

Midnight Clear (2006)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hours 42 min.

Our Content ratings (0-10): Violence 3; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (0-5): 3.5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:5

This film, directed by Dallas Jenkins, not to be mistaken for the WW2 film *A Midnight Clear*, has an interesting history, in that writer Jerry B. Jenkins made a short film based on his short story. Then, when he met and became friends with actor Stephen Baldwin, he turned it into a feature film that movingly explores a number of lonely people on a Christmas Eve, some of whom are ready to give up on life. We meet first Lefty (Stephen Baldwin), so addicted to the bottle that he always shows up late to work. His alcoholism has already cost him his marriage, and on Christmas Eve his long-suffering boss tells him he can no longer put up with his slovenly work habits. Lefty, who is not really left-handed (the story of how he received his nick name is one of several light moments in the film), steals some tools and trades them for a gun.

Eva (K Callan) is an elderly widow no longer in contact with her grown children. As she goes about the day, calling her doctor about her pills, closing out her bank account, and later preparing a brew by soaking all the pills in a pan of hot water, we see that she is getting ready to leave this world.

When we first meet youth director Mitch (Mitchell Jarvis) he is complaining to his pastor about having to go out Christmas

caroling with the youth group. The minister assures him that the mission will be good for him and the youth and for the parishioners. (We are not so sure of the latter when we hear the group's off key, unenthusiastic singing!) Once we learn of his past we surmise that there is a deeper reason for his reluctance: Christmas Eve is the anniversary of the motorcycle accident with his best friend Rick. Whereas he walked away unscathed, Rick has been comatose in a nursing home ever since. When he encounters Mary he feels guilty because he cannot bring himself to visit his friend.

Mary (Mary Thornton) might as well as be a widow, her husband Rick being unable to recognize or communicate with her for a year. She faithfully visits him with their young son Jacob, telling him of their happenings and that she loves him. She is so saddened that only the pastor of her church visits Rick. The others feel too uncomfortable, not knowing what to say or do in his presence. Kirk (Kirk Woller) owns a gas station/convenience store. His dreams of doing well by store dried up when the city did not spread out to his somewhat lonely location. The unkempt condition of himself and his building are a reflection of his inward sense of loss. When Mary and Jacob arrive with a disabled car, he tells them that all the garages are closed. Shrugging off their problem at first, he then makes a decision that will affect the lives of all three of them. Also Lefty stops in, at first to shoplift a bottle of booze, and then he fingers the gun hidden in his pocket.

The actors, under Jenkins' deft direction, keep the film from slipping into the bathos or saccharine sentimentality that beset most TV Christmas movies. This one rings true, highlighting how necessary it is that "the Word became flesh and lived among us." An excellent film for the group that wants an alternative to *It's a Wonderful Life*.

For Reflection/Discussion

This definitely contains spoilers, so wait until you see the film before reading on.

1) There are five characters in the ensemble cast film: with which did you identify the closest? Why? Do any of the characters resemble someone whom you know?

2) How does Lefty show that addicted persons are their own worst enemy? Does he seem able to accept blame for what happens to him?

3) What is Eva preparing to do on Christmas Eve? What clues led you to surmise this? What is it that stops her?

4) When Lefty trades the stolen items for a gun, what did you think he planned to do with it? What passes through his mind as he sits that night in his car? Instead, what does it look like

he is about to do?

5) Why is Rick unable to visit the comatose Rick? How is he more concerned about himself than his friend?

6) What seems to keep Mary going, visiting her disabled husband faithfully? Why has she not been to church since the accident? Does this make you think about your own church and how its members support, or fail to, a family in dire need? Does your church have a program for training members and officers in a deaconate ministry?

7) What had been Kirk's dream in regard to his station and store? Have any of your dreams met a similar fate? What can one do when the world goes in the opposite way in which you had planned and hoped?

8) What do you think of the pastor's words to Mitch, especially when he says that there are some things that we do just because they are right, and not because we will derive some benefit from them?

9) There are many moments of grace in the film, but the sequences at Kirk's store and in Eva's home seem to be the greatest. How does Kirk become an agent of grace, leading Mary to become one too? Lefty and Eva? (Were you surprised to learn of the relationship between the latter two?)

10) Some might regard the concluding church scene a bit too simplistic or hopeful for these people with complex problems. What do you think? Given the subtle, spare handling of the various stories, do you think the filmmakers were really saying that everything is solved, or merely offering a glimmer of hope for some folk who still have a long struggle ahead of them? Where do you see God at work in this film?

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