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'Watsons Go to Birmingham' an opportunity to talk about things that matter

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 18, 2013 NCR Today

"The Watsons Go to Birmingham"
8 p.m. (7 p.m. Central) Friday, The Hallmark Channel

In time to mark the 50th anniversary of the Sept. 15, 1963, bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., that killed four young girls (Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair), "The Watsons Go to Birmingham" made-for-television film will premiere on The Hallmark Channel. The events in the movie take place not even a month after the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

In this fictitious imagining of a family that comes from Flint, Mich., to visit family and deposit an unruly teenage son with his grandmother for the summer, the story of those dark days in the struggle for civil rights in America is told with gentle humor and poignancy for family viewing.

"The Watsons Go to Birmingham" is based on the 1995 novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham -- 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis, which was a Newbery Honor Book in 1996. The book also garnered him a Coretta Scott King Honor.

The first part of the story tells of the close-knit and loving African-American Watson family: Daniel and Wilona Watson (Wood Harris and Anika Noni Rose) and their three children, 15-year-old rebellious Byron (Harrison Knight), bookish 11-year-old Kenny (Bryce Clyde Jenkins) and their cute sister, Joetta (Skai Jackson), who is 8.

Byron can't seem to stay out of trouble. He skips school, lights fires, and gets involved with boys who are going down the wrong path. Kenny, who narrates the story, lets us inside the family with several moments that are funny and sweet. Wilona is originally from Birmingham, and she decides she wants to see her mother, whose strong personality will be good for Byron. So they load up the car and head south once school is finished for the summer.

This is when historic events collide with the life of a family. The Watsons know they will be staying in "Bombingham" and try to explain to their children that the racism, segregation and Jim Crow laws will be the likes of which they have never seen. Their grandmother lives near the 16th Street Baptist Church, and this is where they go to worship. On that fateful morning, the children are separated when the bomb goes off, and we get to see the stuff heroes, even young ones, are made of.

"The Watsons Go to Birmingham" takes its time to lay out the story. Kids growing up 50 years ago faced the same problems socializing and facing temptations as they do today, though racial tensions then were ready to blow at any moment almost anywhere in the country, especially Birmingham.

"The Watsons Go to Birmingham" is a Walden Family Theater presentation sponsored by Wal-Mart, Proctor and Gamble, and the Hallmark Channel. It's not a great film, but it's a good one that won't overwhelm children

with the violence of the era, though the story makes it clear enough. It is not easy to produce a film that can attract and hold the attention of all ages, but because "The Watsons" tells an important story, it's worth it to gather together and talk about things that matter.

Here is a moving featurette with a preview and interviews with the cast:

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