

HOLLYWOOD, TEACH US TO PRAY



OFFICIAL WORKBOOK

BY TERRY LINDVALL

INTRODUCTION:

IN 1855, WALT WHITMAN WROTE AN INSIGHTFUL POEM THAT PREPARES ONE FOR OUR FILM,

*THERE WAS A CHILD WENT FORTH EVERY DAY,
AND THE FIRST OBJECT HE LOOK'D UPON, THAT OBJECT HE BECAME,
AND THAT OBJECT BECAME PART OF HIM FOR THE DAY OR A CERTAIN PART
OF THE DAY,
OR FOR MANY YEARS OR STRETCHING CYCLES OF YEARS.*

MIMESIS, OR THE ART OF IMITATION, BEGINS WITH OBSERVING ACTIONS IN NATURE OR ART. AND THEN WE TEND TO COPY WHAT WE SEE, FROM CHILDHOOD EVEN INTO ADULTHOOD.

DAVID MORGAN WRITES OF A VISUAL PIETY, OF HOW PEOPLE USE IMAGES FOR SPIRITUAL REINFORCEMENT AND INSTRUCTION. THOSE IMAGES ALTER US FROM BEING MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (IMAGO DEI) INTO IMAGO HOLLYWOOD. WE SEE AS THE MEDIA INDUSTRY WISHES US TO SEE. AS FAR BACK AS 1927, WHEN DIRECTOR CECIL B. DEMILLE RELEASED HIS BIBLICAL BLOCKBUSTER, KING OF KINGS, PEOPLE CLAIMED THAT WHEN THEY PRAYED, THEY VISUALIZED THE FACE OF HIS SILENT ACTOR WHO PLAYED JESUS. H. B. WARNER'S SERENE IMAGE INVADED THEIR PRAYERS.

YET WE ARE NOT PASSIVE VIEWERS. WE MAY BE ABLE TO SEE SOMETHING ELSE. IN LOOKING THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF CINEMA, WE FIND CHARACTERS INVITING US TO "JOIN" THEM IN PRAYER. WE ASK, WHAT ARE WE GETTING OURSELVES INTO?

PRE-RAPHAELITE POET AND PAINTER, DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI, CAPTURED FRAGILE MOMENTS OF WOMEN PRAYING IN HIS ART. HIS POETRY SUGGESTED THAT ONE "GIVE HONOR UNTO LUKE EVANGELIST; / FOR HE IT WAS / (THE AGED LEGENDS SAY) / WHO FIRST TAUGHT ART / TO FOLD HER HANDS AND PRAY." IN THE BIBLE, POSTURES OF PRAYER ASSUME STANDING, KNEELING, OR LAYING PROSTRATE BEFORE THE LORD, NEVER SITTING IN PEWS.



"BEATA BEATRIX" (INSPIRED BY DANTE'S LA VITA NUOVA) DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1874)

"PRE-RAPHAELITE WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S "MORNING PRAYER" (1866)



OVER TWO DECADES AGO, U. S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT INVESTIGATED “HOW WE TALK TO GOD.” THEY STUDIED PLACES OF PRAYER (CHURCH PEWS, BESIDE ONE’S BED, FOXHOLES, FOOTBALL HUDDLES), ACCOUTREMENTS OF PRAYER (ROSARY BEADS), POSTURES OF PRAYER (KNEELING, STANDING, HANDS RAISED IN SINGING), AND FUNCTIONS (PRAISE, PETITION, THANKSGIVING).

THEIR FINDINGS IN 2004 REVEALED THAT 64% PRAY MORE THAN ONCE A DAY; 65% WHEN PRAYING ABOUT HEALTH, PRAY REGARDING DEPRESSION OR MENTAL HEALTH; 56% PRAY MOSTLY FOR FAMILY MEMBERS (3.3% FOR STRANGERS). IN ANSWERS TO PRAYER, THEY FOUND THAT 41% SAY THAT GOD ANSWERED THEIR PRAYERS OFTEN AND 1.5% SAY THAT THEIR PRAYERS ARE NEVER ANSWERED (74% WHO SAY THAT WHEN THEIR PRAYERS DO NOT APPEAR ANSWERED, IT IS BECAUSE THEY DID NOT FIT INTO GOD’S PLAN). ONLY 38% SAY THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF PRAYER IS INTIMACY WITH GOD AND FEWER RESPONDENTS, 28%, SAID IT WAS TO DISCERN GOD’S GUIDANCE AND WILL.

HOLLYWOOD’S DEPICTION OF PRAYERS CORRESPONDS WELL WITH SUCH POLLS. A RECENT ROPER POLL FOUND THAT NEARLY 50% OF ALL AMERICANS SAID THEY PRAY OR MEDITATE EVERY DAY AND SO IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT IT APPEARS SO REGULARLY IN MOVIES. SCREENWRITERS PLANT THEM IN FILM NARRATIVES TO REVEAL CHARACTER, TO PROPEL THE DRAMA, TO ADD COMIC RELIEF, AND TO EXPLORE HUMAN DESIRE FOR INTIMACY WITH GOD.

SOME CYNICISM DOES EXIST. WHEN MICHAEL EISNER WORKED AT PARAMOUNT, HE OPINED THAT: “*IF I ASK MISS MIDDLE AMERICA IF SHE WANTS TO SEE A MOVIE ABOUT RELIGION, SHE’LL SAY ‘YES.’ IF I SAY ‘DO YOU WANT TO SEE A MOVIE ABOUT SEX?’ SHE’LL SAY ‘NO’ BUT SHE’LL BE LYING.*” THE FAMOUS LEGEND ABOUT THE COHN BROTHERS, THE FOUNDERS OF COLUMBIA STUDIOS, SHOWS A COMIC IGNORANCE OF SUCH SACRED RITUALS AMONG THE TOP EXECUTIVES. HARRY CHALLENGED HIS BROTHER JACK, CLAIMING THAT HE KNEW NOTHING ABOUT RELIGION.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE, JACK? I’LL BET YOU FIFTY BUCKS YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW THE LORD’S PRAYER,” SAID HARRY.

