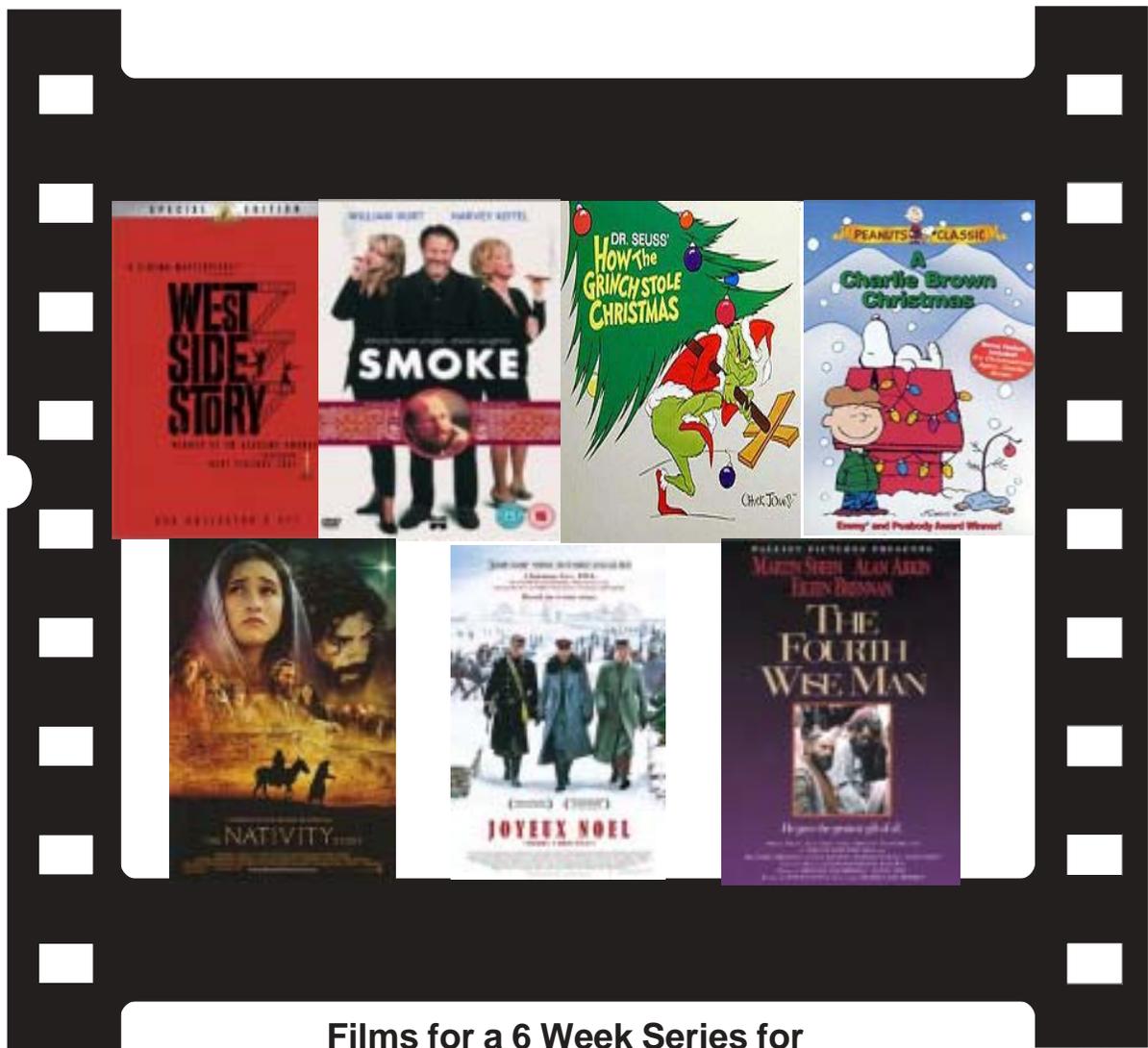


A Visual Parables Special Edition

Christmas Gems

2013



Films for a 6 Week Series for
Family/Church School and/or Preaching
Guides by Edward McNulty

