

**Psalm 55:1-8
Matthew 13:6-7
July 16, '17**

**MOVIES WITH A MESSAGE
“A NATURAL-BORN WORLD-SHAKER”**

IN THE EARLY 1960’S, STUART ROSENBERG WAS LIVING IN NEW YORK & DIRECTING TELEVISION SHOWS.

IN 1965, HE DECIDED TO PACK UP HIS FAMILY & HEAD TO LOS ANGELES WITH THE HOPE OF EARNING A CHANCE TO DIRECT A MOVIE.

SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVING, HE WALKED INTO A BOOKSTORE ACROSS FROM THE HOTEL WHERE HE WAS STAYING UNTIL HE COULD FIND SOMETHING MORE PERMANENT.

HE WAS DRAWN TO A SHELF OF PRE-PUBLICATION BOOKS AND PAID 82 DOLLARS FOR A BOX OF THEM TO HELP PASS THE TIME WHILE HE WAITED FOR WORK TO COME HIS WAY.

BACK IN HIS HOTEL ROOM, THE FIRST ONE HE PULLED OUT & BEGAN TO READ WAS A NOVEL WRITTEN BY A GUY WHO HAD QUITE A PAST.

DONN PEARCE HAD BEEN A MACHINIST’S HELPER, A SAFE CRACKER, A MERCHANT MARINE, A PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR AND A CONVICT.

IT WAS THAT LAST ROLE THAT PROVIDED HIM THE EXPERIENCE THAT INSPIRED HIM TO WRITE THE NOVEL THAT STUART ROSENBERG RANDOMLY PICKED UP AT THE BOOKSTORE THAT DAY.

IT WAS ENTITLED COOL HAND LUKE AND WAS BASED ON A REAL PERSON THAT PEARCE HAD ENCOUNTERED ON A CHAIN GANG IN FLORIDA.

JUST TWO YEARS LATER, ROSENBERG DIRECTED THE FILM OF THE SAME NAME – A FILM THAT, NOW - EXACTLY 50 YEARS LATER – REMAINS A CLASSIC OF AMERICAN CINEMA.

“COOL HAND LUKE,” IS, TO ME, ONE OF THE TWO FINEST CINEMATIC PRESENTATIONS OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST EVER MADE.

THE OTHER ONE IS “PINOCCHIO.”

IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT THE MOVIE “THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION” IS BETTER THAN THE STEPHEN KING NOVELLA ON WHICH IT’S BASED, THE “COOL HAND LUKE” MOVIE IS BETTER THAN THE BOOK.

THIS SUMMER, WE’RE LOOKING AT 4 BOOKS, 4 FILMS AND 4 SONGS THAT CONVEY A PROFOUND CHRISTIAN MESSAGE WITHOUT NECESSARILY BEING OVERTLY RELIGIOUS.

I WANTED TO START THE FILM PORTION OF THE SERIES WITH “COOL HAND LUKE” BECAUSE I THINK IT’S A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT – AN ART FORM THAT IS FILLED WITH SYMBOLISM & SIGNIFICANCE FOR US AS CHRISTIANS WITHOUT THAT NECESSARILY BEING THE INTENT OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR IT.

ROBERT SHORT, THE PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER WHO WROTE THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PEANUTS, ONCE SUGGESTED THAT THE ONLY PERSON WHO IS NOT IN A POSITION TO INTERPRET A WORK OF ART IS THE ONE WHO CREATED IT.

THAT’S A FASCINATING THOUGHT & IT TELLS US THAT WHEN WE SEE OR HEAR OR WATCH SOME WORK OF ART, WE SHOULD ALWAYS BE OPEN TO THE WAY IN WHICH THAT CREATIVE WORK SPEAKS TO US PERSONALLY.

ANOTHER PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER, THE REVEREND ED MCNULTY, HAS SPENT MANY YEARS REVIEWING & ANALYZING MOVIES IN SEARCH OF SPIRITUAL MESSAGES.

HE CALLS MOVIES THAT FIT THAT CATEGORY, “VISUAL PARABLES.”

