

“The Force IS with Us”

January 15, 2017

*Faith in Film* series – *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*

I’ll confess: I’m a little late to the *Star Wars* craze. I was a kid when the first movies came out and didn’t see them, though I remember a lot of my classmates with Chewbacca toys and Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and Princess Leia action figures. I never got into the movies that came out in the early 2000’s - Episode 1, 2, & 3.

But I’m in now. Last year, our family watched the first set of movies in preparation for *The Force Awakens*, and we made it a family date to see *Rogue One*. I still don’t know the whole cast of characters. I can’t keep all of the place names straight, but what I do know is that *Star Wars* offers us a glimpse into the classic good versus evil story. The Rebel Alliance against the Empire. Its staying power is built upon the truth that good will always overcome evil - not without a fight - but good will win. Love will prevail. Friendship and community matter. The Force can be used for good.

We like the premise, too - that this rag-tag group gets together and actually comes together to do something big. In *Rogue One*, it’s Galen Erso - an engineer whose brilliant mind has created the Death Star, but who wants to undermine its power; his daughter, Jyn, whose determination fuels the group; Cassian Andor, a Rebel and spy who calls others to fight for a good cause even when Rebel leaders don’t support it; K-2SO, a droid (robot) with an attitude; Chirrut Îmwe and Baze Malbus, Temple guardians who understand the power of the Force for good; Bodhi Rook, a pilot who defects from the Empire to help the Rebel cause; and encouraging them is Saw Gerrera, an extremist who wants them to keep the hope of a better life and save the dream.

They do something that matters. It’s not a far stretch to look at all of us - to look at our church and the church around the world - and see the same thing. Perhaps we don’t see ourselves as anything special - or prepared enough or ready or whatever other excuse we make - to be followers of Jesus. And yet, God calls. You and I might never have crossed paths if it wasn’t for our Jesus. When Jesus invites, we follow. And when we follow him, the world is transformed.

It sounds great, right? We could stop right there, but we won’t because it’s not that simple. It wasn’t simple for Jesus. Seeking to overcome evil with good led him to the cross. His mission pushed him to the limit of sacrificial love - a love that we’re called to embody ourselves. Love that is stronger than Law, death, hate, despair, and everything else that threatens us.

It wasn't that simple for the first ones who followed Jesus either. They struggled with the call to follow. They struggled to believe that power and might weren't the way that God would bring salvation. They battled against their desire for popularity and prestige. They wondered what it meant that faith and loving service were the highest ideals that Jesus lifted up. They were amazed at the reality of forgiveness and grace that they experienced when Jesus rose again and came back to them.

And it's not simple for us either. The letter to the Ephesians, written when Paul was in prison, reminds us that we can't handle the fight against evil on our own. It's not a minor fight, but a major one that requires power and strength that we don't have.

We can't do it alone, and we'd be misled if we tried. And many times, we are living as rebels - fighting against what is popular and accepted because of the faith we claim. Jyn says, "Rebellions are built on hope." She's right - we stand up against evil with hope that good will overcome.

And don't forget that when we take a vow to be a faithful member of the church whose head is Jesus, we're asked these questions:

*Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of your sin?*

*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?*

I don't tend to talk about fighting the devil, but the struggle against evil is real. It's real in us - as we struggle with our personal tendency to sin, to turn away from God's will and way and go our own way. It's real around us. We see evil in obvious ways: news stories of abuse that we can't stomach, violence planned and perpetrated, and so much more. Sometimes, though, it's not so obvious: the side glances, moving away from someone who is different from us, and the like.

We hear evil in damaging rhetoric, negative and hurtful comments that perpetuate racism, sexism, the fear of others who are different in culture or lifestyle, and the list goes on. But again, sometimes evil is as conniving as the inappropriate joke followed by "just kidding!" or gossip.

I'm struggling with what it means for me to seek justice right now. What do we do with the reality that safe, affordable health care may not be available, that those who would seek to build a better life in this country might not be welcome, that near us and across the world there are young people who don't have the opportunity to grow up with sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and a

loving home, when the distance between the “haves” and “have-nots” keeps getting wider and wider? How do we fight with faith in politics, economics, and in the church when there are still those who are left out and marginalized?

In April of 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote to a group of clergy from jail in Birmingham. He said, “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Dr. King’s words come out of his deep faith in God who loves us and saves us. King was a Christian first, and he was clear that our lives are bound together. He was also clear that the church had a vital role: “If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church,” he said, “it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.”

Friends, he wrote those words in 1963, but they could be written today. We still have a fight. We still have the call to resistance. We still have the call to follow Jesus into places we may not want to go, conversations that are uncomfortable, and situations where our faith isn’t popular. We have a call to represent God’s cause against evil, injustice, oppression, cynicism, and apathy, and it starts with us.

Struggling communities where hope is in short supply, refugees fleeing to find new life and safety, people who know the threat of violence because of racism - this isn’t someone else’s issue. This is about who we are in Christ and what we do wherever there is suffering and need. We are called into community, and we can use all of what we have, including our social capital, to make a difference. And we have power beyond ourselves.

And we need the “armor of God.” Yes, Jesus has overcome sin and gives us new life, but we live each day relying on him and trusting in his strength. We need to be prepared by knowing what Scripture says. We must live without fear. Fear leads to distrust, which leads to blame and hate. We can praise God and do good in order to fight against evil.

And the armor is key: the belt of truth holds up everything else, the Breastplate of righteousness protects the heart. Feet that are ready to move with strength and endurance in order to spread the Gospel of peace. The shield of faith so that we can see beyond the reality of death to the promise of

eternity, and the helmet of salvation which is our visible witness to God's goodness.

Remember that Paul wrote from prison, and maybe he modeled the armor of God after the armor he saw on the guards around him. Every part of the armor is defensive, except for the sword of the Spirit, which Paul says is the word of God.

But the other thing to notice is that Paul doesn't say anything about armor to protect the back or rear. Perhaps it's a reminder that we can't run away. We're called to be active - not passive - as we live our faith, speak out against evil, and stand up against evil.

In the film, Chirrut, one of the Temple guardians, keeps repeating the phrase, "I am one with the Force. The Force is with me." His faith, his trust, his belief that he is not alone is the power that allows him to fight well. And he knows that the Force doesn't guarantee an easy life, but rather the promise of hope and help in the midst of struggle.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead is credited with saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." There's a lot of hope in her words. And I believe that God has hope in us, too. The Force IS with us. God is with us. Don't forget it, and don't ignore it.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.