

“Looking for Light”

February 10, 2019

Faith in Film series – Season of Epiphany – *Mary Poppins Returns*

It’s become my practice to do some crowdsourcing for this series. So I put the question out there on Facebook, “What film gives you hope?” Over 50 people responded - some of them with lists of films that offer hope. Here’s a sample: *Shawshank Redemption, Wonder, Rudy, Frozen, Goonies, Heaven is For Real, Lord of the Rings, The Blind Side, Lion King, Life of Pi, Harry Potter, The Sound of Music, Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure, The Shack, It’s a Wonderful Life, The Green Mile, The Passion of the Christ*, and many more including those that we’ll explore in this series: *Green Book, The Greatest Showman*, and *I Can Only Imagine*.

Stories and movies can touch our humanity in profound ways. We’ve shown this video before, but Josh Larsen put into words why we do this “Faith in Film” series:

SHOW MEDIA - “Movies are Prayers”

Larsen reminds us that prayer isn’t confined to these walls. In film, we encounter confession, yearning, lament, and celebration - all part of our human experience. “Movies are our way of telling God what we think about this world and our place in it.”

I knew last summer when I saw that there would be a *Mary Poppins Returns* that it would be a part of this series. I figured I couldn’t go wrong because I loved *Mary Poppins* as a kid. The fact that my name was Mary helped, but honestly, the movie and the music are timeless. The story is powerful, and it’s a reminder of resurrection. George Banks (Mr. Banks) goes through a transformation that impacts not only him, but also his family and his community.

In this reboot, times have changed. We’re not in a prosperous time where people are saving money, but in what’s termed “The Great Slump.” Michael Banks is at risk of losing the family home because of missing payments. He and his three children (John, Annabelle, and Georgie) are doing their best in the midst of deep grief. His wife, Kate, their mother, has passed away.

The scene has changed. Michael Banks is a teller at the bank where Mr. Banks held a prominent position. Jane Banks is a union labor organizer - still involved like Mrs. Banks whose “Votes for Women” sash shows up in the movie. Bert the chimney sweep is mentioned, but now it’s Jack the lamplighter who is a sidekick. And Ellen the maid is still around, only older!

One thing hasn’t changed much - Mary Poppins herself. She returns to look after the Banks children – not having aged at all. She is still prim and proper - and a little snarky - and still the one we’d all want to care for us in the midst of difficult times. She has a way of being fully invested without getting too close. She stays until her job is done and really is an example of the way the God’s grace is revealed to us through the people around us. She and Jack take the Banks children on a grand adventure,

encouraging them to use their imaginations, which helps the whole family navigate the reality of daily life.

Mary Poppins is with them in the midst of their profound grief. It seems that one of our films usually deals with grief at some level - because it's such a real and raw part - and a common part - of our human experience. Michael misses Kate, as do his children, but they don't talk about it to one another. Mary Poppins helps the children understand the power of memory and the power of love.

One important part of the story is the grief that makes everyone feel somewhat lost. That's a common response that I hear when people are grieving. We do things that make us feel like we're not "with it." I remember running out of gas a few days after my grandma died. I just didn't remember to fill up the tank!

Mary Poppins reminds us that you can't lose what you've never lost – that memories and love are incredible gifts. That doesn't mean grief doesn't hurt, because it does. It doesn't mean that we go through it quickly because we don't. It does mean that death isn't the most powerful thing we face; love is more powerful. We need one another in our grief. We need to be with one another and encourage one another – not to get over grief, but to listen and care as God cares for us.

And you'll see the theme of encouragement running throughout this series, and you may notice that music is something that connects these films. In *Mary Poppins Returns*, though, it was light that stood out for me: the need for light and the power of light. Right away, Jack the lamplighter calls us to look up and see the light. He recognizes his role of lighting lamps early in the morning as vital and important. And Jack made me think about our role as followers of Jesus – the One who says, in the Gospel of John **(Project)**: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

I thought about so many people who have been without power this week – some still waiting – and so many who have been trying to restore power. It's in the moments when light is gone that we notice its absence so profoundly. It's when we're feeling hopeless that we need hope so much. And we usually find it in community with others.

