easy beginner's hike. Anyone can do it." Thames had never been on a hike before. She had no idea what she was doing, no idea what to take with her, but this seemed like just what she needed. So she just starting packing up things she saw in the room: a water bottle... that made sense... but then she packed a full lunch... a basket she found in the bathroom... scissors... some string. Everything but the bathroom sink. She puts some sandals on her feet, takes a bus to the trailhead, and starts the hike.

The first five minutes were glorious. Sun shining. Beautiful scenery. But then reality set in – in three important ways. First of all, it was July 4th weekend, and it was boiling hot. Like crazy hot.

Secondly, that pamphlet had lied. This was no beginner's hike! "I was going up the rough side of the mountain," she said. The trail scrambled over sharp crags, passed over treacherous ledges, and was relentlessly steep.

Last but not least, she realized just how much weight she was carrying. Today she is very fit and slim, but when this took place she was 250 pounds heavier. "I was carrying all

of this weight,” she said, “ and I am slowing down. I am out of water. The sun is beating, and I am thinking, I just can’t do this.” Taking frequent breaks, she forces herself to keep going.

But nearing the very top of the mountain, she comes to a point where the trail enters a dark, narrow tunnel. It was a claustrophobic person’s worst nightmare, and that’s when it all came crashing down. You know we all have that emotional junk closet – that place where we try to put away all the things that worry us, mess us up, or weigh us down. And then we get to a moment when we try to put one more thing in there, and it is just too much, and all that junk comes crashing down on us. That tunnel was her moment. She stepped to the side of the trail, exhausted, ashamed, heart palpitating, overcome with anxiety. She was just about to quit when a couple she did not know came up to her.

“What if we go with you?” the woman said. “If you put your hand on my husband’s shoulder and I put my hand on your shoulder we can guide you through the tunnel.” And that’s what they did. Step by step, yard by yard, the three of them made their way through the pitch-black darkness. Soon, a small light appeared up ahead. And the rocky trail became smooth, and the hill leveled out, and she had made it to the top of the mountain.

“As I exited the tunnel,” Thames said, “it felt like I had been born again. Like this sense of accomplishment that I did this thing, and the view was so worth it.” Everyone around her could sense the importance of the moment. They were cheering for her, taking selfies with her. With joy she sat down to rest and take in the view.

What happened next is still a bit of a mystery to her. “I am sitting down on the ground with my bookbag,” she said, “and the next thing I know, I let my hair down.” At the time her head was covered with long, rich dreadlocks. “I let my hair down,” she said, “ and I just started cutting it. I am crying and cutting, crying and cutting lock by lock of my hair.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind she remembered reading something that Coco Chanel once said, that “A woman who cuts her hair is about to change her life.” And in that moment, that is exactly what she felt was happening. The more she cut, the more freedom she felt. She pulled the basket out of her pack, and she put all of that cut hair into it.

“As I turned around to go back down through that tunnel,” she remembers, “I was not afraid, I was ready, I was confident. And it was amazing.”

Back at the hotel room, she had some repair work to do. She had not packed a mirror for the hike, so her hairdo was, in her words, “a hot mess.” She did her best to neaten it up, because she still had a wedding to officiate. But that did not matter at all to her.

“As I looked in that mirror,” she said, “I saw myself. I saw me. I wasn’t hiding behind any hair. Eleven years of hair had grown, and it was gone, and it was me.”

The day before she flew home, Theresa Thames took that basket full of hair to a big rock at the edge of the water and set it gently onto the surface of the Pacific Ocean. “As I watched that basket float away,” she said, “ what I knew was that in that basket was not just eleven years of locks. It was eleven years of compromising... eleven years of bad love... eleven years of not having boundaries... eleven years of settling... eleven years of turning around... eleven years of not seeing myself. But now, I was free. I was free.”²

That feeling of liberation is exactly what Isaiah promises to people who had been struggling for a long, long time. It is a promise that there will be a time when all the rough

² Theresa Thames, “The Rough Side of the Mountain,”
https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=33572

and rocky places in our lives will be smoothed out... when fearsome obstacles that once seemed insurmountable will be leveled, and problems that once seemed unsolvable will be resolved... when every tear will be wiped away and suffering will end.

It is, we have to say, a real Hollywood ending... like the story of a 1946 film that began as a flop, bankrupting its studio and making its director feel like a failure, only to be rediscovered years later and become one of the most beloved movies of all time... or the story of its main character, who had fallen so low that he thought life was not worth living, only to be shown in miraculous fashion the rich treasures that had been his all along.

In the end, we are reminded that, with God, every life is and can be a wonderful thing, and even those of us who are struggling now can someday find our wings.

Amen.