

THE
Story OF
Christmas
WORSHIP THE KING
CREATED BY
PHIL BARFOOT

SCRIPT

by Deborah Craig-Claar

DEAR POPS

Rediscovering the Heart of Christmas

A Dramatic Script to accompany *The Story of Christmas*

by Deborah Craig-Claar

Summary

Christmas is a season of messages. What once was a litany of cards and letters has turned into a blur of posts, blogs, and tweets. But how often we fail to stop and personally connect to those on the receiving end of our Christmas greetings. When God sent out a series of messages to the participants in the original Christmas story, they were all *personally* delivered: the prophets came to the people of Judea; angels came to Mary, Joseph, and eventually some startled shepherds; and finally, salvation was delivered to the world in the person of Jesus Christ, born in a manger.

This is the truth that a lonely, semi-forgotten septuagenarian named Clarence (affectionately known as Pops to just about everyone) must learn this Christmas. A new resident at an assisted living center, Pops is spending his first Christmas away from his church, friends, and family, although the sassy observations of his caretaker, Mildred Philpot, do fill his time. Most painful of all is his estrangement from his only son, Aaron. The month before Christmas brings a series of Christmas cards, each one bringing Clarence closer to the heart of Christmas. Then a surprise arrival and a change of spirit on Christmas Eve helps Pops realize that *he* is the one who will be sending out Christmas messages this year. As he says, “It’s not enough to just celebrate Christmas. It’s time I start giving Christmas away!”

Key Scriptures

“So shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (*Isaiah 55:11, ESV*).

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (*Romans 10:17, ESV*).

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Characters

CLARENCE GROGAN (POPS): a sprightly 70-plus-year-old malcontent who misses and cherishes many things about Christmas, especially his church, friends, and family; confined to a wheelchair

MILDRED PHILPOT: his quirky caretaker; middle-aged; all Southern, all heart; offers Pops many challenges to his patience, but ultimately proves very wise and caring

DARREN BICKEL: early 20s; an orderly at the retirement village; energetic and eager, but thoughtful

REVEREND DONALD KRONER: 30s to 40s; a pastor that conducts services at Pleasant Acres Retirement Village

AARON: 30s; Clarence's son

BETH: 30s; Aaron's wife

SETH: 10; Aaron's son

AUDREY: 7; Aaron's daughter

ANGRY MAN: visitor at Pleasant Acres (a few lines)

ANGRY WOMAN: visitor at Pleasant Acres (a few lines)

TWO CHILDREN: visitors at Pleasant Acres (no lines)

Authors of the Christmas Messages

BERNIE HEMPHILL: 70s; Clarence's boyhood friend

THELMA CRANSTON: 60s; Clarence's former church secretary

DR. CHARLOTTE WINSTEAD: 40s to 50s; Clarence's primary care doctor at Pleasant Acres

SARAH GROGAN: 20s; Clarence's wife (as a memory) in the early years of their marriage

Time: Present day; the month before Christmas: November 29–December 24

Place: The balcony area of Pleasant Acres Retirement Village

As the Christmas cards are read, they can be projected as images on a screen

Scenes and Songs

SCENE 1: November 29

“Gloria!”

“Jesu Medley” *includes* “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”/“Unto Us”/

“What Child Is This?”/“Alleluia to the King”

SCENE 2: December 6

“The Heart of Christmas”

SCENE 3: December 14

“Jesus Is”

“He Has Come for Us (God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen)”

SCENE 4: December 18

“Almost There” *with* “Mary, Did You Know?”

SCENE 5: December 21

“Noel”

“Come, See the King”

SCENE 6: December 24

“This Is Jesus”

“Give This Christmas Away”

“Joy to the World!”

Pastor’s Message

“Who Can Satisfy My Soul Like You?”

“Behold Our God”

DEAR POPS

SCENE 1

(The setting is the balcony at an assisted living retirement center: Pleasant Acres. There are several small evergreen trees in decorative stone pots. Depending on your stage configuration, this set may be placed in the center or to one side. Accordingly, the choir will either be placed in the center or to one side. A third area can accommodate the characters who are authors of the Christmas cards. They will appear in a special light/spotlight when they speak. The cards can be projected images on your media screen. The musical opens with “Gloria!” The image on the screen shows a joyous holiday scene with a family around a Christmas tree, singing.)

Song: “GLORIA!”

*(When the song ends, the Christmas card scene remains on the screen. We hear the loud grumbling of an old man before we see him. Then **POPS** is wheeled onto the balcony by **MILDRED**. **POPS** is wearing an oversized cardigan sweater and his glasses are perched on top of his head. **MILDRED** is dressed in a nurse’s outfit and wears white orthopedic shoes. **POPS** has a cane by his side and carries a large Christmas card.)*

POPS: Hurry up, Mrs. Philpot!

MILDRED: This is hurrying. You are experiencing hurrying.

POPS: Step on it. I can’t see a thing in this light.

MILDRED: We’re going as fast as we can, Clarence. Wheelchairs don’t come with overdrive, you know.

POPS: Ah, the balcony. Right here, Mrs. Philpot. *(They keep moving.)*

Mrs. Philpot, you can stop now. *(They are headed for the edge of the stage.)*

(shouted) PARK IT, MILDRED!

*(They come to an abrupt halt. **POPS** is nearly thrown from his chair.)*

(shaking his head, under his breath) The Evel Knievel of Pleasant Acres Retirement Village.

