
Sermon
The Divine Secrets of Hollywood – Episode V

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: *Hollywood Dreams & Biblical Stories* by Bernard Brandon Scott, p. 3-4.

Our ancestors gathered around the camp fire while the shaman sang stories of mythical times and places. Strange though these stories may seem to us, they played an important role by encoding solutions for life's problems. They helped the listeners determine who they were, what the world around them was like, and how they were to behave. The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss captures two of myth's fundamental characteristics: They mediate the fundamental problems of life, and they think for us without our being aware of it. These two characteristics are related. All societies face conflict that threatens to disrupt social unity. Chaos is always a danger, so hero myths fortify the group against chaos. Other stories justify inequities that might threaten social cohesion by explaining our fate as the will of the gods. Where did we come from? Where will we go? Myths furnish the answers. But for these stories to work, they must mask their sleight of hand; otherwise the solution will be undone.

Now as we gather around the flickering light of the television screen and movie projector, the purpose of stories remains the same. The movies and television shows are our modern myths; through them we work out who we are and negotiate the problems of modern life.

Sermon

This is the fourth or fifth sermon I've preached about movies using the title, "The Divine Secrets of Hollywood". I think it's the fifth, but when I looked I could only find three previous sermons with the same title. I suspect my numbering is off because I'm thinking of a sermon I did about a movie, but with a different title. But if George Lucas could start his Star Wars movies with Episode 4 there's no reason why I can't skip ahead to number five in my own series. When all is said and done it feels like a number five to me.

I take movies seriously. That's why I preach about them from time to time. And I agree with this morning's reading that the movie theater is the modern equivalent of the campfire and if the bible were being put together today I think it would be perfectly reasonable to include movies in the canon. Not all movies would be candidates for inclusion, but there are some that are obviously meant to be taken seriously. "Schindler's List" comes to mind. You expect to hear preachers talk about that kind of movie. But I believe a lot of movies that might be dismissed as not of the "serious" type are also deserving of consideration. The second Terminator movie is a good example. It's not all that obvious in the original theatrical release, but the director's cut – which includes just two or three minutes of additional material – turns it into a very serious movie about what it means to be human. Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" is another example. Just because a movie is an action film doesn't mean it doesn't deal with

serious issues. And sometimes movies may be made with one idea in mind, but be seen – especially years later – in a different light.

Two such movies come to mind – “Birth of a Nation” and “Gone with the Wind”. Both of them were ground breaking events. “Birth of a Nation” is the first movie ever made and “Gone with the Wind” was a revolution in cinematography and storytelling exceeded only by Citizen Kane. One can watch them today as history making films, but both of them are also painful reminders of the historical racism of American society in general and racism in movie making. But just because a film – especially one such as “Birth of a Nation” – may be seen as advocating social views we reject today, that doesn’t mean they aren’t worth watching. It is much as Alan Dershowitz said in his book, “The Genesis of Justice” about the bible: Many people reject the bible as a source of wisdom about justice because it is filled with stories of injustice, but, as he points out, sometimes the most effective way to teach about justice is by remembering and telling stories about injustice.

It is with that thought in mind that I speculate from time to time about what a bible based on movies would look like. What movies would be included in a celluloid canon – or should I say, a ‘DVD’ canon? The selection process for a bible based on movies would be controversial. Some people would want to include the collected works of Michael Moore. Others would insist that “Hillary, the Movie” be included. Others would want “The Ten Commandments” with Charlton Heston and others would insist on “Religulous” with Bill Maher. If you think such extremes are unbiblical, you should take another look at the bible. There is more diversity between its covers than commonly believed – ranging from the orthodox to the unconventional with a healthy dose of erotic poetry thrown in for good measure. For me the critical issue is the potential of a movie to make people think.

With such thoughts in mind I have looked at some recent movies and find two that I think should be considered. The first of these is a movie that I believe is misunderstood. I’m not sure if its writer and director understands it. The movie is “Inglourious Basterds” the misspelled work of Quentin Tarantino. Those who haven’t seen the movie probably know it from Mr. Tarantino’s reputation for movie mayhem and the advertisements that featured Brad Pitt. The plot – on its surface – is absurd. It is a World War II movie in which Jewish soldiers are recruited – reminiscent of “The Dirty Dozen” – to strike terror into the hearts of the Nazis by committing acts of terrorism on the battlefield. Specifically, Brad Pitt recruits them to scalp their enemies. The clip used in the television advertisements shows Brad Pitt exhorting his recruits. At first glance it comes across as funny. In the movie itself there are scenes of graphic violence, including a couple of close-ups of someone being scalped. It’s not pleasant. But is that what the movie is about? – a sick and twisted attempt at humor? If that’s what it is, then it should never have been made. But I don’t think there is anything humorous about it. I don’t believe Brad Pitt is trying to be funny; I don’t think Mr. Tarantino is trying to amuse his audience. I see Brad Pitt’s performance as one of deliberate and malevolent absurdity. As such I think it’s the best movie made about the absurdity of war in many years.