“OH, YES I DO,” BOASTED JACK.

“WELL THEN, LET’S HEAR IT,” PRODDED HIS BROTHER.

JACK STARTED: *“NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP...”*

“OKAY, OKAY,” CONCEDED HARRY. *“YOU WIN,”* AND HANDED OVER THE FIFTY BUCKS.

SUCH IGNORANCE CONTINUES. THE IMDB DESCRIPTION (ACCESSED OCTOBER 21, 2019) OF ‘*BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE*’ SHOWS A SIMILAR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE. AGENT SULLIVAN (JON HAMM) PRAYS WITH HIS CHILD OVER THE PHONE: *“NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP.”* THE OFFICIAL DESCRIPTION READS:

ROOM 1: SULLIVAN IS ON THE PHONE WITH HIS DAUGHTER TO SAY THE LORD’S PRAYER (SIC) WHILE HE IS IN THE MIDDLE OF CHECKING EVERY ELECTRONIC DEVICE FOR WIRES.”

...“PLUS ÇA CHANGE”

HOLLYWOOD, ACCORDING TO GEORGE LUCAS, HAS SUPPLANTED THE CHURCH IN TEACHING VALUES, MYTHS, AND MORALS.

IF THIS IS SO, THEN WE WANTED TO EXPLORE WHAT IMAGES OF PRAYER HAVE BEEN PROMULGATED AND PROMOTED THROUGH FILM. IN PARTICULAR, WE WANTED TO SEE HOW FILM COMEDY OR HORROR FILMS TREATED SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION WITH GOD, AND REFLECT ON HOW IT MIGHT SHAPE OUR OWN BEHAVIORS AND EXPECTATIONS.

THIS WORKBOOK IS DESIGNED TO HELP VIEWERS EXPLORE THEIR OWN DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER, TO SEE WHERE IT IS INFORMED BY SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH TRADITION AND HOW IT HAS BEEN SHAPED BY CULTURE. IT IS DIVIDED INTO TEN LESSONS, DEALING WITH VARIOUS SECTIONS OF THE FILM.

CHAPTER I: OPENING AND EARLY CATECHISM:

“MAKE ME TO KNOW THY WAYS, O LORD; TEACH ME THY PATHS.” (PSALM 25: 4). STEELY BLUE-EYED PAUL NEWMAN IS COOL HAND LUKE (STUART ROSENBERG, 1967). ESCAPING FROM A BRUTAL SOUTHERN CHAIN GANG, HE HIDES IN A DILAPIDATED CHURCH BUILDING, KVETCHING WITH GOD. HE WRESTLES WITH THE OLD MAN AS IF HE WERE IN HIS OWN BROKEN DOWN GETHSEMANE GARDEN. HE HIMSELF IS BROKEN DOWN AND TRIES TO MAKE CONTACT.

HE CONFESSES TO BEING A “PRETTY EVIL FELLOW...KILLED PEOPLE IN THE WAR AND GOT DRUNK...AND CHEWED UP MUNICIPAL PROPERTY (A PARKING METER) AND THE LIKE.” HE ASKS WHAT GOD HAS IN STORE FOR HIM. “WHAT DO YOU GOT IN MIND FOR ME? WHAT DO I DO NOW? RIGHT. ALL RIGHT.” HE GETS ON HIS KNEES, CLOSES HIS EYES, AND BEGINS TO PRAY. YET HIS PIVOTAL LINE OCCURS WHEN HE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT, “HE CAN HAVE THIS LITTLE LIFE ANY TIME HE WANTS TO.” ESSENTIALLY, HE CONCEDES, “THY WILL BE DONE.”



WHY DOES THE FILM BEGIN WITH THIS STRUGGLING CRIMINAL, CALLING OUT TO GOD JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH BY A CORRUPT PRISON SYSTEM? WHAT LEVEL OF HONESTY DO YOU FIND IN LUKE? HOW IS HIS CONVERSATION MORE OF AN AUTHENTIC PRAYER THAN MANY OF THE PETITIONS WE MAKE?

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A MONTAGE OF CLIPS IN WHICH PEOPLE DISMISS THE IDEA OF PRAYER (GLORY) OR SUGGESTING THAT PRAYING IS JUST FOR CHURCH (NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD). BUT IT ALSO FEATURES HONEST PRAYERS, OF ASKING OTHERS TO PRAY FOR THEM. IT SHOW CASES AN OUTBURST OF REQUESTS FOR AND REJECTIONS OF PRAYERS.

AMONG ALL KINDS OF SINNERS AND SAINTS, LIEUTENANT DAN TAYLOR TELLS FOREST GUMP THAT MAYBE HE SHOULD JUST PRAY FOR SHRIMP. GUMP DOES GO TO A BLACK CHURCH AND PRAY, BELIEVING GOD, BUT NOT REALIZING THAT A HURRICANE WILL SOON COME, WIPE OUT ALL THE OTHER COMPETITION, AND SUPPLY GUMP SHRIMP WITH THE PROVERBIAL BOATLOAD OF FISH THAT PETER CAUGHT WHEN OBEYING JESUS.



THE OPENING ALSO RAISES QUESTIONS OF IN WHAT POSTURE MIGHT ONE PRAY. THEY ARE STANDING IN THE WAR ROOM IN DR. STRANGELOVE WHILE HACKSAW RIDGE AND DUEL IN THE SUN BEGIN A SERIES OF PEOPLE CALLED TO KNEEL, TO BEND THE KNEE AS IN ROCKY AND SILENCE.

WHEN BOB HOPE AS SORROWFUL JONES INSTRUCTS HIS WARD TO GET ON HER KNEES, BOW HER HEAD, AND PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER, SHE ASKS, "BUT WHY?" MEL GIBSON IN WE WERE SOLDIERS THEN ANNOUNCES A THEME OF THE FILM: "WELL, WHY DON'T WE ASK HIM?"