The passage from Matthew might sound familiar. It comes on the heels of what we call the Beatitudes. Jesus has just pronounced a blessing on those who seek to follow him. He has laid out expectations for what it means to belong to him. He says that being "blessed" does not mean being happy, but that "blessed" is a state of being – joy because we live in God's Kingdom.

And when Jesus delivers this "sermon on the mount," it's like his inaugural address. He's been baptized, tempted, and now begins traveling around teaching and healing. He sets out the expectations of people who seek to follow him. It's not just a vision for the future, but a reality check for all of his disciples. This is like "How to be a Disciple" 101.

Jesus is supposedly on a mountain, which reminds us of Old Testament moments when God showed up, usually on a mountain. And we encounter it during Epiphany, we celebrate how Jesus comes for the whole world and a time of “a-ha!” moments when we encounter God’s call on our lives. To read these words, we can’t help but be challenged because Jesus speaks in the present tense. Jesus isn’t talking something in the future, but the reality of what it means to live as his people right now! Being salt and light isn’t something that *will* happen; it’s who we are right now! This is who God created us to be.

And Jesus says these things to a community. In the original Greek, the language is emphatic. It’s the plural “You are...” Yes, these words apply to each of us, but living in God’s Kingdom and working for God’s Kingdom doesn’t stop with our personal lives. We do this together.

Nowadays, salt doesn’t have much of a positive connotation. Perhaps we think of salt only as a part of our diet that we have to watch carefully. But in Jesus’ time, salt was a precious commodity. Salt was a preservative for food that was necessary if people were going to have enough to eat. Salt was a disinfectant. Salt was even as fertilizer – scattered and worked into the land so that it would be more productive.

So when Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth,” he calls us to work into the world around us and to literally transform it. Consider for a moment: we don’t eat salt by itself, but perhaps we eat “a spoonful of sugar.” Salt is used to enhance flavor. Our lives are offerings to God for God to use to transform the world.

When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” he calls us to be agents of God’s work in the world – showing the love of God, bringing hope, and even exposing truth. One of our kids said it well, light shows the way. Light illumines spaces; light lets things be seen as they are.

Jesus isn’t talking about light that blinds and makes it difficult for others to see, but rather light that shows the truth. Those who follow Jesus – even you and me – how do we show the truth about God? How do we show God’s grace?

Together, those who follow Jesus stand out like a city on a hill. Following Jesus is not and cannot be a private affair; it has to be visible to the world. That doesn’t mean that we live with a self-righteous attitude and claim to have it all figured out. In fact, it means the opposite. We’re called to humility. We probably have questions about Scripture or why things happen.

Following Jesus doesn’t mean that death and grief aren’t difficult. It doesn’t mean that we all express our faith in the same way. But it does mean that we do express our faith in Jesus so that God gets all the glory. We point to God – not to ourselves – so that others might praise God.

Jesus’ words are challenging. What would this world be like without salt and light? Both were vital in Jesus’ time and still are necessities today. So, Jesus calls us to reclaim who we are – salt and light. Friends, you are vital to sharing God’s Good News in

Jesus Christ. Our witness is important for a world where people are hurting, desperate for hope, and looking for light.

I thought about how nice it would be if each of us had a Mary Poppins who showed up just at the right time. But really, that's who God is for us. God is with us always - right on time - never leaving us. And we're called to be with each other - to be a community of care and hope.

How are we studying God's Word so we can faithfully proclaim it to others? How are we in fellowship with others so we can find encouragement? How are we in prayer – not just when we want something, not just when life is hard, not just when life is joyful – but constantly seeking God's will for our life? How are we giving – of all of your resources – as a witness to God's faithfulness and generosity? Discipleship is not a social club activity, but a call to follow the Light of the World and be light for the world!

Someone said that an organization or institution is ultimately judged by the people it produces. We may think that's true for schools or colleges, but it's no different for the church. And we know that the church hasn't always had a wonderful reputation for showing God's love to others.

Are we showing others the joy of a relationship with Jesus Christ? Are we conveying the peace that passes understanding and the assurance of God's presence in our lives? Are we sharing the amazing grace of God that we've received as a gift?

Today you received a tea light. Maybe you have a lot of these at home. But I invite you to take it home and light it up – and remember who you are. As Jack would say, "Light your lamps" so that others can look up and look around - and know the love of God.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE