

“God Strikes Again!”

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1st Sun. in Advent/Hope

Revelation 19:11-16, 19-21^a

Luke 21:25-36

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse.

Its rider was called Faithful and True, and he judges and makes war justly.

Revelation 19:11

Let us pray... O God,

As we enter the Season of Advent, let it be an adventure of faith

that leads us to recognize how you are present in our lives;

and how you still strike without warning to bring about good.

Enlist us to be mentors for your cause of overcoming evil spirits

with a well-timed word, spoken in truth and love.

Amen

Well, the day is swiftly approaching for which many people around the world
have been anxiously awaiting – oh, besides Christmas Day...

Yes of course, it is the premier of the new “Star Wars” movie

coming up in just a couple weeks and even The Villages movie theatres
have been selling early bird tickets.

People are really excited about this – me, too!

So, what is all the excitement about?

“Star Wars” is another long-running movie ‘franchise’ –

bigger than either “Jurassic Park” or “James Bond”.

It has a very faithful fan-base who relish every teaser ‘trailer’ that comes out
showing glimpses and clues to the new film.

I remember the advertising hype for the fourth movie back in 1999 –

which was actually “Episode I” and I went to see it with one of the young adults
who was a member of my church then, John Skrmetti.

As it turned out, he couldn’t wait and had to see the first showing the night before!

So, it was the second time for him to see “Episode I” when he went with me.

By the way, that ‘loyal’ fan base?

They hated “Episode I”.

They hated the movie’s producer and director, George Lucas,

and they lambasted him for not being faithful

to what they believed was the “Star Wars” tradition.

So for the next 2 movies in the series, George Lucas gave the fans what they wanted...

and those movies were just awful, like watching violent amusement rides.

This whole affair made me think about how we Christians

have built up our expectations about who Christ is and

about his apocalyptic return – and that many just might be disappointed.

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The Bible does give us a dramatic vision of what Christ's return will be like with such imagery as 'the white rider' in today's lesson from Revelation who is arrayed with his troops before the hordes of the Antichrist in a climactic showdown.

By the way, how I imagined this passage when I first read it decades ago, was basically the same as a scene from the "Lord of The Rings" – another movie series with its own apocalyptic scenarios. In these films, the world of the Hobbits was under siege by monsters called Orcs who were determined to wipe out human civilization – sound familiar? As the Orcs have the good guys surrounded and are about to overrun them, Gandalf – a wise and good wizard who, like Christ, was resurrected from death, appears on the third day of the siege, astride a white horse on a ridge between two mountains – and behind him stood his cavalry. They charge down the hill to mow down the Orcs, scatter the survivors, and rescue the people.

Such films are powerful examples of what can be imagined and our cinema tradition is rich with metaphors and parables that can serve as illustrations to inspire – or as propaganda to manipulate.

This storyline of the 'hero's journey' is very appealing – especially, for those who would like to see the world go to war, even for good reasons like thwarting and degrading ISIS. The "Lord of The Rings" series began around the year 2000 and was very popular in the aftermath of 9/11 and may have contributed to the patriotic fervor then.

But there is another narrative right alongside the call to arms of "Star Wars", "Lord of The Rings", as well as "Harry Potter", which is... the mentoring of young people to live lives of purpose that serve the greater good.

I preached on this theme of mentoring in the movies earlier this summer and I referred to Idgie Threadgoode – or Towanda from the classic, "Fried Green Tomatoes", as well as Obiwan Kenobi of "Star Wars", as metaphors for senior adults who serve as mentors for young people on their hero's path.

Last summer, I learned that one of my mentors, Chris Farlekas, passed away in the spring of this year.

He modeled for me true generosity and compassionate listening. I remember when I first started to work at the Greystone state psychiatric hospital in upstate NJ that I was disheartened and quite frankly afraid to work there.

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Chris would listen, but neither would he let me off the hook, saying,

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You get to go home at night.

Nobody rides into town on their white horse and solves all the problems.

not even George Bush (President #41) Maybe you can help...”

Maybe we can help...

Maybe not in ways as dramatic as Luke Skywalker destroying the Death Star or the Hobbit taking the magic ring to Mount Doom, or Harry Potter confronting the archfiend Voldemort in his evil lair,

or Galahad finding the Holy Grail,

or Dorothy bringing back the broom of the Wicked Witch,

but there are still high callings that can be met by simple people – any of us, doing our fair share of a little bit of good.

George Lucas said,

My main reason for making [Star Wars] was to give young people an honest, wholesome fantasy life, the kind my generation had.

We had westerns, pirate movies, all kinds of great things.

Now they have The Six Million Dollar Man and Kojak.

Where are the romance, the adventure, and the fun that used to be in practically every movie made?

George Lucas, “The George Lucas Saga” by Kerry O’ Quinn, Starlog, July 35 1981

https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Star_Wars_Episode_IV:_A_New_Hope

Friends, George Lucas is talking about entertainment,

but he touches on the real need to re-enchanted youthful imagination as a necessary ingredient to inspire hope for the future.

Lucas himself was inspired by the comparative mythologist, Joseph Campbell, who said,

The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change.”

Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces

Through Campbell, our society has encountered myths as sacred stories

and that the Bible narratives themselves can be seen this way;

and not just as entertainment, but as legitimate guides to stir us up, to go on quests – the kind that overcome evil with good.

Often the great myths are about men going off on desperate journeys, riding mighty horses with names like Shadowfax and Babieca.

Even their swords had names like Glamdring and Excalibur.

However, as we enter the Season of Advent – which is the root word for “adventure”, let us recall that a young woman named Mary is the hero of the Gospel story’s beginning...