MILDRED: What was that?

POPS: *(holding up his Christmas card, speaking full volume)* I want to get a good look at this Christmas card in the light. Wait, I still can't see it, Mildred. I still can't ...

(MILDRED slides his glasses into place.)

... oooh, there we are. Now *this* is my favorite Christmas card, my very favorite.

(MILDRED echoes the following lines along with POPS because she's heard it all before.)

Nothin' says Christmas like a happy family around a beautiful tree, singing about the joy of the season. *(singing "Angels We Have Heard on High," off-key)* "Glooo-ooo-ooo-oria!" Yessir, this is what *my* Christmas always looks like!

(MILDRED pulls a well-worn envelope out of her pocket and reads it.)

MILDRED: Yep. Your Christmas does always look like this. It's looked like this every year since ... *(looking at the envelope)* 1958.

POPS: Nineteen wha ... ?

MILDRED: *(extending the envelope in front of POPS' face)* Read the postmark. That's when you received it.

POPS: *(moaning)* You're right. Put it away.

(MILDRED takes the Christmas card from POPS and puts the card and envelope into her pocket. The Christmas card screen image goes out as she does.

POPS *starts to sniffle.)*

MILDRED: Now Clarence ...

POPS: Pops. The name's Pops. That's what everybody has called me for the last ten years. Everybody, that is, but you.

MILDRED: *(very dry)* Are you finished? Good. *(continuing on)* Now Clarence, it's only November 29th. You always get like this every year after Thanksgiving. You insist on pulling out this old card, and then you get sentimental and start wondering if you're going to receive any Christmas cards this year.

POPS: I do not get sentimental. You're confusing emotion and post-nasal drip. *(blows nose)* When Sarah was alive and we lived on Milton Road, we'd get nearly one hundred cards – more sometimes. But these last few years, well ... *(His voice trails off, and then he abruptly straightens up.)*

Wait a minute! I'll bet no one knows I'm here! *(shaking a finger at MILDRED)*

You never let anyone know I moved to Pleasant Acres Retirement Village!

MILDRED: The announcements were mailed ... twice. I posted an announcement in the classified section of the newspaper. I put flyers on windshields in the parking lot of Walmart®. Your change of residence got more press than *(insert a recent news event)*. If you would only learn to use a computer, Clarence.

POPS: *(shaking his head, resolute)* The Internet isn't scriptural. I can't find it anywhere in the Bible. I'll stick with letters. If it was good enough for Paul, it's good enough for Pops.

MILDRED: You know, Clarence, you could take a tip from Paul and *send* a few Christmas cards this year.

POPS: Why? What's the use? If no one wants to send me a card, they certainly don't want to receive one from me. *(very dramatic self-pity)* No, it looks like everyone's forgotten about old Pops. Old Pops is dead as far as anyone cares. Old Pops today received the same number of Christmas cards he'll receive by December 25th. *(holds up his fingers to make a zero)*

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah. *(turns his chair as if to exit)*

Let's go back inside. This light is giving me a headache.

MILDRED: I knew your eyes were going. Your count's off by one.

POPS: *(turning back)* What's that?

(MILDRED pulls a new sealed envelope out of her pocket and waves it.)

MILDRED: Of course, the person who sent this probably didn't realize you were dead. I'll just return it marked: Addressee Deceased – he thinks.

(POPS grabs for the envelope, but MILDRED manages to keep it just out of his reach.)

POPS: A Christmas card! I knew it! Gimme that, Mildred! Why don't you go haunt some other retirement home? Gimme that!

MILDRED: What's the magic word?

POPS: *(holding up his cane)* Pain.

MILDRED: *(handing it over quickly)* Merry Christmas, Clarence.

POPS: *(eagerly)* I bet it's from my son, Aaron. You know, I haven't heard much from him and Beth and the kids this year ... actually, I haven't heard from them at all ...

(POPS' voice trails off again; MILDRED speaks encouragingly.)

MILDRED: *(sincerely)* Everyone gets very busy around the holidays. You know how it is. Is it from them?

POPS: *(looking at the envelope)* Well the postmark says ... *(his face falls)* Boston. No, it's not from them. It's ... from Boston.

MILDRED: *(quickly covering)* Well, at least the date on it is 2017.

POPS: *(deadpan)* That's good news, Mildred. Well, let's see what we have here.

(As POPS pulls the Christmas card out of the envelope, the image of the card appears on the screen; the scene is of carolers under a streetlight, singing. MILDRED oohs and ahhs with POPS.)

MILDRED: How lovely.

POPS: Look at that – carolers. Ah, couldn't be from anybody but Bernie Hemphill. We always used to carol together when we were kids. He lived three houses down the street from me in Fayetteville, and even though he's in Phoenix now, he never forgets to send a card. Let's see what he has to say this year.

MILDRED: *(reading over POPS' shoulder)* "Merry Christmas, Pops. I hope the Lord ..."
(POPS glares at her.) Sorry.

(POPS clears his throat and starts to read out loud. A light comes up on BERNIE as the two voices overlap.)

BERNIE and **POPS**: “Merry Christmas, Pops. I hope the Lord continues to make your holidays as happy for you as they were back in 1949. Remember how we used to ... ”

(Lights out on the retirement village set; BERNIE continues reading. POPS and MILDRED exit.)

BERNIE: “ ... spend every weekend going to all the farms that were snowed in, bringing food and caroling? Your favorite was always ‘What Child Is This?’ You said it was because you knew the answer to that question: it was Jesus. And that’s what Christmas was – it was all about Jesus. The last couple of years have been difficult for both of us, but at Christmas I’m reminded how thankful I am ... for a friend like you. Merry Christmas, Clarence. Your pal forever, Bernie.”

(BERNIE’s light goes out and the choir sings. The image of the carolers remains on the screen during the song.)

Song 2: “JESU MEDLEY” includes “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”/“Unto Us”/“What Child Is This?”/“Alleluia to the King”

SCENE 2

(At the end of “Jesu Medley,” the Christmas card image dims out. There is a loud noise offstage as MILDRED wheels POPS onstage again ... and again, they are arguing.)

POPS: C’mon, Mildred, get me out on that balcony.

MILDRED: I’m workin’ on it.

POPS: Finally some peace and quiet! How did all those noisy, unpleasant people get into Pleasant Acres?

MILDRED: It’s Sunday, December 6th, 3:00 p.m. You know Sunday is visitor’s day.

POPS: Lord, grant me patience. What time is it now?

MILDRED: *(checking her watch)* 3:05

POPS: Lord, you’re gonna have to grant me a lot more than patience.

(Offstage there are kids screaming and a baby is crying.)

(yelling in the direction of the noise) Hey you kids! It’s Sunday – the day of rest!
So give it a rest!

MILDRED: Now Clarence, I’m surprised at you. Remember Jesus said, “Suffer the little children to come to Me.”

POPS: Yeah, and every time they come, I suffer.

(DARREN enters carrying a piece of mail and a blood pressure cuff.)

DARREN: *(calling)* Mr. Grogan, Mr. Grogan!

MILDRED: We’re out here, Darren, on the balcony. Clarence is enjoying some peace and quiet.

POPS: That’s debatable.

DARREN: *(walking over to them)* Now Mr. Grogan, you know I need to get your blood pressure reading at 3:00 p.m. every day. You’re not trying to avoid me, are you?

POPS: It's not you, Darren. You're a little bossy, but otherwise you're a very nice orderly, and one day you're going to make a very nice nurse. It's just those torture devices you carry around that I'm trying to avoid.

DARREN: You know this really doesn't hurt. It'll be over in a minute. Just give me your left arm. (**POPS** presents his right arm.)

Your other left arm.

POPS: (*presenting his left arm*) Hmpt. Like I said. Bossy.

DARREN: (*as he affixes the cuff, he extends the envelope*) This came for you today.

POPS: Well, why didn't you say so? It must be another Christmas card.

(*As POPS reaches for it, MILDRED intercepts and takes the envelope.*)

MILDRED: You are otherwise occupied. I will hold it for you so you can read.

POPS: (*a slow burn*) Mildred ... !

DARREN: Sit still, Mr. Grogan. Here we go.

(*As MILDRED takes the card out of the envelope, the image of a huge fruitcake appears on the screen. DARREN begins pumping the blood pressure cuff. As POPS reads, his voice gets faster and faster and higher and higher.*)

POPS: "Season's greetings from Custom Christmas Kitchens, your cheery center for Christmas cuisine! If you call the 800 number below, you will receive a complimentary Custom Christmas Kitchen fruitcake, vacuum-packed and ready to serve at any holiday happening! Hurry! Supplies are limited! Custom Christmas Kitchen fruitcakes – they're the heart of Christmas!"

(*screams*) Arruugh!

(**DARREN** stops pumping and reads the gauge.)

DARREN: 140 over 90 ... a bit high today, Mr. Grogan. Have you been under any stress?

MILDRED: (*quickly covering*) I think we'd best delay the test until a bit later, Darren. And here, (*hands him the card and envelope*) you'd better dispose of this permanently.

DARREN: *(takes the card as he exits)* Whatever you say. *(calling back to POPS)* Get some rest, Mr. Grogan. That'll bring those BP numbers right back down. *(exits)*

POPS: *I'll* tell you what will get my numbers down – getting off the mailing list of the Custom Christmas Kitchen! *(shaking his head)* What's happened to Christmas, Mildred? This isn't what the season is about.

MILDRED: *(putting his sweater around his shoulders)* No, it isn't.

POPS: Why can't cards just say, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Now that's the heart of Christmas.

(The image of the fruitcake dissolves into "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Offstage, a few adults and children begin singing, a cappella, "Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come.")

MILDRED: That's a good idea. "Joy to the world!" That really does get to the heart of things. *(looks offstage)* Oh listen. I think visitor's day has turned into a carol sing. Let's go join them.

POPS: That's an even better idea.

(MILDRED wheels POPS offstage as they both join the singing of "Joy to the World!" The singing fades out as the lights dim on the retirement village set, and the choir begins to sing. The image of "Joy to the world, the Lord is come" remains on the screen throughout the song.)

Song: "THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS"

SCENE 3

(At the end of “The Heart of Christmas,” the lights come up on the retirement village set. The image on the screen fades out. Voices are heard offstage, singing a hymn, either with piano accompaniment or a cappella. After a moment, POPS rolls his wheelchair onto the stage. He sits, dejected; an open card is on his lap. After a moment, REV. KRONER comes out. He looks around for a moment, then, seeing POPS, smiles slightly and crosses to him.)

REV. KRONER: Uh, excuse me. Mr. Grogan, is it?