FRANK CAPRA'S 'IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE' BEGINS WITH A SYMPHONY OF PRAYERS FOR GEORGE BAILEY (JIMMY STEWART), WHOSE LIFE HAD BEEN COMING APART. SO TOO OUR FILM OPENS WITH A MONTAGE OF PRAYERS WITH PEOPLE CALLING OUT TO GOD FROM A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS, SEEKING JUST TO MAKE CONTACT. WE EAVESDROP AND HEAR THE VARIOUS WAYS PEOPLE ADDRESS GOD, OUR FATHER, LORD, THE "MAN UPSTAIRS." HOW DO YOU BEGIN YOUR PRAYERS? (SOME PEOPLE USE THE LORD'S NAME REPEATEDLY IN THEIR CONVERSATIONS, WHICH IN ORDINARY CONVERSATION WOULD SOUND LIKE, "DEAR SUSAN, THANK YOU SUSAN, SUSAN, WE ASK YOU...")

FROM 'BAD BOYS' TO 'BLAZING SADDLES,' 'HARRIET' TO 'SISTER ACT,' 'PAINT YOUR WAGON' TO 'PATTON,' FILM CHARACTERS SHOW DESPERATION AND CHUTZPAH IN ADDRESSING GOD. FROM "OUR HEAVENLY FATHER" TO "OH, GOD," RUSHING INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE ALMIGHTY WITH A MULTITUDE OF VOICES.

IN TEACHING THE DISCIPLES A PRAYER, HOW DID JESUS BEGIN? WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "OUR GOD" RATHER THAN "MY GOD"? IN THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, C. S. LEWIS SLYLY CASTIGATES A TENDENCY TO CLAIM OWNERSHIP OVER EVERYTHING, AS IF WE POSSESSED IT ALL AND CONTROLLED IT.

IT SLIPS FROM "MY JOB," "MY DOG," "MY WIFE," TO "MY GOD." SO MANY OF OUR CHARACTERS, WHO PROBABLY HAVEN'T PRAYED IN A LONG TIME, SLIP INTO THIS DESPERATE CALLING OF "MY GOD." WE DON'T SEE TOO MANY GROUP PRAYERS.

QUESTIONS:

- HOW DO THE PSALMISTS BEGIN THEIR PETITIONS OR LAMENTS?
- WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW DO YOU APPROACH GOD?
- HOW DO YOU APPROACH YOUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES? MIGHT YOU SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THESE TWO TYPES OF ENCOUNTERS?
- DO YOU COME WITH BRAVADO OR WITH HUMILITY?
- DO YOUR OPENINGS CHANGE WITH YOUR CONDITIONS?
- IN WHAT POSTURE DO YOU PRAY? IN THE SCRIPTURES, PEOPLE PRAY KNEELING, STANDING UP, OR LYING FACE-DOWN PROSTRATE, NEVER SITTING OR LYING ON ONE'S BACK IN BED (LATER DAVENING WOULD OCCUR). HAVE YOU ALTERED THE POSITION OF YOUR BODY TO STAY ALERT.

THE CLINCHER: ONE CRUCIAL MOMENT DEFINES THE WHOLE FILM. IT IS A PARABLE ON MOVIE PRAYERS.

IN 'EASY A' (WILL GLUCK, 2010), OLIVE PENDERGHAST (EMMA STONE) GOES INTO A CHURCH LOOKING FOR A MINISTER, A REVEREND, EVEN A WIZARD. EARLIER, SHE HAD GONE INTO A BOOKSTORE TO FIND A BIBLE. A BOOKSTORE CLERK TELLS HER IT IS IN BESTSELLERS, RIGHT NEXT TO TWILIGHT.

SHE PLAYS A REVERSE HYPOCRITE, SEEKING TO APPEAR WICKED WHEN SHE REMAINS QUITE WHOLESOME. AS SHE PRETENDS TO BE HESTER (FROM HAWTHORNE'S THE SCARLET LETTER), A FRIEND ADMONISHES HER WITH "*I HOPE FOR YOUR SAKE, GOD HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR.*"

"OH," SHE RESPONDS, "*I HAVE SEVENTEEN YEARS WORTH OF ANECDOTAL PROOF THAT HE DOES.*"

THE KEY MOMENT, HOWEVER, OCCURS WHEN SHE SITS IN A CONFESSIONAL BOOTH. SHE WHISPERS, "*FORGIVE ME, FATHER, FOR I HAVE SINNED. I THINK THAT'S HOW YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO START THESE THINGS. I'M ONLY GOING ON WHAT I'VE SEEN IN THE MOVIES.*"



QUESTIONS:

- WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN IN THE MOVIES THAT SHAPED YOUR JOURNEY TO GOD?
- WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN THAT CONVICTED YOU, CHALLENGED YOU, OR CORRUPTED YOU?
- THE PSALMIST COUNSELS HIS PEOPLE NOT TO PUT ANY WORTHLESS THING BEFORE THEIR EYES. WHILE IT REFERS TO GRAVEN IMAGE AND IDOLS, MEDIA ASSUME THAT ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, AN OBJECT TO WHICH WE GIVE TIME AND ATTENTION. WHAT DO YOU WATCH THAT IS WORTHLESS?
- HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND ON LESSER THINGS?
- HOW HAVE THE MOVIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCED YOUR CHRISTIAN WALK?
- DO YOU CONVERSE WITH GOD AS YOU WALK OR WAIT UNTIL YOU ARRIVE IN WHAT YOU IMAGINE AS A "HOLY" PLACE?

EARLY CATECHISM: ONE DAY JESUS WAS PRAYING IN A CERTAIN PLACE. WHEN HE FINISHED, ONE OF HIS DISCIPLES SAID TO HIM, "*LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY, JUST AS JOHN TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES.*" (LUKE 11:1).

