

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY 3

(02/04/18)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 16:1-18

Mark 1:12-13

“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:13)

I have to confess that, although Darlene and I have not seen any of the films that have been nominated for awards this year, I enjoy watching movies because in them I find many of the powerfully psychological and spiritual themes, the timeless truths of our religious faith clothed in modern garb. I often wonder if the writer of the novel that has been adapted to the silver screen or the director see the same things in the movie that I do; I wonder if it was written that way intentionally or if it just appeared because the creative unconscious emerged into their consciousness. I am also aware that I might be reading too much into the film, that I am finding more in it than was consciously intended or that is even warranted.

I don't care. It's what *I* see that counts (at least to me). If a movie touches me or enlightens me in some way, I am thankful. It is a lot like reading a poem, listening to a symphony, or even reading scripture. What is important is that it speaks to me.

Throughout history people have struggled with several existential questions: “Is there a meaning to life?” “What is the meaning of life?” “What are the guidelines for living life fully?” “What are the forces inside us and outside us that can pull us off course or off center?” And “Is there a God who relates to us in a personal way, seeking to guide the creative unfolding of our life, a God who gives us the resources we need for this journey?”

These themes have been raised in various forms throughout history: in literature, in fairy tales, in mythology, and in the history of religion. Many modern movies lead us into the midst of these themes without our even knowing what is happening; we begin to identify with one of the characters and suddenly realize that on a deep level all the characters in the movie are a part of us. Then we can look at the resolution of the crisis suggested by the film.

Last week, since I just couldn't stand watching “The Bachelor” and the mythical quest of the “beautiful people” for “true love,” Darlene and I watched an old movie that had been made for television. It was entitled, *Only Two Came Back*.

It seemed (at least to me) that the movie touched on a common theme of our communion meditations: “Bread for the Journey.” It reminded me of how Elijah was kept alive in the darkest

moments of his life by an angel who brought him food. It reminded me of the Israelites who were sustained during the Exodus by the miraculous appearance of manna, bread from heaven, and Jesus who was “waited on by angels” when he was in the wilderness. I thought about the resources some people have and some people don’t have when they face a serious life crisis.

The movie is about five young people who form a crew to transport a 68’ schooner from southern California to Vancouver. The protagonist of the movie is Susan--a focused, disciplined, world-class sailor in love with the sea, but wandering, not connecting with life. Jason, an old boyfriend who still loves Susan, is sensitive, supportive, and also an accomplished sailor. Matt is a strong, handsome, but insecure guy who likes Susan. Rick, the playboy skipper of the craft, is more interested in restoring his reputation as a boat transporter than in the safety of his crew. Allie, Rick’s attractive girlfriend, is just along for the ride. So the crew basically shapes up as two jerks, a superficial piece of fluff, and two nice young people--Susan and Jason.

In his desire to deliver the schooner early, Rick doesn’t take the time to properly prepare for the trip. In trying to ride out a storm without radioing the coast guard for help, Rick puts his crew in danger. The boat capsizes and sinks, leaving the five stranded on an inflatable raft in shark-infested waters. Days stretch into weeks as the coast guard mistakenly believes they are safe. To make things worse, Allie’s broken leg is not only painful but is turning gangrenous.

The movie invites us to accompany five people undergoing a wilderness experience. This seems to be a common theme in many modern movies: a group of people undergoes some kind of ordeal like an earthquake, tornado, flood, or alien attack. The movie is about how the members of the group cope with the challenge that life has suddenly set before them. It is about the resources or lack of resources that each is able to utilize in this life-or-death situation.

Rick, his self-esteem shattered by his failure to accomplish his task, becomes depressed. He basically sits around feeling sorry for himself. Having lost the will to live, he eventually gives in to his thirst, drinks seawater, goes crazy, and commits suicide by swimming off to his death in search of what is really a mirage.

Matt, insecure and jealous, shows the weakness that was hidden behind his strong athletic frame. He lacks inner strength and discipline. Matt also gives in to his thirst, drinks seawater, hallucinates, dives into the water, and is eaten by sharks.

Allie, somewhat surprisingly, rises to the occasion. Although she is in tremendous pain from her broken leg, she doesn’t whine or complain. She tries to hang on as long as she can.

Finally, overcome by blood poisoning, her inner resources depleted, she lets go and allows herself to die. But at least she's not a quitter.

Susan survives the ordeal through her fierce independence, her discipline and focus as a sailor. Jason survives through his courage as a sailor and also through the strength of his love for Susan. Susan and Jason are the two in the movie who come back.

I guess by now you are beginning to realize that this is not really an entertaining or uplifting movie! The movie is about five people in a mess. As we watch the movie unfold, we wonder which ones will be able to hang on, to cling to life, to retain hope despite the desperate nature of the situation. We wonder how long they can keep up their spirits. We wonder if they will turn against each other instead of pulling together and helping each other. Will they rise to the occasion or sink? Will they grow through the crisis or regress? Will their will to live be strong enough to sustain them, or will they fold, give up the ghost, and die?

