

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



“Buddy, Bandits, and BB Guns: A Christmas Message”

Remarks by Head of School Lee Burns '87
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Middle School Chaplain and Director of Day Admission Mr. Adam Webb asked me last Friday what my favorite play of the previous night's dramatic state championship football game was. My mind immediately raced to a multitude of exciting, important plays that shaped the arc and outcome of the game. Was it Jay's scrambling pass to Enrique, who tipped it to himself and tiptoed down the sidelines? Or one of Javon's bruising runs or his critical catch on the Left Bundle 91 Moses numbers play on a long third down late in the fourth quarter? Or was it one of the gutsy defensive stops inside our ten yard line, or the huge interception by Marcellus, or Butta's stop of Amari on 4th and 12, or Carson's athletic grab of a touchdown pass in the corner of the end zone, or Zach or Nolan's TD catches? I also thought about the several times Baylor had a false start, delay of game, or bad snap because of how loud the student section was yelling and cheering.

But I chose a different play: the last play of the game, victory formation, when Nathan snapped it to Jay, who, surrounded and protected by the rugged offensive linemen, took a knee.

On Friday night, I enjoyed seeing a second consecutive night of exquisite talent and teamwork as I watched over 300 McCallie and GPS students perform Candlelight with a beautiful array of singing, strings, instruments and bells. The music was as carefully crafted as a particular blocking scheme or blitz and required the choreographed group precision needed for big plays on the field. As was the football game, Candlelight was majestic and beautiful, and it culminated with the song, “O Holy Night,” whose favorite lyric to me is, “Fall on your knees.”





Almost 24 hours to the minute of when Jay took a knee on the football field, our Candlelight Chorus was singing in this chapel, “Fall on your knees.”

Candlelight helps us usher in the Christmas season. For me, it helps to prepare my heart and mind for worship and wonder. There are, of course, many things and traditions that can do so as well, including several Christmas movies.

Perhaps my favorite Christmas movie is *Elf*, the story of a baby boy at an orphanage who crawls into Santa’s toy bag on Christmas Eve and is accidentally brought back to the North Pole, where he is raised by Papa Elf, Santa and the village of elves. A large human being living in the world of small elves, Buddy begins to realize that there is something different about him, and Papa Elf one day reveals to Buddy that he is actually a human and that his father, Walter Hobbs, works in the Empire State building in New York City and is, sadly, on the naughty list.

Buddy sets out for New York to find and meet his father, whose love he instinctively seeks and needs. Santa and Papa Elf had counseled Buddy on the differences between the North Pole and New York. Their advice includes not eating yellow snow, and if you see gum on the street, it’s not free candy. Buddy meets his father, who didn’t know Buddy existed, doesn’t believe him to be his son, and finds him aggravating. Buddy is nonetheless exuberant about meeting his dad and wants to spend all their time together, eating cookie dough, making gingerbread houses, eating sugar plums and cookies, and ice skating and snuggling. Buddy is confused about the human world with its ginormous toilets and escalators, radiator heat and department store Santas. He explains to the Hobbs family about the four main food groups: candy, candy corns, candy canes, and syrup, a bottle of which he carries in his sleeve. He hangs out at Gimbels Toy Store, where he shares the elf motto that “the best way to spread Christmas cheer is by singing loudly for all to hear.”



The incongruence between his elf culture and human culture creates the tension and humor of the movie, and that disconnect eventually leads to the optimistic, cheerful Buddy thinking he doesn’t belong and isn’t loved. He wanted a father, but his father rejected him. He wanted to learn who he was and his story, but he believed himself to be a misfit, a castaway, a nobody...not part of any meaningful story.

He is all alone.





Eight-year-old Kevin McCallister, in the movie *Home Alone*, is accidentally left behind in his Chicago house in the midst of the chaos of his family that had overslept racing to the airport for a holiday trip to Paris. Initially delighted that his annoying family and relatives are gone and that he has the whole house to himself, Kevin fends for himself. He gets groceries and cooks for himself, tries after-shave lotion, and even keeps the house straight. Two bumbling criminals, Marv and Harry, self-named the Wet Bandits, had scoped out the McCallister house to rob and plan their burglary, which Kevin discovers and sets a series of elaborate traps to keep them at bay.



Kevin's mom, meanwhile, panics when she realizes they have left Kevin behind and begins a desperate journey back from Europe to get home to him, though she is unable to get in touch with him. As she races back, Kevin slowly realizes the impact of being alone. All alone.

Two years later, in *Home Alone 2*, the family loses Kevin in New York City, where he checks himself into the famous and posh Plaza Hotel and is once again hounded by the Wet Bandits, now calling themselves the Sticky Bandits. His mother, once again, realizes the danger, pain and loneliness Kevin must be experiencing, and she conducts a relentless search for Kevin, running through dark and dangerous streets, with great risk and no sleep. Kevin, though, is unaware of her frantic search, pursuit, and loving rescue mission.

At the conclusion of both *Home Alone* movies, the mother finds Kevin in touching scenes of love and reunion. In *Home Alone 2*, their reunion is at the famous Christmas Tree in Rockefeller Plaza. Kevin had just said he doesn't deserve Christmas when his mother finds him there. The lost had been found.

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Another young boy, Ralphie, the protagonist of *A Christmas Story*, is not lost but the desperate pursuer of the perfect gift: “an official Red Ryder, carbine action, 200-shot, range model air rifle, with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time.”



For months, he told his parents, teachers, friends, and Santa Claus exactly what he wanted. He was told, however, that no, he can't get one, because he will shoot his eye out. Even Santa tells him this.