THAT’S A VERY APPROPRIATE LABEL BECAUSE THAT’S REALLY WHAT FILMS CAN DO – THEY CAN PROCLAIM A MESSAGE ON THE SCREEN IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT JESUS DID IN TELLING PARABLES.

THE SIMPLEST DEFINITION OF A PARABLE – ONE THAT IS EVEN TAUGHT TO YOUNG SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN – IS “*AN EARTHLY STORY WITH A HEAVENLY MEANING.*”

THAT’S WHAT SOME MOVIES ARE – EARTHLY STORIES WITH HEAVENLY MEANINGS.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT READING THIS MORNING FROM MATTHEW’S GOSPEL IS ACTUALLY THE LECTIONARY GOSPEL READING SUGGESTED FOR THIS DAY.

INTERESTINGLY, THOUGH, THE ENTIRE PASSAGE ISN’T INCLUDED.

IN FACT, THE VERSES WE READ ARE *NOT* PART OF THE SUGGESTED READING.

THE READING IS VERSES 1-9 & THEN 18-23 – THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER ON ONE SIDE & THE EXPLANATION OF IT ON THE OTHER.

THE VERSES WE READ ARE 16 & 17 WHICH FALL AT THE END OF THE RESPONSE OF JESUS WHEN THE DISCIPLES ASK THE QUESTION, “*WHY DO YOU SPEAK TO THEM IN PARABLES?*”

HE SAYS TO THEM, “*BLESSED ARE YOUR EYES FOR THEY SEE & YOUR EARS FOR THEY HEAR.*”

**THE GOSPEL MESSAGE IS ALL AROUND US IN THE WORLD.
DO WE HAVE EYES TO SEE THAT MESSAGE & EARS TO HEAR IT?
DO WE SEE & HEAR THE MESSAGES THAT CERTAIN MOVIES
CONVEY?**

**AT THE END OF THE MOVIE, “PLACES IN THE HEART,” WHEN
THOSE WHO HAVE DIED OR LEFT TOWN ARE SHARING COMMUNION
TOGETHER, DO YOU SEE THAT AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE
MYSTERIOUS WAY IN WHICH THE SACRAMENT BREAKS DOWN
BARRIERS & CALLS US TOGETHER, REGARDLESS OF TIME OR
CIRCUMSTANCES?**

**OR, IN “FIELD OF DREAMS,” DO YOU SEE THE WAY IN WHICH
THE CALL OF KEVIN COSTNER’S RAY KINSELLA IS VERY MUCH
LIKETHETHE CALL OF ABRAHAM THE PATRIARCH - BOTH OF THEM
CALLED FORTH BY A MYSTERIOUS VOICE ON JOURNEYS THEY
COULDN’T EVEN BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND.**

**AS YOU LOOK AT THE IMAGE IN YOUR BULLETIN OF LUKE
JACKSON LYING ON A TABLE IN THE PRISON MESS HALL AFTER
EATING 50 EGGS, YOU PROBABLY SEE IT DIFFERENTLY THAN WHEN
YOU FIRST SAW IT IN A MOVIE THEATER OR TELEVISION SCREEN.**

**IT’S PRETTY HARD TO SEE IT AS ANYTHING BUT A
REPRESENTATION OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS WHEN YOU SEE IT IN
CHURCH.**

**BUT IS THAT BECAUSE WHEN YOU’RE IN CHURCH, ARE TUNED
TO MATTERS OF FAITH?**

**IF WE WOULD MAINTAIN THAT SAME TUNING IN OUR EVERYDAY
LIVES, WE WOULD SEE THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD’S LOVE ALL AROUND
US EVERY DAY.**

IN “COOL HAND LUKE,”THE MESSAGE & THE SYMBOLS OF GOOD NEWS ARE SEEN FROM THE OPENING SCENE TO THE CLOSING CREDITS.

IN CASE YOU’VE NEVER SEEN IT OR CAN’T RECALL BECAUSE IT’S BEEN SO LONG, IT’S THE STORY OF A DECORATED WAR HERO WHO LOSES HIS WAY & FINDS HIMSELF IN A SOUTHERN PRISON ON A CHAIN GANG WITH A TWO-YEAR SENTENCE.