Willard, p.4

The Gospel of Luke begins with Mary visited by a mighty angel, Gabriel, who learns her destiny is to be the mother of the child of God if she chooses. She herself was called to bear and raise up this child – who one day would be the one to save humankind through the loving-kindness of God.

The empowerment of women has been part of the Biblical narrative all along and the Bible has certainly contributed to this movement as it is emerging in our society and throughout the world.

This theme of empowering women is reflected in our cultural media and evident in those tantalizing trailers of the new “Star Wars” movie, which feature a young woman as a central character – perhaps like Luke Skywalker of a generation ago.

My friend Chris Farlekas loved movies and wrote about them as the media critic for the Times Herald Record of upstate NY;

and he would have loved to see this new “Star Wars” movie.

A trip to visit Chris Farlekas in Middletown, NY

usually included a stop at a Greek restaurant called the Colonial Diner, followed up with a trip to the movies.

The last time I saw a movie with Chris, he was wheelchair bound and living in a nursing home.

I sprung him to have dinner at The Colonial; then we went to the movies and saw ‘The Help’ which is about an African-American housemaid working in the segregated South of the early 1960s.

As I said, Chris Farlekas had been a mentor and he used to say, “If you are full of the answer, people won’t ask you the question.”

And every so often there would be some marvelous event or insight and Chris would say, “God strikes again!”

He helped me face my fears, forgive and love more, and in the process, helped find meaning in my life which is crucial for young people especially in a time of uncertain future.

By the way, a recent report by anthropologist Scott Atran

says that “significance” or identifying with a life of meaning,

is one reason why young people are attracted to Islamic extremism – like being seduced to the Dark Side of the Force in “Star Wars”.

<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/5-important-facts-about-young-isis-recruits.html?mid=fb-share-scienceofus>

As I grew in my passion for storytelling – especially Biblical storytelling,

Chris sent me new Bible translations, got me to see theatre like “Les Miz”, museum exhibits like one about “King Arthur”, and again, movies...

One of the most significant films we saw together was “The Fisher King”

which in many ways is emblematic – or iconic, of who Chris Farlekas was and still is to me.

Willard, p.5

“The Fisher King” is part of the legend about the quest for the Holy Grail – the cup that Christ used at the Last Supper, and the story is about how it is discovered when a wounded king is healed by a clown. In the movie, the characters of the film are alternately the wounded one and the healer...

At the conclusion of the story, the clown happens to stumble into the bedchamber of the king himself.

Not knowing who this is, she simply asks a question,

“Are you OK? Can I help you?”

And the king answers that he would like some water.

She pours him a glass and drinking it, he is immediately refreshed, but then he sees what is in his hands and it is the Grail itself.

His hands had been terribly burned because of a thoughtless act in his youth, and the wounds had never healed.

Yet pushing back the bandages,

he found that his hands had been restored.

In his amazement, he asks the clown,

“How did you do this? How did you find the Holy Grail which my brightest and bravest warriors failed to do?”

And the little clown was frightened and said,

“I don’t know. I only knew you were thirsty”...

Friends, in the beginning of the Christian story was the Word and words give us meaning to form ideas and sentences – to imagine questions as well as answers.

In our lesson today from Revelation,

Christ as the ‘white rider’ destroys the armies of the Antichrist by ‘the sword that comes from his mouth’ –

that means words, questions, stories...

At the conclusion of the Book of Revelation,

an ancient word is used to summarize the hope for the future:

“Maranatha” – “Come soon”. Come soon, Lord Jesus.

There are a lot of bad movies out there, disturbingly violent and unnecessarily humiliating – and that’s just the comedies.

There are others that have something to teach us like Jesus’ parables and maybe this new “Star Wars” film will be like that.

Let this Advent Season be the occasion to lead you into the advent-ure of renewed faith and may the love of Christ be born anew in you.

Amen

Our lesson from Revelation 19:11-16, 19-21

*is like the reading from the Book of Daniel last week,
as an example of apocalyptic literature.*

*It describes the final battle between the Antichristian forces of the Beast,
and the heavenly armies of Christ...*

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse.

Its rider was called Faithful and True,
and he judges and makes war justly.

¹² His eyes were like a fiery flame, and on his head were many royal crowns.

He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

¹³ He wore a robe dyed with blood, and his name was called
the Word of God.

¹⁴ Heaven's armies, wearing fine linen that was white and pure,
were following him on white horses.

¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword that he will use
to strike down the nations.

He is the one who will rule them with an iron rod.
And he is the one who will trample the winepress
of the Almighty God's passionate anger.

¹⁶ He has a name written on his robe and on his thigh:
King of kings and Lord of lords.

¹⁹ Then I saw that the beast and the kings of the earth
and their armies had gathered to make war
against the rider on the horse and his army.

²⁰ But the beast was seized,
along with the false prophet who had done signs in the beast's presence.
(He had used the signs to deceive people
into receiving the beast's mark and
into worshipping the beast's image.)

The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake that burns with sulfur.

²¹ The rest were killed by the sword that comes from the mouth
of the rider on the horse, and all the birds ate their fill of their flesh.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 21:25-36

[Jesus said,]

- ²⁵ “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars,
and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity
at the roaring of the sea and the waves,
- ²⁶ men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world;
for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.
- ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of man [the True Heir of Humanity]
coming in a cloud with power and great glory.
- ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near.”
- ²⁹ And he told them a parable:
“Look at the fig tree, and all the trees;
- ³⁰ as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves
and know that the summer is already near.
- ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place,
you know that the kingdom of God is near.
- ³² Truly, I say to you,
this generation will not pass away till all has taken place.
- ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.
- ³⁴ “But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down
with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life,
and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare;
- ³⁵ for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth.
- ³⁶ But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength
to escape all these things that will take place,
and to stand before the Son of man [the True Heir of Humanity].”