How would you react in a situation like that? What resources would you be able to draw upon to survive? I found it interesting that no one in the crew turns to his/her religion for hope, for strength. No one invokes God's presence to combat the crushing loneliness of the open ocean. No one prays. Each person meets the crisis with his/her inner resources, which in some cases is adequate and in other cases is not adequate, but no one on the boat turns to the resources of his/her faith.

When Allie is on the verge of death, she apparently sees a vision. She reaches out to God and begins to talk to him. Susan, Justin, and those of us watching have a sense that God is calling her, that God is reaching out to her. Allie begins to recite the 23rd psalm. We are surprised that she knows the words. If she knew this psalm, why didn't she say it earlier? Susan, who is holding Allie in her arms, begins to recite the Lord's Prayer. Again, we are surprised that Susan knows this prayer, for there was no evidence of a religious faith in either Allie or Susan until the moment of Allie's death. If Susan had a religious faith, why didn't she turn to it during those moments when she was on the verge of abandoning hope?

Susan and Jason hang on and are eventually rescued thanks to Susan's mother who was finally able to convince the Coast Guard that something was wrong. They return to life deeply changed by the experience, with Susan finally realizing how much she needs people.

How would you have responded to that crisis? Is there a side of you or a tendency within you that might be symbolized in Matt or Rick? Would you become so depressed or angry that

you couldn't function? Would you become so lost in feeling like a victim that you would give in much too soon? What resources would you have called upon to keep yourself and those who share your little lifeboat alive? Would you rise to the occasion and come out a stronger person, or would you regress, dying with a broken spirit?

The movie challenges us to think about life in a broader sense than being shipwrecked on a raft in shark-infested waters. We all have personal ordeals. There are times when life seems not only difficult; it seems overwhelming. At various times in our lives we may feel trapped, stranded, and without viable options. We hunger and thirst, not as the members of that crew hungered and thirsted, but we hunger and thirst for the spiritual food that would feed our spirit, the food that would nourish our soul.

What are the difficult parts of your life right now? What are the parts of your life that seem hopeless? How do you stay alive? How do you keep from giving up?

In its presentation of Susan and Justin, the movie emphasizes the importance of our inner resources. It also shows us the importance of other people. Susan learns to become more open and receptive to the caring support of others. The movie tells us we may be able to go through the wilderness experiences of our lives alone, but we don't have to do it this way.

For just a moment, as Allie is dying, we suddenly become aware of something that was missing in the way the crew faced their ordeal. The element of religious faith bursts upon the scene. In this brief scene the movie suggests that there is a third set of resources, the resources of our religious faith.

Our faith can help us through the darker moments of our lives, those moments that the writer of the 23rd psalm called the "valley of deep darkness." When our inner strength or resiliency is not buttressed by the experience of community, love, support, and a strong religious faith, or when we have these resources but don't call upon them, we become especially vulnerable. If our outer life goes well, we may never notice. However, when the storms of life hit we may fall apart. When the light of hope is fading, we may suddenly realize that a hand is reaching out to us in the darkness, and we may trust enough to reach out and take this hand.

The ancient Israelites left Egypt, where they were slaves, and set out with a feeling of hope toward the Promised Land. This journey was neither short nor easy. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years, often hungry and thirsty, often depressed and angry. As we heard this

morning, they complained a lot. Really! Many times they wanted to turn back. Some of them gave up and died. Others found a way to hold on until they reached their goal.

While they were in the wilderness the Israelites discovered a resource that was not of their own making. One evening they went to bed hungry and depressed. When they awoke they discovered the manna that God had provided, the bread that they needed for their journey. It was enough to keep them alive. They didn't need to hoard it, to save some for tomorrow. This is when they realized that they would somehow receive what they needed every day.

God assures us that he will be present in the wilderness experiences of our lives, just as he was for Elijah and the Israelites, just as he was for Jesus. God gives us the resources we need to meet the challenges that life places before us. A spirit of love and charity, a spirit that comes from God, connects us with one another in beautiful and healing ways. Just as God gave the Israelites Moses and Aaron as their guides, God gives us Jesus—not only his teachings but also his presence. His presence is bread for the journey, the spiritual food we need.

As we partake of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us think about the wilderness experiences of our life's journey, the difficult ordeals that we face, the crushing loads that we bear. Then, let us turn to God in prayer. Let us ask God to be in the lifeboat with us, to share the ordeal we are facing. Finally, let us open our hands, our hearts, our minds to God to receive the bread that God sends to us to sustain us on our journey.

Then let us share this bread with those who have gathered here with us.

In this spirit of quiet receptivity, in an openness to the presence of our Lord in these moments and in every moment of our daily life, let us so partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
February 4, 2018*