THROUGH A SERIES OF ESCAPADES & FUTILE ESCAPE ATTEMPTS, LUKE ENDEARS HIMSELF TO HIS 50 FELLOW PRISONERS.

HE BRINGS A SENSE OF LIBERATION TO THOSE OTHER PRISONERS & HE STRIKES FEAR IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO USE BRUTAL FORCE TO MAINTAIN THEIR AUTHORITY.

THE MOST WELL-KNOWN LINE IN THE MOVIE – UTTERED TWICE – IS “*WHAT WE’VE GOT HERE IS FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE.*”

THAT’S VERY MUCH THE THEME OF THE MOVIE – A COMPLETE DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE PRISONERS & THOSE WHO WIELD AUTHORITY OVER THEM.

IT EVEN SEEMS TO BE SOMETHING THAT SEPARATES LUKE FROM THE OTHER PRISONERS IN THEIR PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF GOD.

THE OTHER PRISONERS – AT FIRST GLANCE – SEEM TO HAVE GREATER RESPECT FOR DIVINE POWER AND AUTHORITY THAN LUKE DOES.

BUT LUKE – IN HIS COMMUNICATION WITH GOD – SOUNDS VERY MUCH LIKE SO MANY OF THE PSALMS – INCLUDING THE ONE WE’VE READ THIS MORNING.

THERE’S AN OPENNESS & AN HONESTY ABOUT THE WAY LUKE TALKS TO GOD.

IT INDICATES – NOT A DISRESPECT – BUT A BOND THAT ENABLES HIM TO COMMUNICATE HIS QUESTIONS, HIS DOUBTS, HIS ANGER & HIS FRUSTRATION WITH AN HONESTY THAT MOST OF US LACK.

AS WE CONSIDER THE FILM, LET ME POINT OUT JUST A FEW OF THE COUNTLESS SYMBOLS & THEN CONSIDER THE DEEPER MESSAGES IT MIGHT HAVE FOR OUR OWN LIVES.

THE VERY FIRST THING YOU SEE WHEN THE FILM OPENS IS A BIG RED “VIOLATION” SIGN.

IT’S ON A PARKING METER THAT’S ABOUT TO BE DE-CAPITATED BY LUKE JACKSON, PLAYED BY PAUL NEWMAN, IN ONE OF HIS FINEST ROLES.

ONE NIGHT, IN A DRUNKEN STUPOR, FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, LUKE DECIDES TO UNLEASH A PIPE-CUTTER ON THE HEADS OF ALL THE METERS UP & DOWN THE STREET.

NOW CLEARLY THIS GUY ISN’T GOING TO BE THE MOVIE’S REPRESENTATION OF JESUS CHRIST, FOR SURELY JESUS WOULD NEVER HAVE CAUSED A PUBLIC COMMOTION SUCH AS THIS!

OR WOULD HE?

WHAT ABOUT THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM DURING HOLY WEEK?

THE CONTEXTS ARE SURPRISINGLY QUITE SIMILAR.

PARKING METERS ARE OFTEN THE SUBJECT OF CONTROVERSY AS THEY COMMERCIALIZE SOMETHING THAT CAN BE ARGUED SHOULD BE OPEN & PUBLIC.

BOTH PARKING METERS & THE TEMPLE VENDORS, THOUGH, PROVIDE A NECESSARY SERVICE SO LUKE & JESUS WERE PERFORMING POWERFULLY SYMBOLIC ACTS OF REBELLION.

LET ME HASTEN TO ADD THAT IN BOTH PARABLES & IN FILM, YOU HAVE TO BE WARY OF TRYING TO MAKE DIRECT & EXACT PARALLELS.

BUT THIS IS OUR FIRST INTRODUCTION TO LUKE & HIS REBELLIOUSNESS REMAINS THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE MOVIE – AND THE CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM DOES AS WELL.

ALL OF THE SONGS OF THE FILM ARE SPIRITUAL IN NATURE – INCLUDING ONE WE SANG THIS MORNING – “JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE.”