Seven Christmas Gems

Introduction

Christmas is so filled with events that it can easily devolve into a hurried frenzy in which we miss the real point of the season. Shopping for family and friends, which require elbowing one's way through crowded stores; attending office and school parties; writing and sending off Christmas cards (even though graceless email cards now serve for those at the peripheral of our lives); preparing special foods; journeying to be with family, or else getting the home ready to receive distant family members—all consume and tax us so much that we need something that reminds us that all the fuss is worth the effort. (Well most of it, anyway.) And so the films below are more than just entertainment.

Each film, chosen from a much longer list of Christmas films, reminds us in its unique way of how precious and meaningful this holy season is. Several might seem rather unusual choices, and that is part of the reason they were selected.

West Side Story seemingly has little to do with Advent or Christmas: there are no Scripture quotations, and its authors, in adapting Shakespeare's great tragedy even leave out the one religious figure in the original play—Friar Laurence. And yet a close look at the songs show the deep yearning of its central characters for a better world, one in which love, rather than prejudice and hatred, dominate.

Smoke is the most questionable of the film choices, set as it is in a very politically/morally incorrect tobacco shop in Brooklyn. Plus, several of the characters spew out foul words never heard in a church—unless you had sat before the pulpit of Martin Luther, whose coarse vocabulary bequeathed him by his peasant upbringing often entered into his sermons. But as soon as you enter the lives of its characters you will see their wounds and their yearning for healing and wholeness.

Our Double Feature: "Good grief, **How the Grinch Stole Christmas** and **A Charlie Brown Christmas** are for children, for heaven's sake!" someone might object. But Jesus told his disciples that if they are to enter the kingdom of God, they "must become like a child." Also, for those "who have eyes that see," even so-called children's literature and films offer insights for adults as well as children, certainly the case with these two classic gems. And just in case you might want to explore these films with a child, some discussion questions geared for children are included.

Joyeux Noel, it might be objected, is a subtitled French film, and most Americans hate subtitles. True, but if warned ahead of time, most church folk will be willing to watch—and often become surprised at how easy it is to scan the printed dialogue while keeping an eye on the action. This film is so beautiful, visually and spiritually, that it must be included in this, what we hope will be the first of several Christ-

mas collections.

The Nativity Story is probably the most logical, understandable choice. After all, it is a Bible costumed drama of the two stories of Christ's birth from Matthew and Luke. In a couple of places it falls into a Hallmark card mode, but its good qualities outweigh this.

The same might be said for **The Fourth Wise Man**, a creative addition to Matthew's story of the magi, that can be seen as a moral parable contrasting two ways of living.

Three Ways to Use the guides

There are at least three ways that I envisioned these film guides being used:

1. For a church group to watch and discuss together. The viewer gains so much more from watching a film with even one more person than viewing it alone. Others see details that she or he missed, and vice versa—this obviously assuming that there will be some discussion. The films could be seen on a week night and discussed right afterward—or the discussion could take place at a church school class on Sunday mornings.
2. Preachers might create a series of six sermons using scenes from the films as illustrations. This could entail the use of video clips if the church has the equipment and volunteers who can use it without screw-ups, but this is not necessary. If the films are also being discussed in church school classes or on weeknights, the impact of the sermons will be greatly increased.
3. Individuals can watch the films in their own homes and then use these materials to guide their reflections upon the film. Some of the questions might lead them in directions they might not have thought of, hopefully sending them to their Bibles to read the suggested Scripture passages attached to each film.

About 90% of the material below appeared through the years in the pages of Visual Parables, the monthly journal found at www.visualparables.org. Most of it has been revised, some of it considerably, with new questions added to improve the guide's usefulness. I've also added a song at the end so that those who love the carols of the season can close the group session appropriately. We at Visual Parables and ReadtheSpirit.com hope that this publication will lead you to a deeper and more involved search this year for, in the words of that hackneyed but still meaningful phrase, "the true meaning of Christmas."

Edward McNulty