

'Tis the season of Advent, yes, but also of the Hallmark Channel Christmas movie. Romantic (some might say sappy) holiday movies have been playing 24 hours a day on that channel for weeks now. My Christmas Love, A Holiday Engagement, Christmas in Homestead: the list goes on and on – on and on for so long, in fact, that you might wonder how so many movies could be written and produced in so little time. The answer is simple: they're all the same movie. They are so much the same movie, in fact, that we could write our own, right now, Mad Libs Style. Title: A Christmas *Blank*. (Fill in an event or an item – you know, A Christmas Cruise, A Christmas Calendar, A Christmas Corkscrew). The plot: A young woman (always a woman) who works as a *blank* (high-powered attorney, television personality, cupcake shop owner) is unhappy because *blank* (she works too hard, her fiancé left her, she's talented but broke). She has lost her Christmas spirit, until...her world is turned upside down when she *blank* (inherits an inn, has to return home to run the family

business, meets a Christmas ghost). When she returns to *blank* (hometown, small town, definitely not the city), she meets *blank* (the handsome, kind-hearted diner owner; the handsome, kind-hearted music teacher; or the handsome, kind-hearted Christmas ghost). The two of them spend time shopping locally, drinking hot chocolate, and serving at the local *blank* (soup kitchen, food pantry, orphanage). The woman sees the light and decides to give up her job in the city to *blank* (help run the inn, open a hometown photography studio, stay with the aforementioned ghost). She finds the spirit of Christmas along with her true self, her true home, and maybe even her true love. Tah-dah! That's it. Add in a few scenes of an adorable, old-timey town all decked out for Christmas, with a sparkling tree in the town square, mounds of pure white snow, and enthusiastic carolers with perfect teeth, and you've got yourself a Hallmark Christmas movie.

At this point, I interrupt this sermon for a confession, which is that I *love* these movies. They're so much fun to watch – everything

is beautiful, everyone is beautiful, there's always a happy ending, and even if you start watching them halfway through you can still enjoy the kiss at the end. My enlightened brain tells me that these movies are somewhat problematic in that they present an overly simplistic portrayal of familial and romantic love, they're disappointingly heteronormative, and they're hopelessly biased towards small-town America. As one friend recently posted on Twitter, I'm looking for the Hallmark movie where a woman learns the true meaning of Christmas by leaving her hometown, moving to the big city, beginning a fantastic career, finding a church home, growing meaningful friendships, and discovering she's a marvelous, beautiful, whole person, even without a man. But I doubt Hallmark will be changing its formula any time soon; they've tapped into something universal and powerful – the desire of human beings to know and be known, to find their place, to go home.

Going home is not only a universal and powerful theme, it's

also an ancient one. Going home is all that the Israelites ever wanted. They wanted a home to call their own, where they could plant seeds and raise children and worship their God. They wanted a home where they could be marvelous, beautiful, whole people, where they could know and be known. But again and again that home was taken away from them, first by famine and then by slavery, by conquering kingdoms and then by exile, and finally by the ravenous empire of Rome. They longed for a place where everyone could have her own vine and fig tree, but when they could not find it, they hung up their harps, sowed with tears, and went out weeping. The people wandered in the wilderness, were driven to Babylon, and after finally returning to Jerusalem found themselves in a city that was no longer their own.

But each time this people found themselves unhappy, and their spirits dried up and withered, God sent prophets to tell them that there was more to the plot of their story than they knew. “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem. Arise, O

Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them.” In other words, Fear not, O my people, and be not afraid. While you may imagine yourselves trapped in a life that does not feel like your own, while you may feel that your spirit is broken and that you will never find joy or laughter again, that is not your story. For God has not abandoned you. God knows your longing, and God will bring you home.

John the Baptist is the last in that long line of prophets who reveal the heart of God’s holy plot. He leaves the city of Jerusalem and returns to the wilderness, to that very place where the Israelites first learned their true identity as the chosen, beloved children of God. John knows that his people are feeling lost and threatened, disheartened and broken by the Roman occupation that darkens every moment of their existence. How can they ever find themselves again, find love again, if their home no longer belongs to them? But

Blessed John the Baptist is a prophet, and he sees the scope of their story in a way that they cannot. And so he speaks the same words to them that God has spoken to the Israelites for centuries. Fear not, O Jerusalem, for the Lord is making his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low. All of you shall see the salvation of God. All of you shall come home.

We don’t often think about Advent as a time made for homecoming – waiting, perhaps, or getting ready. But in truth, going home is at the heart of this season. Repent and return to the Lord, John tells us, and what is returning to the Lord if not coming home? You have wandered far away – you have run off to the big city, or to the wrong relationship, or to a life so filled with busy-ness that there is no time for prayer – and God is calling you to return. God is calling you to repent and to come home. Come home to discover that you are a marvelous, beautiful whole person, beloved of God. Come home to discover that God has always been here for you, waiting to

welcome you back to your true self. Come home to find the forgiveness that has always been laid out for you, the mercy that has always been woven into the fabric of your story.

And this home is not some idyllic, far-away place like a small, snowy town on Christmas Eve. This home is far closer and far more real than that. This home is right here, where two or three are gathered. This home is in the life you live now, not somewhere you have to escape to but something that has always been within you. For this home is Christ himself, who is always reaching out to you, always inviting you to repent, to turn to him, to come back and come home.

In those times when we feel lost and alone, when we feel like we have wandered from the path and lost our way, Advent helps us to find our way home. The light of these candles shines into the darkness to remind us that there is more to the plot of our story than we realized. It is the same story that has been told over and over again for generations. It is so much the same story, that we can write it

ourselves, Mad Lib style: Title, An Advent *Blank* (Discovery, Redemption, Healing). Plot: We, the people of God, whose lives are so often *blank* (stressful, lonely, sad, frightening, tedious) have our world turned upside down when we *blank* (stop, be still, and pray; hear an old hymn with new ears; open our heart to a spiritual friend; make our confession; risk being generous). When we return to *blank* (ourselves, stillness, vulnerability, the Altar), we meet *blank* (the beautiful, kind-hearted Spirit of God, the loving Christ who comes, the Holy Father who forgives, the Divine Mother who comforts). We decide to give up their need for *blank* (control, self-sufficiency, things, sin), and to return to the Lord. The spirit of Advent has helped us discover ourselves, our home, and our true love, even our Savior, Jesus Christ. Tah-dah! The story of Advent. Your story. So welcome home.

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