POPS: Oh, I didn’t see you. I’m sorry, Pastor.

REV. KRONER: I couldn’t help but notice that you left before the end of our service. *(lightly chuckling)* I hope my sermon wasn’t the cause.

POPS: Of course not. I apologize. I’m sure that seemed very rude.

REV. KRONER: Not at all. I just wanted to make sure that you are all right. You looked mighty upset during our worship service this morning.

POPS: I apologize again. I’m fine. Really. I don’t mean to keep you from your people.

REV. KRONER: Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. My assistant, Russell, is leading some “closing” hymns, as he calls them. This could go on until next Sunday. I think we’re fine.

POPS: I really appreciate you taking time away from your church to come here and try to talk some sense into old fools like me.

REV. KRONER: *(smiling)* We are all in the same church, Mr. Grogan. We’re all having the same conversation with God, no matter where we happen to be.

POPS: *(almost to himself)* I guess I haven’t felt much like talkin’ lately.

(REV. KRONER looks at POPS for a moment, smiles, and then quickly breaks the mood.)

REV. KRONER: I see you got some mail.

POPS: Oh this. *(holds up the card in his lap)* Yes, it came yesterday. It’s from my old church. Well, from Sarah’s and my old church. We were two of the founding members. We never missed a Sunday, unless the snow blocked Route 47, or the ignition would freeze up on my old ’65 Oldsmobile, or, of course, when Sarah got so sick. *(his voice breaks slightly)* This was a church that knew how to celebrate Christmas.

REV. KRONER: It's a beautiful card.

POPS: *(extending the card)* Yep. Special delivery from Thelma Cranston, the church secretary. She's the only person who's been at that church longer than I have. See? It's a star of Bethlehem. Thelma always chose a card with the star of Bethlehem.

(The image of a card with a star of Bethlehem comes up on the screen.)

Every year the same thing, but I grew to really look forward to that, to *depend* on it. Does that make sense?

REV. KRONER: It makes all the sense in the world. We need to keep our eyes on that star, especially in times like these. We need to remember that God keeps His promises to us, even when we have to wait. After all, that's what Christmas is: God keeping His promise to the world to send us a Savior.

POPS: You sounded just like Thelma right then.

REV. KRONER: She sounds like a very wise woman. Maybe I should see if she'll come guest preach for me some Sunday.

(A loudly sung "Amen!" sounds from offstage.)

Oops. Sounds like Russell has finally sounded the "Amen." That's my cue.

(Turning back to POPS.)

You have a Merry Christmas, Mr. Grogan. And keep listening to Thelma!

(REV. KRONER exits. POPS opens the card to read it.)

POPS: *(to himself)* Listen to Thelma. Think I'll do just that.

(As POPS starts to read the card out loud, a light comes up on THELMA; at first POPS and THELMA speak in unison, then POPS' voice stops and his light fades out, and he exits; THELMA continues.)

POPS and THELMA: "Dear Clarence. Oops, sorry, Dear Pops. I know that's what everyone calls you now. I hope this finds you well and enjoying the holidays. We miss you here at First Community Church."

(POPS' light goes out, he stops speaking, and he exits; THELMA continues.)

THELMA: “Oh how I remember those Christmas pageants you and Sarah starred in when the church first began in 1967. This will be the first Christmas you aren’t here to play the third wise man. It just won’t be the same without you. Keep your eye on the star over Bethlehem, Pops. Remember that it is a light that never goes out, and it leads everyone back to Jesus. I know He’ll always be there, ready to welcome you. We love you and are praying for you, your First Community family ... and Thelma.”

(THELMA’s light goes out and the choir sings. The image remains on the screen during the songs.)

Song: “JESUS IS”

Song: “HE HAS COME FOR US (GOD REST YE MERRY, GENTLEMEN)”

SCENE 4

(At the end of "He Has Come for Us," the image of the star of Bethlehem dims out and the lights come up on the retirement village set as MILDRED rolls POPS onstage. He is still reading the card from THELMA.)

POPS: It just won't be the same without you.

MILDRED: I've heard this before, Clarence.

POPS: I remember those Christmas pageants ...

MILDRED: I feel like I've been listening to this since 1967.

POPS: Oh, and look, Thelma always puts a photo of the founding members of First Community Church on the back of the card. Look at this, Mildred.

(He gives the card to MILDRED, who looks closely at it.)

That's just what we all looked like, too.

MILDRED: Laminated?

POPS: No! Happy! Look, Mildred, look how happy every one of the seven founding members of First Community Church looks.

(MILDRED frowns and looks closely at the card.)

That's not it, Mildred. That is not a happy First Community Church look.

MILDRED: You want happy, Clarence? Put the card away. Put all your Christmas cards away. Then you'll see happy.

POPS: I only have two of them. *(grumbling)* Oh, all right. *(puts away the cards)* *(under his breath)* Ebenezer Scrooge in orthopedics.

MILDRED: What was that?

POPS: *(loudly)* So what am I supposed to read? It's December 18th, and they are still the only Christmas cards I've received.

MILDRED: Try something from this decade ... like a newspaper.

(MILDRED plops a newspaper in his lap.)

POPS: *(grumbling as he opens the paper)* Small print, big ads. Has the mail come today?

MILDRED: Not yet.

(She looks over POPS' shoulder.)

You're reading the obituaries again.

POPS: I do that to make sure I'm not in there.

MILDRED: Don't worry, Clarence. You'll be the first to know.

