

One of my favorite holiday movies is the 1987 classic, *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. OK, yes, I know, technically it's a Thanksgiving movie and we're now in Advent. Thanksgiving is so a week-and-a-half ago.

But *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* is all about trying to get back home for the holiday. And that's a theme that carries over from November to December.

After all, we're still hearing,

"Oh there's no place like home for the holidays..."

And, "I'll be home for Christmas..."

*Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* is the story of an ad executive, Neal Page, played by Steve Martin who's trying to fly home to Chicago from a business trip in New York a couple of days before Thanksgiving. But there's a snowstorm in Chicago, and his flight gets diverted to Wichita, Kansas.

In Wichita, he teams up with someone he encountered in New York and again on the flight, a talkative shower-curtain ring salesman, Del Griffith played by John Candy. Neal and Del join forces to try to get Neal home to Chicago in time for Thanksgiving. On the way they encounter a series of comic misadventures together.

Now, we all know that just because a movie is set somewhere, it's not necessarily filmed there. I lived in Wichita, KS for 11 years. There's not one bit of the real Wichita in this movie. But I also went to seminary in the Chicago area. And when we would drive back and forth from Texas to Chicago, we would always look for the Braidwood Inn, the motel where Neal and Del spend their first night of their journey. The Braidwood Inn was supposedly in Wichita, KS. But it's actually in Braidwood, IL, on the SW fringes of the Chicago metro area. Renee and I knew that when we passed the Braidwood Inn, we were only an hour and a half from the seminary.

Plus, while in seminary, I did field work at Annunciation of Our Lady Episcopal Church in Gurnee, IL. And just a mile from Annunciation was the El Rancho motel, which was the filming location where Neal and Del spent their second night on the road.

But we know that movies are not always filmed where they're set. *The Buddy Holly Story* was set in Lubbock but filmed in Georgia and California.

The 2016 movie *Hell or High Water* was set in Lubbock and in surrounding small towns. But it was filmed in New Mexico, and the Lubbock scenes were shot in Albuquerque.

But then again, the movie *The Last of the Mohicans* was set in upstate New York and filmed in North Carolina. The film *Cold Mountain* was set in North Carolina but mostly filmed in Europe, in Romania of all places. So we know the images presented to us on the big screen don't always reflect reality.

And that's something important for us to remember. There are lots of images out there in our world. But they don't always match up with reality.

And that's especially true this time of year. During Advent we are bombarded with lots of warm and fuzzy images. We have images of the perfect Christmas, the ideal holiday celebration. But we have to remember, those are images that don't necessarily line up with reality.

Now I don't know about you, but my Christmas never looks like it does on TV. I've never pulled up to a house in the middle of snowy woods riding in a horse drawn sleigh. The food doesn't magically appear out of nowhere—it takes a lot of work and preparation. Our Christmas tree doesn't look like Martha Stewart and her entire staff spent a week decorating it.

In fact, the idea of the Christmas tree is a little strange to begin with. In many ways, Christmas trees are more about image rather than real substance.

Question: How do you make a Christmas tree?

There are two ways.

1. You find a living tree. You cut it off from its roots, which makes it a dying tree. You bring it into your house, so it can slowly drop needles all over the carpet. You cover it with lights and ornaments and tinsel to hide the decay. Then you throw it away before it catches your house on fire.

Or 2. someone in a factory takes some metal tubes and metal wires. They add some green plastic or nylon pieces to it. And they make an imitation tree, a tree that was never really alive. Then you can stick it up in your house and pretend it's real.

Either way, it's a little strange. I'm not trying to run down our practice of having Christmas trees. They are beautiful. They warm my heart. But ironically, Christmas trees are beautiful on the outside, but lifeless on the inside. External glitz and glitter. Internal lifelessness. Image, not real substance.

But if you think about it, ALL of our Christmas decorations are external. They are about outer image. They don't really change anything inside.

We don't remodel our houses to prepare for Christmas. We just put up some decorations and lights. Christmas decorations give the illusion of change without really changing anything. They are somewhat superficial. They are simply exterior cosmetic things that we slap up on the outside without ever touching what's inside.

And our holiday décor is very temporary. The decorations will be up for a number of weeks. Then they'll go into the box to collect dust until next year. And I'm afraid, when they go into the box, the artificial good feelings they create are often gone as well.

That's the great danger of our culture anyway. Substance is often missing. A big plastic and metal fake evergreen tree in the corner of my living room may be beautiful to look at, but it doesn't change the way I am as a person. Hanging up a bunch of big decorated socks on the mantle is fun, but it doesn't change my heart in the slightest.

There's got to be more to Christmas than external glitz and internal lifelessness.

We've got lots of image. But what is the substance? What is the reality we're hoping for? What's behind the image that reflects what we are we longing for?

Our Epistle lesson this morning is from 1Thessalonians. Brief trivia. 1Thessalonians is probably the oldest book in the New Testament. There's a minority group of biblical scholars who think that Galatians is a bit older. But most scholars think 1Thessalonians is the oldest. The Epistles pre-date the Gospels. And 1Thessalonians is probably the oldest epistle extant.

So what burning and important theological issue is Paul discussing here? What profound doctrine is he writing about? Actually, in this section of 1Thessalonians, Paul is dealing with something more basic. Relationships.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy had founded the church in the Greek city of Thessalonica. And then they had moved on to plant other churches elsewhere. But Paul writes back to these Christians in Thessalonica basically to say, 'We miss you.'

He writes, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face." He writes, "May God... and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you."

It's a very warm letter. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the thought of them fills him with joy. He is thankful to God for them and for his relationship with them. And he hopes that the Thessalonian Christians will continue to grow in love for each other just as Paul and his co-founders abound in love for all of them. He hopes that their love for each other will overflow, that God will use them and their love for each other as a launching pad. That that love will grow and overflow and bless others outside their circle. And finally, he hopes that God will allow him to see them all again. Paul treasures his relationship with the Thessalonians.

At heart, I believe that same feeling is behind all of our holiday hopes and longings. We want loving relationships with others. Friends. Family members. That's what many of our warm holiday images are all about at heart.

That doesn't mean it's always easy. Our friends and families are real people. And real people often have difficulties in relating to each other, even at Christmas. And I'll say more about that in a couple of weeks.

But Paul longs to be with the Thessalonians. And we long to be with those we love. And that's the central theme of *Plains, Trains, and Automobiles*. Neal Page is trying to get home to spend Thanksgiving with the family he loves. And on the way, he's also having to deal with a new person in his life, shower-curtain ring salesman Del Griffith.

Neal and Del are not always the easiest people to get along with. Neal is pretty cynical. And he has some really sharp edges to his personality that can cut other people. Del is more amiable. But Del wants to be liked so much that he's not always truthful with others. Del will often resort to bending the truth or telling white lies to spare others' feelings. And yet in spite of their flaws, Del and Neal become friends. And Neal becomes close enough to Del to realize that one of the white lies that Del has been telling was in referring to his wife in the present tense. In reality, Del has been a widower for 8 years.

And so at the end of the movie, Neal makes it home to spend the holiday with his family. But he brings Del along with him. And as Neal greets his wife, his first words to her are, "Honey, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine." Neal's definition of family, Neal's circle has enlarged to include Del.

During Advent we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus came as "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." Through Jesus we are given access to God. We are made part of God's family. We share friendship and relationship with the God who created us and loves us.

And all of our impulses, all of our longings for home and friendship and family and love, can find their perfect fulfillment in the love God has for us. And hopefully, that love God has for us can overflow into the love we have for others.

As Paul prays, "May God make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all," just as God abounds in love for you.