DISCIPLES NEED TO LEARN HOW TO PRAY. IN FACT, EVERYONE NEEDS TO LEARN HOW TO PRAY. IN 'GRAVITY' (ALFONSO CUARÓN, 2013), ASTRONAUT RYAN STONE (SANDRA BULLOCK) MAROONED IN SPACE PLAINLY CALLS OUT IN WHAT SEEMS LIKE THE EMPTINESS OF A GODLESS COSMOS, "*WILL YOU SAY A PRAYER FOR ME OR IS IT TOO LATE? NO ONE EVER TAUGHT ME HOW.*"



DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, THE SWASHBUCKLING HERO OF MANY SILENT FEATURES, PLAYS THE TITULAR CHARACTER OF *'THE GAUCHO'* (F. RICHARD JONES, 1927), A CAREFREE ADVENTURER AND LEADER OF A RENEGADE BAND OF ROBIN HOOD-LIKE OUTLAWS IN ARGENTINA. CAVALIER AND INSOUCIANT THROUGHOUT THE FILM, A LEPER INFECTS HIM WITH THE DEVASTATING DISEASE. AS HE WATCHES A DARKENED DEFORMITY SPREAD ON HIS HAND, HE APPROACHES THE VIRGINAL SAINT AT A SACRED SHRINE AND MISSION IN THE ANDES, HE BEGS HER, *"TEACH ME TO PRAY."* SHE POINTS HIM TOWARDS HEAVEN AND HE KNEELS IN HUMILITY AND DESPERATION.

IN *'I CAN DO BAD ALL BY MYSELF'* (TYLER PERRY, 2009), JENNIFER, AN EMOTIONALLY BROKEN YOUNG WARD OF THE ELDERLY AND SURLY CHARACTER MADEA (TYLER PERRY) ASKS FOR SPIRITUAL HELP. HER OWN GRANDMOTHER NEVER TAUGHT HER HOW TO PRAY, SO SHE ASKS THE GRUMPY FOSTER MOTHER *"WOULD YOU TEACH ME?"*

WITH HER SPOTTY KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIBLE, THE WISECRACKING MADEA TENDS TO MISQUOTE SCRIPTURE, PROVIDING A HILARIOUS MIXTURE OF BIBLE STORIES IN AN ATTEMPT TO SOUND KNOWLEDGEABLE. JENNIFER RECOGNIZES THAT HER PRAYER ABOUT ETHIOPIA AND THE FIERY FURNACE (WITH SHADRAQ, NO-SHIT, AND THE BILLY GOAT) JUST DOESN'T SOUND RIGHT, AND MADEA HONESTLY TELLS HER JUST TO TALK FROM THE HEART.

KATHARINE HEPBURN PLAYS TRIGGER, A BACK-WOODS PENTECOSTAL FAITH HEALER IN *'SPITFIRE'* (JOHN CROMWELL, 1934) WHO CHATS WITH GOD AND SOMETIMES TAKES THE WORD OF GOD A BIT TOO LITERALLY. WHEN SHE READS A BIBLE CARD WITH MATTHEW 7: 7-8, SHE PONDERES ITS MEANING:

ASK, AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN YOU; SEEK, AND YE. SHALL FIND; KNOCK, AND IT SHALL BE OPENED UNTO YOU: FOR EVERY ONE THAT ASKETH RECEIVETH; AND HE THAT SEEKETH. FINDETH; AND TO HIM THAT KNOCKETH IT SHALL BE OPENED.

TRIGGER WONDERS, *"WHY SHOULD YOU KNOCK?"* *"WELL, IT SAYS SO,"* SHE THINKS, AND SO RAPS HER KNUCKLES ON A CHEST OF DRAWERS, LOOKING UP TO HEAVEN.

WHEN A CANDIDATE STANDS HOLDING A BIBLE UPSIDE DOWN OR QUOTES A SECTION OF SCRIPTURE THAT ONE KNOWS HE OR SHE HASN'T READ (FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN A PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER CALLED ONE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL'S LETTERS, "TWO CORINTHIANS"), THAT CANDIDATE IS FODDER FOR A SATIRE. IN *THE CAMPAIGN* (JAY ROACH, 2009), CAM BRADY (WILL FERRELL) FINDS HIMSELF LOSING TO LIGHTWEIGHT POLITICIAN MARTY HUGGINS. CHALLENGED TO RECITE THE LORD'S PRAYER, CAM STUMBLES THROUGH IT LED BY HIS MIMING POLITICAL CONSULTANT.

HIS BASIC IGNORANCE SHAPES HIS IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE:

*OUR FATHER, ART, WHO IS UP IN HEAVEN. ALOE VERA BE THY NAME. THE THIGH... THY KINGDOM...
COME... THE MAGIC KINGDOM. AS IT IS ON EARTH IN A HELICOPTER. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY...
PIZZA. AND LET US DIGEST IT. FORGIVE US, FORGIVE OUR PASSES WE FORGET SOMETIMES.*

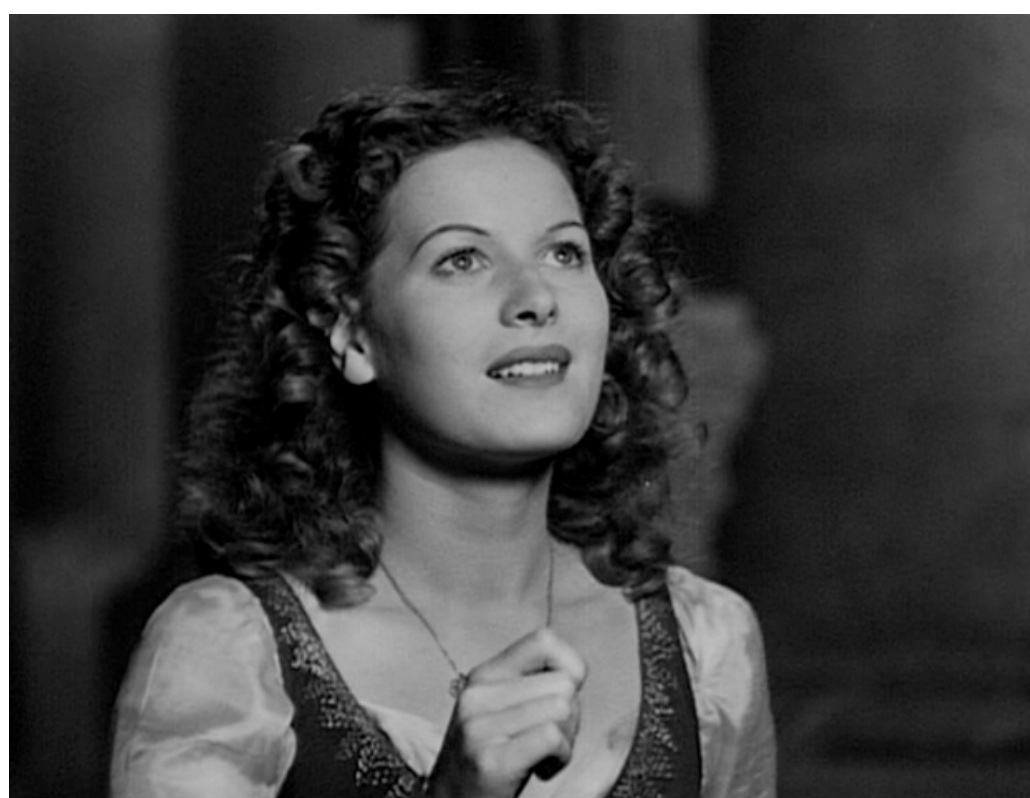
HE CONTINUES REQUESTING THAT HE WOULD NOT BE LED INTO THE “*TEMPTATIONS FOR WE ARE TIRED OF THEIR MUSIC AND DANCING.*” THE ROOT OF HIS FLIPPANCY COVERS A WITLESSNESS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICIANS, MOUTHING SACRED WORDS WITHOUT LIVING THEM.