POPS: *(eyes her)* I'm not so sure. Do you know somethin' I don't?

MILDRED: No, but you're not getting any younger.

POPS: I don't know anybody who is. Except those movie stars who keep getting tucks and lifts and peals.

MILDRED: Hmpt. Old wine in new wineskins. There's nothing wrong with being old. The Bible says it's a time we should be respected and upheld for our wisdom.

POPS: Yeah, I'll remember that the next time that ten-year-old assassin down the street knocks me over with his bike. *(pause)* I wonder if my granddaughter learned to ride that bike she got last Christmas. Are you sure the mail hasn't come today?

(DARREN enters with a piece of mail and a full tray of medications.)

DARREN: Mail call.

POPS: Ah hah! The Lord rewards the patient man.

DARREN: As long as the patient man takes his medications first.

POPS: That's extortion! I thought the FBI made some kind of ruling against that.

MILDRED: For you, the FBI would make an exception. *(to DARREN)* Make sure he takes all of them this time, especially the big pink one. He likes to hide the pills in his pocket.

(She takes the newspaper and card from POPS and starts to exit.)

(loudly) See you tomorrow – same time, same place. *(She exits.)*

POPS: *(calling after her)* Unless Igor here poisons me first!

DARREN: Now Mr. Grogan, you know these medications are only meant to help you feel better.

POPS: I know, Darren. I'm sorry. Sometimes I don't think I'll ever feel better again.

(DARREN starts to give POPS his pills, along with a cup of water, during the following dialogue; POPS "swallows them" [this should be mimed].)

DARREN: That's not what I heard. Just last week, Dr. Winstead was saying your tests are improving. And she really knows what she's talkin' about. She takes real good care of her patients.

POPS: Well, this patient may be beyond her care.

DARREN: Aw no, Mr. Grogan. She said your numbers are real stable. That's always a good sign.

POPS: *(increasingly upset)* A sign of what? That every joint in my body seems to hurt all the time? That someday I can't remember where I put my glasses or the name of the street I used to live on? That I will probably never get out of this chair and walk again?

(There is a pronounced pause. DARREN regards POPS, then hands him the last pill.)

DARREN: *(quietly)* Don't forget to take the big pink one.

(POPS takes the last pill and continues to look down, dejected. DARREN finally moves to stand beside POPS, putting his hand on his shoulder.)

I won't pretend to know how you're feeling, Mr. Grogan. I mean, I wake up and pretty much bounce out of bed. Some days it seems like I never stop running. But I *do* know what it's like to worry about what the future will bring. I do know what it's like to be lonely. And I sure know all about wondering if God even hears my prayers, much less plans to answer them.

POPS: *(smiles at DARREN)* Who would ever imagine that you and I are pretty much in the same place?

DARREN: I was thinking today about what Rev. Kroner said at the service last Sunday. Were you there?

POPS: *(a bit evasive)* For ... parts of it.

DARREN: He said that the Bible tells us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts, and not lean on our own understanding. That sure made me feel a lot better about the future. *(pause)* Maybe it will help you feel better too.

POPS: *(smiling)* I do feel better. Thanks, Darren.

DARREN: You did well with your pills today, Pops. I mean, Mr. Grogan. Even the big pink one.

POPS: You can call me Pops. In fact, I'd like it if you would.

DARREN: *(starting to exit)* You got it. Oh!

(Stops and returns to hand POPS the card.)

I almost forgot ... special delivery.

POPS: Looks like today won't be such a bad day after all.

(POPS opens the card and an image of Mary and Joseph on a journey to Bethlehem appears on the screen. POPS shows the card to DARREN.)

DARREN: Mary and Joseph on their journey. Beautiful. Who's it from?

POPS: I can't imagine. *(opens the card)* Why ... it's from Dr. Winstead.

DARREN: *(nodding)* Like I said. She takes real good care of her patients. What does it say?

(As POPS starts to read the card out loud, a light comes up on DR. WINSTEAD. At first POPS and DR. WINSTEAD speak in unison, then POPS' voice stops and his light fades out; he and DARREN exit; DR. WINSTEAD continues.)

POPS and **DR. WINSTEAD**: “Merry Christmas, Mr. Grogan. I hope your first Christmas at Pleasant Acres will be happy and memorable. I know it will be different than the holidays you used to share at home with friends and family.”

*(Lights out on **POPS** and **DARREN**; they exit; **DR. WINSTEAD** continues.)*

DR. WINSTEAD: “But I believe many good things are still ahead for you. At Christmas, I always think about Mary and Joseph and how they had to place their entire future in God’s hands. They set out across the desert with nothing but the light of the stars overhead ... and their faith. And God led them to Bethlehem and the birth of hope for the world. May you trust God with your journey and find hope this Christmas. Your doctor and friend, Charlotte Winstead.”

*(Lights out on **DR. WINSTEAD**; the choir sings. The image of Mary and Joseph remains on the screen during “Almost There.”)*

Song: “ALMOST THERE” with “Mary, Did You Know?”

SCENE 5

(At the end of "Almost There," the image of Mary and Joseph dims out, and the lights come up on the retirement village set as MILDRED rolls POPS onstage. He has two small barbells and is performing some physical therapy exercises.)

POPS: One, two, three, four ... one, two, threeeee, foouur ... *(it's getting harder)*
ooooone, twooooo ...

MILDRED: I must say, Clarence, you're taking your physical therapy more seriously today.

POPS: *(continuing to exercise)* Well, I've decided to pay more attention to Dr. Winstead's orders. Darren's too. Turns out they really know what they're talking about.

MILDRED: *(smiling)* Glad you finally noticed. *(abruptly stern)* Now, if you'll just start listening to me!

POPS: *(still exercising, under his breath)* That day will never come.

MILDRED: What was that?

POPS: I don't know. I'm not listening to you.

(There is a loud commotion offstage; it is the sound of a husband and wife arguing.)

What in the world is that?

MILDRED: I thought you weren't listening. It's Sunday ... 3:00 p.m. ... visitor's day. Oh, there's nothing like a retirement home full of happy families.

(An ANGRY MAN comes onstage; he turns and yells toward the offstage area.)

ANGRY MAN: Well fine, Joyce, just fine! Go ahead and *be* like that!

(An equally ANGRY WOMAN comes onstage, dragging two CHILDREN with her.)

ANGRY WOMAN: Don't worry, Norman, I will! C'mon kids. We'll go home and watch a rerun of *Little House on the Prairie*!

(The family exits, angrily, as MILDRED and POPS watch.)

MILDRED: I wonder why all the happy families are on TV.

POPS: Visitor's day ... again. It must be Sunday, December 21st.

MILDRED: (*packing up the exercise equipment*) That's right.

POPS: And ... I am to take it that I don't have any visitors again today.

MILDRED: (*a bit more slowly*) That's right.

POPS: And no Christmas cards yesterday. Or the day before. Or the day before that.

MILDRED: (*pauses, then speaks quickly*) Listen, I think it's time we go in for dinner.

POPS: It's 3:10, Mildred. I keep track of the time pretty closely on visitor's day. I'm still trying to recover from lunch.

MILDRED: Yes, that frozen lasagna was a bit hard, but our new cook was just trying to make a good impression.

POPS: Oh, there's an impression all right.

MILDRED: (*putting a blanket over his legs*) Now Clarence, you were just spoiled by all those years of your wife's cooking.

POPS: (*a bit surprised*) Why ... thank you, Mildred. You're right. No one could hold a candle to my Sarah. Not her cooking, her singing, her beautiful face ... (*voice breaking slightly*) ... nothing. Now there was a woman who could make you think of Christmas just by walking into the room. The Christmas before Sarah died, she knitted complete outfits for both grandkids. Oh, that was the best Christmas. Aaron and his family came and spent two weeks with us, and ...

(His voice trails off.)

It's getting colder, isn't it? Now where did I put that sweater?

(MILDRED puts a cardigan sweater around his shoulder.)

Ah, I knew I'd find it if I looked hard enough.

MILDRED: (*as she adjusts the sweater*) I'm certain you will hear from Aaron any day now. Here, let me help you with the sleeve.

POPS: *(fussing with the sweater)* No, Mildred, I can manage perfectly well.

(MILDRED stops and pulls a card from the pocket of the sweater.)

MILDRED: Why Clarence! A Christmas card! I didn't think you'd gotten any this week!

POPS: I didn't. *(pause)* Well, I did, but not today. You're the expert on postmarks, Mildred. Take a look at this one.

MILDRED: Well, it's a little hard to make out in this light ... *(gasps)* 1962!

POPS: Yep. It's the first, and only, Christmas card Sarah ever sent me. Guess it seems kinda foolish that I've kept it all these years.

MILDRED: Not foolish at all.

POPS: We were only nineteen at the time – married just six months. I thought I knew everything about life back then. Turns out, I knew precious little. Except how much I loved the woman I'd be sharing my life with. We were so poor, we couldn't rub two dimes together.

MILDRED: I think that's "nickels."

POPS: We didn't have those either. But somehow, Sarah always made everything wonderful. She filled our tiny house, with a bad roof and leaking plumbing, with love. She filled it with Christmas. All we had that first year was some boughs of holly my mother had given us, a couple of big red candles, and a Nativity scene. So that's what was on Sarah's card ... a Nativity scene.

(POPS pulls the card from the envelope and shows MILDRED, as an image of a Nativity scene comes up on the screen.)

MILDRED: *(quietly)* It's beautiful.

POPS: That was my Sarah. This is what she wrote.

(As POPS starts to read the card out loud, a light comes up on SARAH. At first POPS and SARAH speak in unison, then POPS' voice stops and his light fades out, and he and MILDRED exit; SARAH continues.)

POPS and **SARAH**: “My darling. I could say ‘Merry Christmas,’ but perhaps you don’t feel too merry with all the bills we have from last year. I could say ‘Happy New Year,’ but I know how worried you are about how we’ll make ends meet for another year. So instead I’ll just say ‘Noel.’”

*(Lights out on **POPS** and **MILDRED**, and they exit; **SARAH** continues.)*

SARAH: “‘Noel,’ Sweetheart, because it means ‘all is well.’ And I know all will be well. Just like God watched over Mary and Joseph and provided a manger bed for His Son so long ago, so will God keep us in His care. The most beautiful gift I can give you this year is this story of amazing love. Read it again tonight. Read it whenever you are worried or afraid or feeling alone. Read it and remember how much God loved us to send us His Son. And remember how much I will always love you. Noel. Your Sarah.”

*(Instrumental introduction for “Noel” begins. **SARAH** reads from her Bible over the instrumental introduction.)*

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken. And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth ... to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house ... of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger. ... And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them ... and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests’”
(Luke 2:1,3-11,13-14, NIV).