On Christmas morning, he gets a disappointing array of gifts, including socks and a fluffy pink bunny pajama ensemble with built-in slippers. After all the presents had been opened, his father points out to a downcast Ralphie that it looks like there is one more present beyond the tree. Ralphie's spirits rise at this, and they soar a minute later when he opens the very Red Ryder BB gun he had craved all year. All is right in the world, he says.



Clark Griswold, the exuberant dad in *Christmas Vacation*, is determined to give his family a perfect Christmas. Enthusiastic and idealistic, he strings thousands of lights on their house, wants to share magical and sentimental activities and meals with his family, and plans to surprise his family with a gift, a swimming pool, that will thrill them.

Of course, it all goes wrong. The lights don't work. His relatives, including the big-hearted but dimwitted cousin Eddy and his family, arrive from out of town, pulling up on fumes in their RV. The relatives bring their idiosyncrasies and bickering, their pets and pessimism, their cigars and chaos. The dog wrecks the dining room table during the Christmas Eve dinner just before a cigar ignites the Christmas tree, killing the cat of a grandmother who had said the pledge of allegiance when asked to say the blessing. Clark's annual Christmas bonus with which he was going to put in the pool for



his family turns out to be a membership in a jelly of the month club, leading cousin Eddy to kidnap Clark's boss that ends in the climatic scene with a police SWAT team crashing through the Griswold home to rescue the boss and arrest the Griswolds. Clark's Hallmark style Christmas, perfectly planned, worked at so hard, turned out to be a chaotic and unpredictable nightmare.



These four movies, for all their humor, remind me not just of the traditions and trappings of Christmas, but of the need for Christmas. Like Buddy, we have, deep down, in ways that we cannot fully articulate, a need to know and understand who we are, where we came from, what our story is, and who our father is. Written in the human heart is a desire to be found, to be known and loved, not at a distance, but up close, in a personal and powerful way.

Christians believe that God sent His Son, Jesus, so that we might know God in a personal way, up close, not simply abstractly or from a distance. God took on human form, flesh and blood, like us, with our struggles and sorrows, having left the glory and comforts of heaven to descend down to earth in a way we could see...in a way that fits with us...in our human culture...in a way that could show more fully His love for us, His plan for us.

Buddy came to New York, from elf culture to human culture, to find his father. God came to earth, to humans, as Jesus to reveal Himself and our Father, to create the way to God the Father.



For all the holiday festivities and busyness this time of year, December can be a lonely month. But not just December, all the months can be. It's easy and common to be alone, even when you are home, even when you are surrounded with people and presents, even when you are popular and powerful, even when you are staying in the Plaza, even when your life looks perfect to others. No matter what you have, or what you do, or where you are, you will ultimately be lonely and empty without God.

God, though, desires a relationship with us in a deeply personal way, overwhelming our loneliness with love. He invites us into fellowship with Him...not aloneness. He calls us to receive His love. He doesn't leave us alone; in fact, he pursues us, like Kevin's mom, relentlessly, persistently, lovingly, even as we are unaware of it, even as we are undeserving of it. He pursues and pursues and pursues...even when we run and resist and recoil.

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He sent Jesus to pursue us in a messy and broken world...a Griswold family gathering, with ruined meals and burned trees, temper tantrums and SWAT teams. Our lives often don't go as we want or expect or seem fair or good. And it's not just the world that is messy and broken, but we are, too. We are all flawed, imperfect, selfish, prideful, greedy, and messy—bandits—sinners for sure despite our sometimes good and noble intentions and deeds. We are incapable of consistently living up to our best intentions and worthy ideals. We fail and fall, in little and big ways, in public and private ways, in ways that make us anxious or addicted, ashamed or adrift, alienated or all-about-me.

God sent Jesus to rescue us. To rescue us from ourselves, from our sins, from the consequences of our sins, as He paid the price of all of our sins on the cross and gives us His perfect record instead. He takes us off the naughty list, works off all our demerits—millions of them—past, present and future ones. He transforms us from bumbling

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man, to become a human being, to experience pain and suffering, to live a perfect life yet be die a brutal and unfair death—all to show us His love, to show us our purpose and path, to rescue and redeem us, and to get us to our eternal home...a home with Him, not a home alone.

The Christmas story tells us the grand narrative of who we are: children, beloved by God, created in His image, with inherent dignity and worth, with a purpose to glorify and enjoy Him, with a future of glory and perfection purchased for us, gifted to us by grace, to be claimed by us through faith.

It is the ultimate gift—infinitely better than the best BB gun we could ever desire. Better than anything we could put on a Christmas list. Better than anything for which we could hope.

So how do we respond to perfect and unconditional love, relentless pursuit, and undeserved rescue? With gratitude, yes, and with joy and worship as we fall on our knees.

Sometimes when we fall on our knees it is in victory, like the last play of a football game. And sometimes it is in surrender, when we acknowledge our weaknesses. As we fall on our knees in gratitude and tribute to God, in surrender, we also claim victory, for Jesus has overcome the world, has overcome sin and even death, and He invites us to be co-heirs with Him in that most glorious victory. Let us, with joy, fall on our knees in surrender as we celebrate in victory.

Joy to the world!

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bandits to beloved sons, from lost to found. This frees us from our need to perform, to be perfect, to be powerful. This frees us from our inclination to feel superior to others, but to love and forgive each other instead. He frees us from our guilt and shame, replacing them with joy and peace as we receive and increasingly internalize the depth and magnitude of His love and forgiveness.

Christians celebrate at Christmas the birth of Jesus: a miraculous birth in which God breaks into human history. But more than the divine birth in a dirty, dingy manger, Christmas is the story of the unconditional, immeasurable love that the God of the universe demonstrates by sending His Son, fully God and fully

