

Sermon – 5th Lent
Philippian 3:4b-14
April 7, 2019

“Christian Movies...Christian Lives”

A recent post on the Christian blog “Faithit”, by a writer named Jared Wilson both surprised and sobered me. The post was titled *“Why Are Christian Movies So Terrible.”* Jared likes movies. He loves Jesus too. But he bemoaned the careful stylizing and caricaturizing of our faith that “faith-based movies” often succumb to. He’s not critical of the film making abilities of Christians who produce movies and doesn’t dispute their right to do so. But after watching lots of them he wonders if it’s possible in less than two hours to drill down into the life of Christians (and their non-Christian antagonists) while making a compelling, entertaining case for Christianity. He writes *“I don’t mean (they) aren’t made by people who are good at their jobs. What I mean is that they are made by people who don’t really know what the job ought to be.”*

Is it to portray a Christian world view or Christian values? Is it to evangelize or defend the faith? What it ought to be he surmises is what the Bible is, and its writers were – honest, hopeful, and did I mention...honest? Too often, Mr. Wilson writes, *“characters in Christian movies don’t sound like people in real life. They sound like Christians imagine (or desire) real life to be. The team must win. The sick person must defy the odds. (If you can get a sick person and a sports team in the same story, you’ve hit Christian movie gold.) The atheist prof must get owned. The unbelieving spouse must be converted...Why? Because “if you just believe,” you can win.”*

Paul the Apostle of Christ Jesus wrote no such scripts - not that he didn’t believe his faith in Christ a winning proposition – in fact he called it “a prize.” He even goes so far as to use an expletive (translated mildly for us as “rubbish”) to express how much better faith in Christ was to his former way of life. Paul believed Jesus was the best thing going – but that doesn’t mean he thought of himself, yet anyway, as a winner. Like the characters in most Christian movies, Paul had a history. Twice he tells about it –the ugly part, in Galatians 1:13; *“you have heard, no doubt, about my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.”* Then Philippians 3:4-6 - the better part. Yet even in this passage he can’t shake the persecuting Saul he was, even if also pretty good at his faith - *“as to the law a Pharisee...as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* Let’s get this guy a blue visitor card.

But even then he considers his past so much “rubbish.” The point he’s trying to make is not that God’s laws were bad – rather the confidence (or opinion) he had of himself because he kept God’s law was, well, a bunch of bull...dung! I doubt Paul would contend with movie makers (or other forms of contemporary Christian art like sacred music or books) that paint an honest picture of someone’s life without Christ as distressing – after all Paul did insult, berate, and murder Christians – that’s pretty bad. I think he would contend however with those, who like he, know

that being “born again” by water and the Spirit is the most significant change a person can experience and is mind bogglingly wonderful. But it’s not a “win” the way we and particularly some movie makers often think of a win.

It’s not the bow that ties up neatly the package of a pain free, prize-winning life. It doesn’t solve ambiguities that crop up in life – from how we use our money and how we raise our kids to how we treat those irritating unbelievers we bump into everyday it seems, and, since Paul mentioned his history, how we contend with ours. Victory is for the sequel. Christianity in the here and now is an unresolved script – with that great sequel...that hasn’t been released yet. Living our faith a day at a time and particularly sharing it can’t be compressed into “*just in time and just the right way*” phrases that movies major in – those memorable lines you wish you could remember after you leave the theater – or what Mr. Wilson calls “*gotcha*” *wisdom to souls apparently just a few well-turned phrases away from conversion.*

You want a simple summary of Christian life? Try this...press on. Then, if you simply can’t avoid a look back to recall the person you once were, where you ran aground in life, what hurt, or assess how you missed (or avoided) God’s presence or grace a time or two (or 3 or 4), fine – just don’t dwell there. If you stop now and then to take stock of how God has blessed you or from what he’s delivered you so you can give thanks, good. But even that Paul tried to forget. Because nothing is so important as living in and for Jesus today, and even that doesn’t compare to what seeing Jesus will one day be. Only the past can make us feel guilty or show us laurels that can’t be rested upon anymore, and only the future can make us anxious. So, press on – even if both those parts of your life are unresolved.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet in so many words says to Israel, “*do you remember Egypt, both how awful it was and how decisively God freed you from it? Put it aside already. Do you still have the smoking ruins and dead flesh of Jerusalem, from when the Babylonians came and took you captive in your nostrils? It’s over – forget about it. Set your mind and heart on the future - not because you have your act together now and have righted the ship - but because I am your God and I write this script.*”

“*Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*” Such a statement is possible only for someone who knows that the grace of God has resolved the guilt of the past and will relieve the anxiety of the future...someone who knows Jesus...someone like you. AMEN