

Polar Express (2004)

Rated G Our rating: V-1; L-1; S/N-1

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:2

When the Star Wars Special Polar Express Edition was released in 1997, I remember looking at some of the new computer-generated scenes thinking, "Well, they've got these effects looking photo realistic. Now they just have to get the human movement to look realistic." When I saw The Polar Express, I became convinced that Hollywood could now create realistic-looking human movement in computer-generated characters. The effects in The Polar Express truly are nothing short of amazing (although, as you might read in a number of other reviews, the characters expressions were still pretty stiff).

The story follows the journey of a young boy (action by Tom Hanks, voice by Daryl Sabara) who is beginning to doubt that Santa Claus is real. On Christmas Eve, a locomotive pulls up outside his bedroom and the conductor (Tom Hanks) invites the boy to get on board the Polar Express. On his way to the North Pole, the Hero Boy (as he is named in the credits) meets some friends—Hero Girl (Nona Gay), Know-it-all (Eddie Deezen), Lonely Boy (Peter Scolar), and a mysterious Hobo (Tom Hanks).

These friends help the Hero Boy to rediscover his faith in the spirit of Christmas.

When the Polar Express reaches the North Pole, the children on the train are told that Santa Claus will give one of them the first Christmas gift of the year. Hero Boy, Hero Girl, and Lonely Boy end up getting lost. Hero Girl and Lonely Boy hear a bell, whose sound they follow, but Hero Boy can't hear the bell.

Eventually, they find their way back to the center of the North Pole where the children, conductor, and elves are gathered, awaiting the arrival of Santa Claus (action by Tom Hanks, voice by). When the elves bring out the flying reindeer, Hero Boy realizes that he can't hear the jingle bells. One of the bells falls off, and even this bell he can't hear. At this, the boy makes a decision. He is going to believe. And, so, he says to himself, "I believe, I believe, I believe..." Then, as though by magic, he hears the bell ring.

At this, Santa Claus chooses the Hero Boy as the one to whom he will give the first Christmas gift. When asked what he wants for Christmas, the boy tells Santa he wants the bell. Here is one of the film's most critical lines. Santa says, "Yes, that's a wonderful symbol of the spirit Christmas, as am I." In other words, the film doesn't try to convince kids that Santa Claus is real, but that he represents the spirit of Christmas—and that is something that we shouldn't stop believing in.

The Polar Express addresses the issue of faith. Do we need to see in order to believe? A couple of different times in the film, characters say that "seeing is believing." But in the end, it's really the boy's decision to believe that makes the difference. As the conductor tells the boy at the end of the film, when it comes to trains, it doesn't so much matter where you're going, "What matters is deciding to get on."

For Reflection/Discussion

1) The boy in this film is beginning to doubt the existence of Santa Claus. What are some of the doubts that you struggle with? Do you struggle with any spiritual doubts? What kind? Why?

2) What does the Hobo represent? How does the Hobo help the boy begin to rediscover his faith in the spirit of Christmas?

3) The Hobo states that "seeing is believing." On the other hand, the conductor says that "sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can't see." Is there a contradiction in these two statements? If so, what exactly is the contradiction? Do you agree with one statement more than the other? Why or why not?

4) How would you describe faith as portrayed in this movie? Put it in your own words.

5) What exactly does the Hero Boy end up believing? Does he believe in something real or imagined? Does it matter? Why or why not?

6) What tension do you see (if any) in the way faith is portrayed in this film and the way faith is portrayed in the Bible? Look up the following passages for further discussion and compare these passages to the film: Hebrews 11 (the whole chapter), Mark 16:9-14, 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.

7) Do you agree with the conductor's statement that the important thing is simply "deciding to get on" the train? Why or why not? What are the implications of this statement?

8) Faith is a theme that runs through a lot of films and literature. Do you think humans crave to believe in something? If so, what might that tell us about human nature? About God?

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