QUESTIONS:

- WHO TAUGHT YOU TO PRAY?
- WHERE DID YOU LEARN THE WORDS OF PRAYING, THE POSTURE OF PRAYING, THE PURPOSE OF PRAYING?
- WAS THERE A GOOD-INTENTIONED MEDEA IN YOUR LIFE, A SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER, A YOUTH PASTOR, A NEIGHBOR?
- WHAT HABITS DO YOU HAVE THAT MAKE FOR RIDICULOUS PRAYERS?
- DO YOU USE WORDS LIKE “JUST” A LOT WHEN YOU PRAY?
- DO YOU PRAY TO IMPRESS OTHERS OR TRY TO SOUND MORE RELIGIOUS WHEN YOU PRAY, OR DO YOU TALK NATURALLY AS IF YOU WERE TALKING TO A FRIEND?
- FILM HISTORIAN LEONARD MALTIN SEES THE RITUAL OF MOVIE GOING AS A KIND OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. HE DOESN'T MEAN THIS IN A GLIB WAY. FILM CRITIC BRETT MCKRACKEN NOTES THAT BOTH SITES OFFER INSTRUCTION AND COMMUNITY. THEY ARE ALSO THE ONLY PLACES WHERE YOU CAN GET PEOPLE TO SIT STILL AND QUIET DOWN.
- HOW DO YOU SEE MOVIES AND CHURCHES OVERLAPPING?
- WHAT SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES DO YOU SEE BETWEEN VIEWING MEDIA AND ATTENDING CHURCH?

THE FOLLOWING SEQUENCE SHOWS MORE SCENES OF PEOPLE TEACHING OTHERS TO PRAY. IN ‘*INTOLERANCE*’ (D. W. GRIFFITH, 1917), MAE MARSH TEACHES HER NEW HUSBAND HOW TO PRAY, HOW TO FOLD HIS HANDS AND LOOK UP TO HEAVEN. AS HE LEARNS FROM HER DIRECT AND PERSONAL INSTRUCTION, HE LEAVES FOR WORK AND SHE CELEBRATES HER VICTORY OVER SATAN, JUMPING AND HAND PUMPING HER DELIGHT IN SHARING THIS HOLY PRACTICE.

THE ADAPTATION OF VICTOR HUGO’S ‘*THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME*’ (WILLIAM DIETERLE, 1939) FEATURES THE STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL GYPSY ESMERALDA, (MAUREEN O’HARA) SEEKING SANCTUARY IN THE CHURCH. SHE APPROACHES A KINDLY CLERIC WHO INVITES HER TO JOIN OTHERS IN SEEKING THE COMFORT OF THE MOTHER OF GOD.



ROMAN CATHOLICS TEND TO PRAY ALONGSIDE OF SAINTS (SOME EVEN PRAY TO SAINTS). HOW DO EACH OF THESE PRACTICES SHAPE A PRAYER? WHAT SCRIPTURES AND TRADITIONS HELP MAKE SENSE OF SUCH HABITS? IN PARTICULAR, MANY PRAY TO THE MARY, THEOTOKOS, THE MOTHER OF GOD.

AFTER THE 1906 SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE IN WHICH THE CITY WAS DEVASTATED AND HUNDREDS LOST THEIR LIVES, A GROUP OF SURVIVORS SING “*NEARER MY GOD TO THEE*,” A PRAYER OF NEED IN SAN FRANCISCO (W. S. VAN DYKE, 1936). BARBARY COAST’S “PARADISE” SALOONKEEPER, THE ROGUISH BLACKIE NORTON (CLARK GABLE) SURVEYS THE WRECKAGE OF THE CATASTROPHE.

HAVING LOST EVERYTHING, EXCEPT HIS BELOVED MARY, (JEANNETTE MACDONALD), AN OPERA IMP, HE TURNS TO HIS FRIEND, THE CONSCIENTIOUS PRIEST FATHER TIM MULLEN (SPENCER TRACY) AND ASKS. “*I WANT TO THANK GOD. WHAT DO I HAVE TO SAY?*” FATHER MULLIN RESPONDS, “*JUST SAY WHAT’S ON YOUR HEART.*”

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NORTON KNEELS AND SAYS, “*THANKS, GOD. THANKS! I REALLY MEAN IT.*”

