

“Be with Me!”

February 2, 2020

Faith in Film Series – “The Rise of Skywalker”

Season of Epiphany, Souper Bowl of Caring

Star Wars has captivated the world since 1977. For more than 40 years, and two generations – almost three – we’ve been watching a classic “good versus evil” story. It’s the Rebel Alliance against the Empire, Jedi versus Sith, Skywalker versus Palpatine. The Empire wants to keep its power even as a resistance movement of rebels rises up.

And even the folks on the good side have to wrestle with the reality of evil - their own connections to it and the temptation to let evil get the best of them. There are incredible epic battles that make for great cinema. And there’s the ultimate answer: good will always overcome evil - not without a fight - but good will win in the end. Love will prevail over hate. And a side note - friendship and community make a difference.

The characters have become a part of our culture, so when you say Luke and Leia, Han Solo, Chewbacca, R2D2 and C3PO, and now even BB8 and Baby Yoda, many people know the reference even without seeing the movies. The toys, action figures, and costumes are familiar, light sabers continue to be a part of the imagination of people even now, and the *Star Wars Experience* at Disney World is busy! And, when I say, “Luka, I am your mother!” you get the joke.

The first movie - *Star Wars: A New Hope* - was released in 1977 with two others through 1983. The second set started in 1999 through 2005. So this is the third set, which started in 2015 with *The Force Awakens*, then *The Last Jedi* a couple of years later, and now *The Rise of Skywalker* - the eagerly-anticipated ninth film and the end of the saga.

Josh Larsen puts 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.” And movies can help us to see the power of God’s great story in our lives when we consider bigger themes like identity, failure, redemption, and reconciliation. All are present in *Star Wars*.

And George Lucas, creator of *Star Wars*, would agree. In an article on Syfy Wire, Jessica Toomer recalls an interview from over 20 years ago where Lucas said that he created *Star Wars* “to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people — more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system.” Lucas intended for his films to wake people up to the idea of faith.”

And that's true for the characters in this film. Our heroine, Rey, is claiming her identity as a Jedi. From thinking she's a "nobody from nowhere," she's come a long way - now training and trying to get command and control over the Force. I noticed Rey's appeal to the Force as she was training. She says, "Be with me."

Even though Rey has a special connection to the Force, she understands her need for it and its power in her life. She knows that she's up against the evil powers of the world. She's not alone in her fight, but her appeal for a presence beyond just herself shows a dependence and desire to be connected so that she can carry out her role as a Jedi.

It's not unlike us as we seek to follow God faithfully. We trust in the truth that God is with us, but we also have to stay engaged. We nurture a relationship through our prayer life and our constant communion with God in worship and study. We seek God's guidance for next steps. We invite God into our celebrations. We lean on God in our struggles.

This week, my brother-in-law's mom passed away. Annette has been a part of my life since my sister got married more than 25 years ago. I have spent many holidays and family celebrations with her. She was a person of deep faith in Christ, and her Bible shows it. My sister was looking through the Bible that was next to Annette's bed to find Scripture readings for Annette's memorial service, and there were many highlights, underlines, and notes written about verse that helped her through difficult times of illness. It's a powerful part of her witness to God's grace in her life - and a reminder of what it means to say and pray "Be with me."

Back to Rey - and a spoiler alert in case you haven't seen the movie yet. She has to contend with a shocking truth that she's actually the granddaughter of Emperor Palpatine - the image of evil and destruction. She's not who she thought she was - and so she must deal with Palpatine's invitation to join the dark side plus the added Force connection that she has to Ben Solo (or Kylo Ren). They are very strong together in the Force, and both of them must come to terms with how they will use their power. Will it be for good or evil?

JJ Abrams, who directed the film, said, "Being strong with the Force didn't mean something scientific, it meant something spiritual. It meant someone who could believe, someone who could reach down to the depths of your feelings and follow this primal energy that was flowing through all of us." Perhaps we might think of the power we have to do good - and the struggle we have to choose good instead of evil.

That's where the apostle Paul comes in. 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 alone. Part of the resolution for Rey comes because she has friends - Finn and Po. She has mentors in Luke and (now General) Leia. They tell her not to be afraid, remind her that she's not alone in life or in the fight against evil, and help her trust in her goodness.

The apostle Paul offers a notable metaphor with "armor of God." Yes, Jesus has overcome the power of sin and death 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. I thought of that as I looked at Annette's Bible. The words were a part of her and how she navigated the world, and she stayed connected to God.

Though we may not be fighting the same fight as Rey, we still battle fear – whether it's evil or the everyday struggles of life. But faith calls us to live without fear. Fear leads to distrust, which leads to blame and hate. We can trust in God to lead us in the everyday struggles we face – and to do good and 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 the moment and even beyond 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 from forces around us that encourage violence, division, and hatred. We're called to face them – to confront them.

And in the midst of where we are – both personally and in our country right now, we must examine where we are and where we're called to follow God more closely. We're called to be active - not passive - as we live our faith. We face evil trusting in God to be with us. We speak out against evil. We stand up against evil. We resist evil. That's our call as followers of Jesus, and it's our call as the Body of Christ.

What the *Star Wars* story calls out isn't just the good news that evil won't win. It isn't simply a good story about a heroine and her friends who fight for what's right. It's also a call to examine ourselves and the power we have to do what's right - to remember who we are.

I kept remembering Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words that "the time is always right to do what's right." It's a call to stand up to the powerful when power is

misused and abused because someone suffers – someone always suffers. It's a call to keep on praying "be with me" - trusting that we're never alone. God is with us, and we have each other.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...