*(Choir begins singing “Noel,” followed by “Come, See the King.” Lights out on **SARAH** and she exits. The image of the Nativity scene remains on the screen during the songs.)*

Song: “NOEL”

Song: “COME, SEE THE KING”

SCENE 6

(At the end of “Noel” and “Come, See the King,” the image of the Nativity scene dims and deep blue lights come up on the retirement village set, indicating night. There is the sound of a group singing “Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come” offstage, as if at a holiday party. After a few moments, POPS slowly rolls his wheelchair onstage, into its own light. He is very reflective and speaks his thoughts.)

POPS: Well, it’s finally Christmas Eve, Sarah. Your favorite day ... or should I say your favorite night. You used to tell me you loved Christmas Eve because it was the evening when the waiting was over, when all of God’s promises came true. And then the dawn of Christmas Day was a sign that the world was going to start over because our Savior had finally come. You always did know how to find just the right words for Christmas.

(Smiles, sighs, and looks at his watch.)

Here it is, 10:00 p.m, and the Christmas party is still going on. Ten o’clock – this was always the time we’d finally gotten Aaron to sleep and all the presents out ... and then we sat in front of the fire. It seemed like we had the same conversation every year: how fast Aaron was growing up, how expensive everything was getting. How the Lord had blessed our family. When I’d complain that Christmas was getting too commercial, you’d remind me that the real riches of Christmas are found in the family.

(Emotion now fills his voice.)

I miss you, Sarah. I miss our family. Aaron seems to be getting farther and farther away each year. We had a couple of rough discussions about ... oh, I don’t even remember what it was about now – a lot of foolishness. We both said things we regret. At least I did. Then a whole year passes, and I hardly hear from him, and this December, not even a Christmas card. Remember when he was six, he used to draw those pictures of a stable and a manger and angels and put them on the refrigerator and say, “When I grow up, I’m gonna draw you a card just like this one and mail it to you. And inside it’s gonna say “Merry Christmas, ... Daddy.”

(Very quietly.)

Oh, Sarah. I don’t know how many more Christmases I can face alone.

(MILDRED calls shrilly from offstage.)

MILDRED: CLARENCE ALEXANDER GROGAN!! WHERE HAVE YOU RUN OFF TO?

POPS: Then again, there's a lot to be said for being alone.

(MILDRED enters, laden with winter clothes, and bustles over to POPS.)

MILDRED: There you are! I have been looking everywhere for you. First you sneak out of the holiday party, then I find you out here, sitting in the elements. Do you know what time it is? And Christmas Eve too. You should be in bed!

(MILDRED starts to bundle him up, amid protests.)

POPS: Crimeny, Mildred. I think I'm a little old for visions of sugarplums dancing in my head.

MILDRED: Let's not talk about what's been dancing in your head lately, Clarence.

(MILDRED "snaps" some earmuffs on POPS' head; he reacts, yanking them off. DARREN enters.)

DARREN: Oh good, I see you found him, Mrs. Philpot.

MILDRED: In a manner of speaking.

DARREN: Well, there's someone here to see him. Uh, Mrs. Philpot, would you come with me a minute?

MILDRED: Of course, Darren. *(to POPS)* We'll be right back, Ebenezer. And if you even think about running away, you'll ... you'll ... get a lump of coal in your stocking!

(MILDRED and DARREN exit. POPS yells after them.)

POPS: The only thing in my stocking is bunions ... and you put them there!

(Settling in, grumbling; speaking to himself.)

Oh, don't worry, Mildred. I won't be going anywhere. Where is there to go? I'll be here at Pleasant Acres longer than Jimmy Stewart stayed in Bedford Falls. Miracles never happen on 163rd Street. And the only white Christmases I ever see are when my bed linens are changed.

(AARON enters, with a suitcase. He stands just behind POPS, who does not see him.)

(continuing, now very sincere) Forgive me, Sarah. I know how much you hated self-pity. If you only knew how much I long for just one more Christmas with a crayon drawing of a manger and angels on the refrigerator door, and to hear a little voice saying ...

AARON: *(finally speaking up)* Merry Christmas, ... Daddy.

(POPS turns and sees AARON. There is an emotional moment, then AARON runs to his father's arms. During the embrace, BETH and their two children, AUDREY and SETH, enter and stand to the side. MILDRED and DARREN stand behind them.)

MILDRED: *(gently)* Looks like someone got his Christmas wish after all.

(POPS turns to BETH, and the children rush to him; BETH hugs him from behind the chair. POPS takes AUDREY onto his lap and SETH stands to the side. They ad lib their greetings.)

BETH: Dad, it's so wonderful to see you. *(ad lib a bit)*

AUDREY and SETH: Grandpa, Grandpa! *(ad lib a bit)*

AARON: *(speaking with difficulty)* Dad, this isn't how I planned to say this, but considering I only have a short time before Christmas gets here, I guess I better get it said. Please forgive me for this past year. I know I've been ... far away from you. I've been far away from the Lord, too. I got laid off in March and, well ... I just felt like such a failure. I couldn't tell you the truth back then. So I argued. I argued with you. I argued with everybody. Then I just couldn't face you. I didn't know how I could face myself. But Beth ...

(He gestures to his wife; she joins him.)

Beth stuck right by me and kept reminding me that money and possessions aren't what life is about, and that real riches are in your family.