THE CLIMACTIC SCENE JUST BEFORE THE TITLES SITUATES DENZEL WASHINGTON (‘*THE BOOK OF ELI*,’ ALBERT AND ALLEN HUGHES, 2010) IN HOSTILE TERRITORY WITH A YOUNG WOMAN SENT TO EXTRACT SECRETS FROM HIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY, NAMELY THE POSSESSION OF A SACRED BOOK. IN ONE OF THE MOST PEDAGOGICALLY DIRECT MOMENTS OF TEACHING ONE HOW TO PRAY, ELI TELLS THE WOULD-BE SEDUCTRESS TO SIT DOWN WITH HIM AND SHARE SOME FOOD AT TABLE: “*GIVE ME YOUR HANDS. CLOSE YOUR EYES. ‘THANKS FOR WARM BED THANK YOU FOR THE GIFT OF COMPANIONSHIP. AMEN.’ NOW WE EAT.*”



QUESTIONS:

- WHAT ARE THESE FILM CLIPS SUGGESTING ABOUT PRAYER?
- HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU THANK GOD? DO YOU EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE AFTER MAJOR EVENTS OR PROBLEMS? DO YOU HAVE TO ADD, “*I REALLY MEAN IT?*”
- ASK YOURSELF, WHO IS PRAYING? WHAT GENDER, RACE, AGE, OR ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS GROUP IS BEING REPRESENTED?
- ARE WOMEN MORE SPIRITUAL? DO THEY PRAY MORE THAN MEN DO?
- WHO IS TEACHING THE OTHERS TO PRAY? HOW DO THEY TEACH PRAYING? WHAT ADVICE DO THEY GIVE? IS IT BIBLICAL OR HELPFUL?

CHAPTER TWO: EASY ANSWERS, SHEEP'S CLOTHING, AND CONFLICTED CLERGY

IN FILMS LIKE *'THE TWELVE CHAIRS'* AND THE HAROLD LLOYD SHORT, *'BUMPING ON BROADWAY,'* PRAYERS ARE ANSWERED WITH DIZZYING SPEED. THE UGLY WOMAN OPENS HER WINDOW AND CALLS OUT TO THE LORD FOR A MAN. A MAN IN TROUBLE TRIES TO ESCAPE AND LANDS IN HER ARMS. SUCH PRAYERS ARE DANGEROUS IN THE ALACRITY.

A SIDE LIGHT TO THIS ALMOST SILLY ISSUE IS THE PRESENCE OF THANKSGIVING FOR QUICK ANSWERS. IN *'YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN,'* THE BLIND HERMIT (GENE HACKMAN) PRAYS, "A VISITOR IS ALL I ASK" AND SUDDENLY THE DOOR OF HIS HUT BLASTS OPEN AND FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER APPEARS WITH A LOUD GROWL. THE HERMIT LOOKS UP TO HEAVEN AND WHISPERS, "THANK YOU!"



THE PARODY OWES ITS ROOTS TO JAMES WHALE'S *'THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN,'* IN WHICH THE OLD RECLUSE WELCOMES THE MONSTER AS ANOTHER LONELY CHILD OF GOD. SECLUDED IN HIS HUT, WITH A CRUCIFIX HANGING PROMINENTLY ON THE WALL, THE HERMIT PRAYS FOR A FRIEND. WHEN THE CREATURE APPEARS, HE MINISTERS TO HIM AND CONFESSES.

"I HAVE PRAYED MANY TIMES FOR GOD TO SEND ME A FRIEND. IT'S VERY LONELY HERE. AND IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE ANY HUMAN BEING CAME INTO THIS HUT. I SHALL LOOK AFTER YOU AND YOU WILL COMFORT ME. NOW YOU MUST LIE DOWN AND GO TO SLEEP. YES, YES. NOW YOU MUST SLEEP. (HE TAKES THE MONSTER'S HAND) OUR FATHER I THANK THEE THAT IN THY GREAT MERCY, THOU HAST TAKEN PITY ON MY GREAT LONELINESS AND NOW OUT OF THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT HAS BROUGHT TWO OF THY LONELY CHILDREN TOGETHER, AND SENT ME A FRIEND TO BE A LIGHT TO MINE EYES AND A COMFORT IN TIME OF TROUBLE. AMEN."

AS THE BELEAGUERED MONSTER LAY IN A BED, THE HERMIT'S TEARFUL PRAYER ELICITS A SILENT TEAR FROM HIS VISITOR, IN A REMARKABLE SCENE OF COMPASSION. IN THE SLOW FADEOUT, THE LAST IMAGE TO VANISH IS THE GLOWING CRUCIFIX. (MEL BROOKS' *'YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN'* WITH GENE HACKMAN WILL PARODY IT IN A HILARIOUS FASHION.)

SHIRLEY TEMPLE, AS *'THE LITTLE PRINCESS'* (WALTER LANG, 1939), BEGS GOD TO HELP HER FATHER RETURN SAFELY FROM HIS DUTY IN THE SECOND BOER WAR. HAVING HEARD THAT HE IS DEAD, BY A STUBBORN FAITH, SHE DOES NOT ACCEPT IT. SHE KNEELS PIOUSLY BESIDE HER BED, SHE TELLS GOD TO PLEASE "DO SOMETHING." WHEN ROUSING PATRIOTIC BAND MUSIC BLARES OUTSIDE, SHE REALIZES HER FATHER'S UNIT HAS BEEN RELIEVED AND HE WILL RETURN. SHE RUNS TO HER BALCONY AND EXCLAIMS, "OH, THANKS FOR BEING SO QUICK ABOUT IT THIS TIME!"

IN HIS DEVOTIONAL CHRISTIAN ESSAYS CALLED 'PROVOCATIONS,' SOREN KIERKEGAARD CITED THE SCRIPTURES IN SAYING THAT "EVERYTHING CREATED BY GOD IS GOOD IF IT IS RECEIVED WITH THANKFULNESS."

AND WHEN THE LIGHT SPARKLE OF JOY CALLS YOU, DO YOU THANK GOD FOR IT? AND WHEN YOU ARE SO STRONG THAT YOU FEEL YOU NEED NO HELP, DO YOU THEN THANK GOD? AND WHEN YOUR ALLOTTED PORTION IS LITTLE, DO YOU THANK GOD? AND WHEN YOUR ALLOTTED PORTION IS SUFFERING, DO YOU THANK GOD? AND WHEN PEOPLE WRONG YOU AND MISTREAT YOU, DO YOU THANK GOD?