WHEN LUKE IS FORCED TO DIG A MASSIVE HOLE, HE FALLS IN & THE CAMERA PANS OUT TO DEPICT IT AS A GRAVE WITH LUKE CRYING OUT TO GOD IN DESPAIR.

WHEN HE’S FORCED TO EAT A MASSIVE AMOUNT OF FOOD AS PUNISHMENT, EACH PRISONER WALKS PAST & TAKES A SPOONFUL FROM HIS PLATE IN A CLEAR – YET BIZARRE – REPRESENTATION OF THE LORD’S SUPPER.

WHEN IT APPEARS AS THOUGH THE PRISON GUARDS HAVE FINALLY BROKEN LUKE, HE STAGGERS INTO THE BUNKHOUSE & FALLS TO THE FLOOR.

HE REACHES OUT HIS HAND FOR SOMEONE TO HELP HIM TO HIS FEET BUT, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THERE’S NO ONE THERE.

HE CRIES OUT IN AGONY, “*WHERE ARE YOU?! WHERE ARE YOU NOW?!?*”

HIS DISCIPLES HAVE DESERTED HIM IN HIS TIME OF DEEPEST NEED.

WHEN THE AUTHORITIES ARRESTED JESUS IN GETHSEMANE, MARK SAYS, “*ALL OF THEM DESERTED HIM & FLED.*”

AND FINALLY, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EYES TO SEE & EARS TO HEAR, THE CONCLUDING 7 TO 10 MINUTES OF “COOL HAND LUKE” ARE AS RIDDLED WITH CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM AS ANYTHING YOU’VE EVER SEEN IN A MOVIE.

THERE’S THE OPEN & HONEST PLEA TO GOD IN A MODERN-DAY GETHSEMANE SCENE.

THERE’S THE BROKEN GLASSES OF “THE MAN WITH NO EYES” WHICH SHATTER THE WORLD’S VIEW OF SOMEONE LIKE LUKE.

THERE’S THE SETTING SUN OF GOOD FRIDAY AS LUKE IS TAKEN DOWN FROM HIS PROVERBIAL CROSS & THEN THERE’S THE RISING SUN OF EASTER MORNING.

THERE’S THE GATHERING IN THE UPPER ROOM ON EASTER AS FELLOW FUGITIVE DRAGLINE MOVES FROM HIS PREVIOUS ROLE OF JUDAS TO THE ROLE OF PETER IN SHARING THE GOOD NEWS WITH HIS FELLOW PRISONER-DISCIPLES.

THERE’S THE FINAL SCENE OF AN OVERHEAD SHOT OF AN UNMISTAKABLE CROSS AT THE CONVERGENCE OF TWO COUNTRY ROADS.

SUPERIMPOSED OVER TOP OF IT IS A PHOTO OF LUKE – A PHOTO THAT HAD BEEN TORN TO PIECES BUT IS NOW PUT BACK TOGETHER, CREATING YET ANOTHER UNMISTAKABLE CROSS.

WHENEVER WE SEE SUCH SYMBOLISM IN A MOVIE, WE ASK, “*WAS ALL OF THAT INTENTIONAL OR AM I READING TOO MUCH INTO IT?*”

IN THE CASE OF “COOL HAND LUKE,” WE KNOW THE ANSWER.

THE DIRECTOR, STUART ROSENBERG, SAID THAT HE AND THE SCREENWRITER, FRANK PIERSON, ARGUED ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THE CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE FILM.

WITHOUT CHANGING ANY OF PIERSON’S DIALOGUE, ROSENBERG CLEARLY BROUGHT OUT THE SYMBOLISM.

WITH THE CLOSING SHOT OF THE CROSS, HE SAID, “*I SPENT SEVERAL HOURS IN A HELICOPTER LOOKING FOR JUST THE RIGHT CROSSROAD FOR THE ENDING.*”

IT’S ONE THING TO SEE THE SYMBOLISM IN A MOVIE – IT’S QUITE ANOTHER TO SEE THE MESSAGE.