It begins by confronting the reality of evil, the reality of a monstrous, unspeakable evil. The opening scene of an SS officer calmly asking a French farmer about the

location of a Jewish family is mesmerizing. It's not a scene from an action movie. It is two men talking at a table while one drinks a glass of milk. It is movie making and acting at its finest. And then the movie moves to Brad Pitt and the absurdity of combating evil with evil, the absurdity of using terror to combat terror. Along the way we encounter a German soldier who is celebrating the birth of his first child. All he wants to do is go home and be with his wife and child. None of the evil is of his making. He is as innocent as anyone can be in a time of war. And he dies. Scene after scene throughout the movie one is confronted with two repeating scenarios – the first is the death of those who are innocent and the second is the painful reality of people forced to make a deal with the devil. To defeat evil, will we terrorize our enemy? – just a little shock and awe. To defeat evil, will we make a bargain that allows a man who is truly evil, who has committed terrible war crimes, to go free and to become rich after the war? What price will we pay in order to win? Will we sell our own souls to the devil? But keep this in mind. This film never suggests that anything short of victory is acceptable. In scene after scene innocent people die and we are reminded of the evil being fought. The people responsible for the war have to be stopped. Not for an instant is there a contrarian suggestion.

Lift those ideas out of their celluloid context and there are some questions that demand answers. How far should a woman pay go to defend herself against a brutally violent husband? What price should the City of Tulsa pay to stop the gang violence that saw another high school student murdered just two days ago? What price will we pay to defeat Al Qaeda? I don't think there is any question that we need to win all those battles. To suggest otherwise is absurd. We are dealing with evil. That's not the issue. The challenge we face, the one we must face if we are to be honest, is what price are we willing to pay? Are we willing to make a deal with the devil and pay his due? That's what's behind the concern over the whole question of torture. I will leave it to you to decide the price you think we should be willing to pay. I insist only on this one point: If you are going to make that bargain, it is moral cowardice to try to deny its price, to deny the cost to ourselves. It is moral cowardice to pretend that meeting terror with terror does not cost us something.

The second movie that has attracted my attention is last year's "The Dark Knight". It's the Batman movie with Heath Ledger as the Joker. If you haven't seen it, just let me say that Mr. Ledger's performance is every bit as good as you may have heard. Looking back over the last few years I can think of only one performance that is its equal – the performance of Christopher Waltz as the SS officer in "Inglourious Basterds". But as good as Heath Ledger is, it is the character of Batman that attracts me. Look beyond the special effects. There are lots of those. But the movie would be just as good, perhaps better, without them because the heart and soul of the movie is driven by character. Batman is not one of the good guys. The character of the Joker exists almost entirely to allow us to see what the Batman will do. How far will he go to defeat the Joker? Of all the comic book superheroes he may be the best and most interesting. Superman is a stuffed shirt. He fights for truth, justice and the American way. He is the quintessential "good guy". But the Batman is a vigilante. He hates evil and crime and to stop it he thinks nothing of dropping a few bad guys off the top of buildings. He will use the methods of the criminals to stop criminals. But the Batman brings something different to the table than "Inglourious Basterds" does. The Batman

looks beyond the deals we are willing to make with the devil and into the inner being, into the soul of the Batman and asks if evil is what we do or who we are.

That question is also suggested of the Joker. In two different monologues he tells conflicting stories of how he became the Joker. It is obvious that at least one of them is a lie, probably both of them because the Joker is evil and, as Scott Peck has said, the defining characteristic of evil is the lie. It's also an idea explored with the character of Harvey Dent who begins the movie as the crusading District Attorney and at the end of the movie, after having been horribly abused and tortured, has been transformed into the comic book character of Two Face – another creature of evil. What is the source of evil? We see the transformation of Harvey Dent. We are also privileged by the story to know the history of the Batman and how he became a figure caught between two worlds. We don't know how the Joker came to be. What then is the source of evil? I believe the answer is given at the end of the movie. The Joker has manipulated two large groups of people onto separate ferry boats. One group is filled with ordinary people – good people. The other boat is filled with hardened criminals being evacuated from the prison where they are held. He tells both of them that each has a transmitter that will allow them to set off explosives on the other boat. If neither button is pressed by midnight both will explode. If one is pressed, destroying the other boat, the people on the boat that destroyed the other will be spared. It is an invitation to make a deal with the devil. At the end it is one of the hardened criminals who grabs the transmitter from the hands of a frightened guard who seems about to push the button and throws it overboard. He may have committed terrible crimes, but he refuses to buy into that kind of evil. Evil, it would appear, is not something forced upon us, but the product of the choices we make. We have a choice and not just the Batman, but all of us. We have a choice.

I don't expect the bible will be replaced anytime soon with a collection of DVD's. If it was there would be the same arguments we have about our current bible - which movies to include and should we accept only the original theatrical release or the revised director's cut? There would also be the question of how the movies should be interpreted. Are they just for entertainment, or are their deeper messages? The same is true of life. Are we meant to live on the surface, or shall we dive deeply and confront the questions that lurk underneath? I reminded of these words of Henry David Thoreau.

I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

At their best that is what good books and good movies strive to help us do. They are a means of taking us on a journey that we might come to know the meanness and sublimity of the world for what they are. Once upon a time it was stories told around a campfire that helped us to do that, now it is movies on the silver screen. There will not be a bible made of movies, but I hope we would take them seriously. There is more to them than entertainment. Watched carefully we can find both the meanness and sublimity of life.

Amen.