WE ARE NOT SAYING THAT IN OUR THANKFULNESS WRONG CEASES TO BE WRONG – WHAT WOULD BE THE USE OF SUCH DESTRUCTIVE AND FOOLISH TALK! IT IS UP TO YOU TO DECIDE WHETHER IT IS WRONG; BUT DO YOU TAKE THE WRONG AND ABUSE TO GOD AND BY YOUR THANKSGIVING RECEIVE IT FROM HIS HAND AS A GOOD AND A PERFECT GIFT? DO YOU DO THAT? WELL, THEN YOU HAVE WORTHILY UNDERSTOOD THE APOSTLE'S PRAYER WORDS. YES, IT IS WONDERFUL THAT A PERSON PRAYS, AND MANY A PROMISE IS GIVEN TO THE ONE WHO PRAYS WITHOUT CEASING, BUT IT IS MORE BLESSED STILL ALWAYS TO GIVE THANKS.

THE GREAT ACTOR SEYDELMANN, ON THE NIGHT HE WAS CROWNED WITH A WREATH IN THE OPERA HOUSE "TO APPLAUSE THAT LASTED SEVERAL MINUTES," WENT HOME AND VERY FERVENTLY THANKED GOD FOR IT. MIGHT NOT THE VERY FERVENCY OF HIS GIVING THANKS SHOW, HOWEVER, THAT HE DID NOT REALLY THANK GOD? WOULD NOT HIS GIVING HIS FERVENT THANKS WHEN BOOED INSTEAD OF PRAISED HAVE SHOWN BETTER THE SINCERITY OF HIS THANKFULNESS TO GOD?

SHEEP'S CLOTHING:

THE PROBLEM OF GOD'S PEOPLE IS THAT WE ARE HYPOCRITES; THAT IS, WE ARE ACTORS WHO ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT WE SEEM. HOWEVER, SOME OF US PRACTICE CHICANERY MORE THAN OTHERS DO. WE PRETEND WHAT WE ARE NOT. SINCLAIR LEWIS' ARCHETYPAL CONMAN, ELMER GANTRY, GIVES A GULLIBLE CONGREGATION HELLFIRE SERMONS AND PRAYERS. THEY LISTEN TO THE VOLUME AND NOT THE SUBSTANCE.

UNFORTUNATELY, A BIT OF THE HYPOCRITE RESIDES IN ALL OF US. SOME TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OTHER SHEEP, BASICALLY BECOMING WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING, SEEKING TO SEDUCE THE VERY ELECT. THE PRAYERS OF THE SONS OF ELI ARE SMOOTH AND DECEIVING. GOD PREFERS THE HUMBLE TAX COLLECTOR'S DESPERATE PRAYERS RATHER THAN THE SMUG AND SELF-RIGHTEOUS PRONOUNCEMENTS OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADER.

ONE OF THE MOST HOMICIDAL CHARACTERS IN FILM EXPLOITS THE NAME OF GOD AND USES RIGHTEOUSNESS AS A WEAPON AGAINST ANYTHING REEKING OF CARNALITY. IN CHARLES LAUGHTON'S 'NIGHT OF THE HUNTER' (1955), AN UNSAVORY CHARLATAN (ROBERT MITCHUM) MARRIES WOMEN, THEN MURDERS THEM. HIS CONVERSATION WITH GOD REEKS OF BRIMSTONE AND EVIL, AS HE DRIVES TO HIS NEXT VICTIM .



THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE CULMINATES BETWEEN THE ERSATZ MINISTER AND RACHEL COOPER, A HOLY ELDERLY WOMAN WITH A SHOTGUN (LILLIAN GISH). IN A BATTLE OF HYMNS, THE SERIAL KILLER HARRY POWELL SINGS LUSTILY, CREEPILY SINGING “*LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS.*” HOWEVER, RACHEL IS THE ONE WHO SINGS BY NAMING THE NAME OF JESUS WITH “*LEANING ON JESUS, LEANING ON JESUS, SAFE AND SECURE FROM ALL ALARMS.*” HE AVOIDS PRAISING THE HOLY NAME, MIRED IN MALICIOUS INTENT.

HOW HAVE WE MISUSED PRAYERS TO SUMMON THE JUDGMENT ON OTHERS WE FEEL LESS WORTHY FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD? DO WE PRAY FOR OUR ENEMIES (OTHER THAN THE LORD MIGHT TAKE THEM SOON)?

IN THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, ONE PETITION LINGERS IN THE BACKGROUND, NAMELY PRAYERS “*FOR OUR BISHOP, AND FOR ALL THE CLERGY AND PEOPLE, LET US PRAY TO THE LORD: LORD, HAVE MERCY.*”

AS THE CLERGY TEND TO WANDER AWAY FROM “*FEEDING THE SHEEP*” INTO POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES OR INTO PERSONAL SINS, THE NECESSITY OF PRAYING FOR ALL RELIGIOUS LEADERS BECOMES URGENT.

DIRECTOR MICHAEL SCHULTZ BASED HIS SHADY CLERGY ON A REAL PREACHER WHO USED PRAYERS FOR PROFIT. THE REVEREND IKE PREACHED A PROSPERITY GOSPEL LIKE RICHARD PRYOR IN ‘*CAR WASH*’ (1976). HIS MINISTER IN ‘*WHICH WAY IS UP?*’ (1977) FOOLED AROUND WITH WOMEN LIKE SEVERAL TELEVANGELISTS OF THE PERIOD.



‘*LEAP OF FAITH*’ (RICHARD PEARCE, 1992) CONTINUES THE CHICANERY OF CHARLATANS, THOSE WHO USE PRAYER, “*WORDS OF KNOWLEDGE,*” AND SUSPECT HEALINGS. AS SISTER ROSE NOTES, HERE ARE PEOPLE WHO EXPLOIT PEOPLE’S TRUST AND MANIPULATE IT. THE REVIVALIST JONAS NIGHTENGALE (STEVE MARTIN) TALKS TO JESUS ON THE CROSS, SHOUTING “*WHY DID YOU MAKE SO MANY SUCKERS?*” IN SPITE OF HIS MERCENARY SOUL, A GENUINE HEALING TAKES PLACE, SUBVERTING EVEN THE CONMAN’S CYNICISM.