LUKE SERVES AS A CHRIST-FIGURE – “A NATURAL-BORN WORLD-SHAKER” AS HIS BUDDY DRAGLINE REFERS TO HIM – NOT IN A MORAL SENSE, BUT IN THE WAY HIS LIFE & DEATH SERVE TO LIBERATE HIS FELLOW PRISONERS FROM THE CAPTIVITY THEY’RE EXPERIENCING.

FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS, THE CECIL B. DEMILLE CLASSIC, “THE TEN COMMANDMENTS,” HAS BEEN AIRED ON NETWORK TELEVISION EVERY SPRING TO COINCIDE WITH THE OBSERVANCE OF PASSOVER & THE CELEBRATION OF EASTER.

PERSONALLY, I THINK IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA TO DO THE SAME THING WITH “COOL HAND LUKE” BECAUSE THIS IS AN EASTER FILM.

IT’S A FILM ABOUT DEATH & RESURRECTION.

IT’S A FILM THAT CELEBRATES THE POWER OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT TO LAUGH AT THE ADVERSITIES & ABSURDITIES OF LIFE.

IT’S A FILM THAT CHALLENGES OUR NOTIONS OF POWERLESSNESS IN THE FACE OF BRUTAL OPPRESSION.

LUKE PROVES THAT YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE THE SMARTEST PERSON AROUND FOR SURELY HE WASN’T.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE THE STRONGEST – HE GETS BEATEN TO WITHIN AN INCH OF HIS LIFE IN A BOXING MATCH WITH DRAGLINE.

LUKE SIMPLY SHOWS AN UNBEATABLE SPIRIT – A SPIRIT THAT REFUSES TO GIVE UP, AN UNWILLINGNESS TO QUIT, A HEART & SOUL THAT HANGS ON & A STRENGTH & DETERMINATION THAT WON'T BE BEATEN, EVEN IN THE FACE OF SEEMINGLY INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS.

HE DISPLAYS A FAITH IN HIS CREATOR THAT KNOWS HE WAS MADE FOR SOMETHING BETTER THAN WHAT'S HE'S EXPERIENCING IN HIS CAPTIVITY.

MY FAVORITE SHOT IN THOSE FINAL 7-10 MINUTES OF POWERFUL SYMBOLISM IS WHEN WE SEE DRAGLINE IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIS HEARTFELT, JOYOUS, EXHUBERANT PROCLAMATION OF THE GOOD NEWS TO HIS FELLOW PRISONER-DISCIPLES.

YOU SEE A CLOSE-UP OF THE CHAINS SHACKLED TO HIS ANKLES.

HE'S STILL ON THE CHAIN GANG.

HE'S STILL A PRISONER.

BUT IT NO LONGER MATTERS.

HE'S NO LONGER IN CAPTIVITY.

NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO HIM ON THE *OUTSIDE*, HE'S FOUND A LIBERATING POWER THAT ENABLES HIM TO LIVE IN FREEDOM ON THE *INSIDE*.

HIS BODY MAY BE IMPRISONED BUT HIS SOUL HAS FOUND FREEDOM.

AS ONE OF THE PRISONERS SINGS EARLIER IN THE FILM – “*AIN'T NO GRAVE GONNA HOLD ME DOWN.*”

AIN'T NO GRAVE GONNA KEEP ME DOWN.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON ME ABOVE,

KEEP YOUR HEART FULL OF LOVE.”

AS CHRIST ENTERS OUR LIVES, THE SHACKLES ARE REMOVED.

**AMID ALL THE AFFLICTIONS & ADVERSITIES WE FACE, THERE'S
NOTHING THAT CAN HOLD US DOWN.**

**THOUGH THE SHACKLES ON YOUR BODY MAY REMAIN, THE
SHACKLES ON YOUR SOUL ARE GONE.**

**AS THE PSALMIST PROCLAIMS – “OH, THAT I HAD THE WINGS OF
A DOVE! I WOULD FLY AWAY & BE AT REST.”**

**IN THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, WE HAVE BEEN GRANTED
THOSE WINGS OF FREEDOM.**

DO YOU HAVE THE EYES TO SEE IT & THE EARS TO HEAR IT?

AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*