Sermon for Sunday, January 6, 2019

“A Star is Born”

Up until recently, it had been years since I had seen a film that really struck my spirit. I’m talking about the movies that give you that special feeling, a certain je ne sais quoi that you get from the ideal cinematic experience that hits all the high notes. The characters stories tug on your emotions, taking you to places of darkness but also to places of genuine joy. The plots twists and turns make you think in new ways, and all of these elements combine to leave a distinct impression that lingers on your spirit for sometime. You can’t quite shake it, but you don’t want to shake it. It’s hard to accurately capture what all goes into the making of these films, but honestly even Oscar worthy films sometimes miss the mark in creating these highly sought after experiences. Not every great film has that thing I like to call movie magic.

This past fall, I stumbled upon some of that magic when I had the pleasure of watching Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga in “A Star is Born.” I just got swept away in their story and kept thinking back to what a great cinematic experience I’d had...

...Then I found out the film was a re-make. I legitimately thought it was a magnum opus from Bradley Cooper's genius screenwriting abilities, and was let down to learn that this was a film that had been remade for generations. Oy vey.

Ok so the classic was made anew for us with modern day stars. Which doesn’t actually take away anything from the film, it just honestly made me think. It made me think about the way good stories are worth re-telling, especially worth adapting for each generation.

In a lot of respects that's what our Christian Faith is about. We listen to stories retold again and again from ancient days and we don't even get a new cast of characters. For example, our Gospel text for today re-tells a story that we have heard before. It’s got the original cast and crew- Mary, Herod, the Magi’s and baby Jesus; the original screenplay, written by Gospel author Matthew; and the unbeatable director: God, one with the Holy Spirit- the author of all creation who put the parts into motion.

This storyline is re-told as if we were watching the original 1937 version of “A Star is Born.” It’s not the remake from the 1950’s, 1976 or 2018. We don't get the newly adapted version of Scripture like we do Hollywood films. What we do get that's new is the chance to adapt our lives to the age-old truths as they apply to our current circumstances. It's less of an updated version than it is a current day application of an eternal truth, a real life version if you will.

If we are playing out the real life version of Matthew’s Scripture, seems to me we might want to choose who the Magi and Herod symbolize. Jesus is a given constant, and the star fixed above him suggests just that. As a result, there is a little less room for interpretation there... He is the divine gift of God given to humankind, pointed to in a majestic fashion by the stars alignment in the night’s sky. He is the sought after treasure, the Messiah. It's also pretty clear he is the treasure we are to seek after as well. Of course that varies in its own way depending on how your Christian life is developing and changing at present, but the overall relationship to the star is fixed. We seek after it always.

So in pondering our roles as the different kings in this story, as one of the 3 of orient or as the Roman emperor, this story asks us to examine a more human experience in relationship to the divine Christ child. Are we like the Magi, seeking after Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh… Or are we more like Herod? We might say we want to pay him homage, but really we want to size up the Christ child’s starmpower against our own power. These distinct characterization are states that we oscillate between: states of submission and seeking after God like the Magi, and states of challenging God and our own authority against the Lord’s, like Herod.
I started reading a book by Thomas Moore called “Soul Mates.” It’s a fascinating read for me as a pastor and a former philosophy major, but it’s probably a bit dense for the less metaphysically inclined reader. That aside, Moore makes a distinction between soul and spirit, and calls on psychologists who have done the same to structure his view, but interestingly, he re-tells the myth of Apollo and Daphne to illustrate his point. Apollo is grounded in his desire for relationship with Daphne, who is flighty and unsure of tying herself down to him. Our souls are like Apollo, while our spirits are like Daphne. Moore continues that the soul wants to ground itself in rooted experiences of the past and familiarity, but our spirits seek after new experiences that transcend the earthly life. Earthly and sturdy is the soul; heavenly and flighty is the spirit.

Lots of mystics encourage pursuit of the life of the spirit according to Daphne- to seek after ideals by constantly working upward towards a more heavenly state. We accomplish this by disengaging our world more and more, tuning into the Holy Spirit more and more, and in so doing we accomplish our goal and transcend the world of the flesh. While that is not in and of itself wrong, it isn’t always realistic. Disengaging our world calls us to a hermitage that doesn't allow much room for the fullness of a life lived in community full of the ups and downs that come with family and neighborly relationships. Furthermore, our experiences tend to be earthy, full of grit and sometimes a good bit of dirt. Transcendental experiences almost have to be engineered to pull us away from the grips of our fleshly yet soulful existence.

Much like we oscillate between being the Magi or Herod, we shift between soul and spirit, Daphne and Apollo, and we live in this confusing existence that is humanity. The constant flux of life is sometimes maddening. We aim to be the perfect balance of soulful and spiritual Magi, grounded and yet upwardly mobile in spirit our seeking after the Lord. Later on, we might want to push ourselves past the Herod like grudges we hold that we know are unholy, but instead we get stuck there. We sit on our thrones and demand that the location of the Christ child be brought to us!

We start to think we can’t fulfill our destiny because we don’t have the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh. Next time we’ll try harder, we'll make sure to grab the gifts...but then it turns out we don’t have the star in sight. There is always some obstacle in our path- it's not a straight shot or a smooth journey to the star.

It's equally as hard to start the journey. When you expect deliverance to show up at your fingertips so you can pay homage without starting out on our own journeys, you probably won't ever get to see the star. Even those Magi ordered to bring you news of the Christ child’s exact location won't deliver at your beck and call...you'll have to go after him yourself.

As we tell our own stories, our own adaptations of the Gospel text, we have choices to make. We can choose to leap out of our seats and begin the journey. We can bolt past our 2 magi friends and get to the star first! There are endless possibilities for how our journeys might develop, but this much is clear: we are called to seek out Christ.

In this new calendar year, you likely have some resolutions you don't fully intend to stick to, but you surely have new goals, big plans and even bigger dreams to live out. Seek out your own stars, but don't forget that our earthly souls and our heavenly minded spirits are intricately woven into the fabric of our being. Stars in this world will never be enough. We need more than good movies and astrological signs to live a life full of all that God has to offer- we need to nurture the spirit and the soul in ways that move us closer to Jesus. In that state of being, our goals, plans, and our dreams become more than just bright spots in our mundane lives. They become sources of light that reflect the power of the best star that ever shone once upon a time, long ago, when it pointed to the birth of our Savior. Maybe we can have our own little stars born, born of the spirit, if we seek with soul and spirit after the one true God.

With peace and much love in Christ,
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