POPS: Seems I remember another beautiful lady who once said the same thing.

AARON: I remember. This past Friday, I was sitting in the kitchen, feeling pretty down about not being able to buy as many presents as I had in the past. Then Seth came up and showed me a picture he had drawn. I packed up the car that night so we could come here and show it to you.

(AARON pulls out a large piece of paper. As he does, the final projection appears on the screen. It is a simple child's drawing of a Nativity scene, with a vast array of people kneeling in front.)

SETH: Here's my picture, Grandpa. I worked on it every day since school's been out. See? Here's the stable and the hay and the shepherds and the kings ...

AUDREY: *And* the flower. That's the part I put in!

SETH: *(rolling his eyes)* ... *and* the flower ... and the mom and the dad and the baby! *This (pointing proudly)* ... *this* is Jesus! Sorry it's not quite as good as the cards you buy at Walmart®.

POPS: *(laughing)* Now who said that! This is better. This is a Seth and Audrey original!

(MILDRED and DARREN come forward and peer at the drawing.)

MILDRED: Just a minute. I think there's something wrong with this picture.

DARREN: Who are those people kneeling at the manger?

SETH: Oh, that's us! Mom and dad and Audrey and me. *(looking at POPS)* And Grandpa.

(Everyone laughs.)

AARON: Well, I didn't know we were at the Nativity.

POPS: But that's just the point, Son. Seth got it exactly right. That's where we must be – where we all must be – every Christmas. Kneeling at the Nativity.

AARON: *(putting his hand on his father's shoulder)* Yes. Kneeling at the Nativity.

(Just then, REV. KRONER and DR. WINSTEAD enter, carrying boxes of decorations and some gifts and holiday cookies.)

REV. KRONER: Merry Christmas, everyone! We thought we heard some laughter out here.

DR. WINSTEAD: Looks like you're having a better party than we're having inside!

POPS: Oh hello, Rev. Kroner, Dr. Winstead. I guess we are having a bit of a celebration. This is my son, Aaron.

REV. KRONER: *(shaking AARON's hand; he speaks with special meaning)* Aaron, it is so good to meet you. I can't tell you how happy I am you've decided to join us this Christmas.

POPS: And this is his wife, Beth, and my grandchildren, Seth and Audrey. *(holding up the drawing)* They are the artists behind this masterpiece, I'll have you know.

REV. KRONER: *(regarding the drawing)* Now that is what I call "inspired."

SETH: *(pointing)* And right there ... see? *This* is Jesus!

REV. KRONER: Right where He should be ... in the center of everything!

DR. WINSTEAD: Hey, if you all don't mind, we'd love to join your celebration.

POPS: Mind? There's nobody else I'd rather share Christmas Eve with.

DR. WINSTEAD: We brought all the trimmings and some treats as well.

MILDRED: Well then, let's get busy. Let's make this place look like Christmas!

(The music begins and the choir sings "This Is Jesus." As they do, everyone onstage decorates the potted evergreen trees, hangs some lights, and passes out the gifts and cookies. The image of the children's drawing of the Nativity remains on the screen during the song and the rest of the musical.)

Song: "THIS IS JESUS"

(At the conclusion of the song, the balcony area is decorated for Christmas, and everyone is in a festive mood. On the last beat of the song, DARREN takes a photo with his cell phone of everyone.)

DARREN: Hey, that's a keeper! Nothin' says Christmas like a happy family around a beautiful tree, singing about the joy of the season!

POPS: I couldn't have said it better myself. Hey, do you think there's still time for me to send out some Christmas cards? I'm behind by quite a few years.

REV. KRONER: I'm not sure that's possible, Mr. Grogan. It's Christmas Eve. But there's always next year.

DARREN: Wait! I can make a Christmas card from the photo I just took. If you've got the names and addresses ... email addresses, that is.

AARON: I'm sure we could pull those together!

DARREN: Then we should be able to get them sent before midnight!

POPS: Darren, I take back my bossy comment. You are a genius.

MILDRED: Now wait a minute. I thought you said the Internet was unscriptural.

POPS: I found a verse, Isaiah 55:11: “So shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

MILDRED: Isaiah was talking about the Internet?

POPS: I think he was talking about anytime the Word of God is shared. And that’s what I plan to do. It’s not enough to just celebrate Christmas. It’s time I start giving Christmas away – starting ... right now.

(POPS pulls out a large card in an envelope and hands it to MILDRED. She is stunned.)

MILDRED: For me?

POPS: For you.

(MILDRED takes the card, and, opening it, reads the contents aloud.)

MILDRED: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.” Thank you for helping me find the heart of Christmas again.

(There is a significant pause; MILDRED speaks with emotion.)

Thank you, Pops.

POPS: *(amazed)* You called me Pops.

MILDRED: *(quickly back to her old self)* A momentary lapse. Don’t expect to hear it again until ... well ... next Christmas.

REV. KRONER: Which is in about ten minutes. Joy to the world, everyone!

ALL: Joy to the world!

POPS: Joy to the world, the Lord ... is ... come!

(The full cast joins the choir in singing the final two songs.)

Song: "GIVE THIS CHRISTMAS AWAY"

Song: "JOY TO THE WORLD!"

THE PASTOR'S MESSAGE CAN BE DELIVERED HERE

Song: "WHO CAN SATISY MY SOUL LIKE YOU?"

Song: "BEHOLD OUR GOD"