

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
February 24, 2013

Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35
“Jesus and the Oscars”

U.S. America throws a party today in celebration of the mainstream movie industry’s best movies of the past year. It’s the cultural arts equivalent to the Super Bowl.

Movies and Hollywood have always played an important role in the cultural landscape of this country and its influence is felt globally. I appreciated films and the significance of this day while growing up in South Africa.

And in my 30-year living in this country I have grown closer to this cultural bonanza and have made a point of seeing every “Best Picture” Oscar nomination for the past, I don’t know, how many number of years.

Which brings me to the question about Jesus and the Oscars: If he were alive today would he watch the Oscar movies? I think he would because he was appreciative and critical of his culture.

In the Lenten gospel story today when he is told that Herod was out to get him – kill him actually – he replies: “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”

The Brief Statement of Faith of our denomination states that Jesus was killed for “sedition and blasphemy.” In this text he sees that the dominant political structure is after him and by affirming his prophetic nature we see that the religious authorities want his head as well.

All this implies Jesus’ awareness and critique of the socio-political and cultural dynamics of his society. Jesus would watch movies today, perhaps not so much as a member of the general public likes us, but as one who directs and acts in his own films like Quentin Tarantino and Ben Affleck of these Oscar movies. Jesus would be director, actor and viewer.

The Oscar movies are mainstream and thus meant to be seen, enjoyed, critiqued and evaluated by the general populace. Christians are not divorced from culture and therefore we have a role in the mix.

Every verse in the Psalm today can be related to one or more of the “Best Picture” Oscar nominations. I shall provide a brief movie review on each verse

with the rider that I'm uncomfortable with violence, torture, abuse and anything that dehumanizes human beings and disregards and violates animals and nature.

Here goes, Psalm 27, verses 1 to 14:

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

In "Life of Pi," the protagonist literally trusts God and that's his strength and salvation.

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

In "Django Unchained," the flesh of slaves is devoured and in the end adversaries and foes stumble and fall by the dozen.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

In "Argo" the CIA rescuer is fearless and confident to the end and it saves the day. Fearlessness and confidence is a necessary trademark of the Navy Seals in "Zero Dark Thirty." These movies are two sides of the same coin. In one Osama Bin Laden is the target of U.S. operatives and in the other U.S. citizens are the intended subjects of U.S. operatives. God and Allah is an ambiguous mixed bag in these and all war-related movies.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

In "Les Miserables" the protagonist is saved in the house of the Lord and his heart never leaves it.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

The same protagonist hid in God's house and on numerous occasions he was set on a high rock. Christianity is powerfully portrayed in Victor Hugo's story. Now, I must read the book which is only about 1,300 pages long.

⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

I argue with the way joy is achieved in “Django Unchained” but understand why the oppressed shout for joy in the final outcome.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

Both “Life of Pi” and “Amour” can be seen as cries to the Lord, the “Life of Pi” literally and “Amour” in a philosophically humanist way. Both seek greater strength and “Amour” is a cry for mercy and an answer in compassion.

⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek.

This is clearly and unequivocally conveyed in “Les Miserables.”

⁹Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

Lincoln in “Lincoln” sees himself as a servant of the Lord in his leadership and quest to rid society of slavery. It is known that he failed many times so this verse might have been his prayer. Perhaps the entire Psalm was his prayer. He certainly saw God as his and society’s salvation.

¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

The children in “Beasts of the Southern Wild” are forsaken by their mothers and the protagonist’s father has a yo-yo relationship with his daughter. It’s the result of poverty and reckless living. One hopes in the end that someone does “take up,” save or protect these children. We might ask: Who/what are the beasts of the southern wild?

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

This is a constant prayer of the protagonists in “Lincoln” and “Les Miserables.”

¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

“Zero Dark Thirty” is a tale of false witnesses, violence and adversaries. Enough said.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

In an odd way, “Silver Linings Playbook” leads to God’s goodness and to the “land of the living” for the bipolar protagonist and those around him.

Finally, ¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

This concluding prayer of the psalmist applies to every “Best Picture” Oscar nomination.

I also saw the documentary, live action and animated shorts. These are shown at the Rafael Theatre every year and are just as powerful and meaningful as the full length movies.

Much is learned about life in good movies. In a way, we see what God sees. We go into realms and regions that are beyond us and are propelled into greater faithfulness.

While I appreciate that movies entertain us and we are entertained, I say a prayer before each movie which goes something like this: “God, help me to see and hear what you want me to see and hear in this movie.” In that way, I’m assured that Jesus is a fellow traveler with me in the movies.

Jesus is with all of us everywhere and must certainly be with us when we watch the Oscar movies. Amen.