CONFLICTED CLERGY:

LIKE THE LAITY, THE CLERGY WRESTLE WITH FAITH AND DOUBT. “LORD, THIS IS SONNY!” HOLLERS THE PENTECOSTAL PREACHER EULISS F. “SONNY” DEWEY (ROBERT DUVAL), WHO KILLED HIS YOUTH PASTOR WITH A BASEBALL BAT IN DUVAL’S SELF-FUNDED ‘*THE APOSTLE*’ (1997).

SONNY PRAYS WITH FERVOR AND RAW HONESTY, DISPLAYING A MODE OF PRAYER THAT RESPECTABLE PRESBYTERIANS WOULD NEVER PRACTICE. “GIVE IT TO ME...GIVE IT TO ME...GIVE IT TO ME. I AM MAD AT YOU.” THIS BLESSEDLY FLAWED CHARACTER SEEKS THE LIGHT, CONFESSING HIS MOST GRIEVOUS SINS AND MANIFOLD WICKEDNESS.



IN MARTIN SCORCESE’S 2016 ADAPTATION OF SHŪSAKU ENDŌ’S NOVEL ABOUT THE MARTYRDOM OF JAPANESE CHRISTIANS, ‘*SILENCE*,’ PRAYERS SEEM TO BOUNCE OFF A BRASS CURTAIN OF HEAVEN.

FATHER RODRIGUES (ANDREW GARFIELD) FACES TEMPTATION TO DESPAIR AND TO FEAR. HE CONFESSES, “FATHER, I AM AFRAID. THE WEIGHT OF YOUR SILENCE IS TERRIBLE. I PRAY, BUT I’M LOST. OR AM I JUST PRAYING TO NOTHING?” THE DIALOGUE ECHOES, EVEN PLAGIARIZES, THE ANGUISHED INQUIRIES OF THE MEDIEVAL KNIGHT IN INGMAR BERGMAN’S CLASSIC SPIRITUAL JOURNEY FILM, *THE SEVENTH SEAL*.

CHARACTERS STRUGGLE WITH WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE COMPLETE SILENCE OF GOD IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING, DOUBT, AND PERSECUTION. LIKE HABAKKUK OR ONE OF THE OTHER HEBREW PROPHETS, THEY CALL OUT, “HOW LONG, O GOD?” THEY CRY, EVEN SCREAM OUT, TO GOD, SPEAKING DIRECTLY WITHOUT FILTERS.



WHEN RODRIGUES IS FORCED TO STEP ON THE FACE OF JESUS TO SAVE OTHERS FROM TORTURE AND DEATH, HE HIMSELF IS TORTURED. WHEN HE BETRAYS HIS CHRIST, HE LONGS FOR FORGIVENESS, FEELING THE GRAVITY OF HIS SIN.

HE VOICE OF JESUS TELLS HIM, “COME AHEAD, NOW. IT’S ALRIGHT. STEP ON ME. I UNDERSTAND YOUR PAIN. I WAS BORN INTO THIS WORLD TO SHARE MEN’S PAIN. I CARRIED THIS CROSS FOR YOUR PAIN. YOUR LIFE IS WITH ME NOW. STEP.” YET, LIKE ST. PETER’S THREEFOLD DENIAL OF JESUS AND HIS RESTORATION IN THE GOSPELS, GRACE QUIETLY RETURNS TO ACCEPT THE SINNER.

IN A FUNNY AND PIOUS (AND HIGHLY RECOMMENDED) FRENCH FILM, 'LE PETIT MONDE DE DON CAMILLO' (JULIEN DUVIVIER, 1953), THE COMIC ACTOR FERNANDEL PLAYS FATHER DON CAMILLO WHO CONSTANTLY BATTLES HIS GOOD FRIEND, THE COMMUNIST MAYOR. THROUGHOUT THE FILM, HE STANDS BEFORE A LARGE CRUCIFIX AND TALKS TO JESUS, WHO GUIDES, REPROVES, AND ENCOURAGES HIM, WHILE TAMING HIS TEMPER.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE LORD OFTEN INVOLVE SHOUTING ("HOW LONG, O LORD?"). THOMAS MANN ONCE WROTE THAT "IT IS THE WORD, EVEN THE MOST CONTRADICTIONARY, THAT PRESERVES CONTACT." IT IS SILENCE THAT ISOLATES. YET EVEN IN THE SILENCE, GOD IS NEAR AND LOVES.

ANOTHER SCENE LEFT OUT OF OUR FILM IS WHEN DOCTOR PATCH ADAMS (ROBIN WILLIAMS) SHOUTS TO GOD OVER THE DEATH OF HIS BELOVED IN 'PATCH ADAMS' (TOM SHADYAC, 1998). YET AS HE SUFFERS, HE WAITS, UNTIL A BUTTERFLY APPEARS, FLUTTERING NEAR AS A SIGNAL OF GRACE AND REMEMBRANCE.

QUESTIONS:

- WHERE IS GOD WHEN THERE SEEMS ONLY TO BE SILENCE?
- WHEN HAVE YOU HAD TO WAIT TO HEAR FROM GOD? HOW LONG DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD GIVE IN WAITING? REALLY?
- HOW CAN ONE LEARN TO WAIT IN SILENCE? WHAT HAPPENED WHEN ELIJAH, AFTER DEFEATING THE PROPHETS OF BAAL, RETREATED TO A CAVE AND COULD NOT HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD IN THE STRONG WIND, THE EARTHQUAKE, OR THE FIRE? (SEE 1 KINGS 19: 11-13).

CHAPTER THREE: HIGH-LEVEL NEGOTIATION AND SPORTS MOVIES

"BE ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING; BUT IN EVERYTHING BY PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION WITH THANKSGIVING LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN UNTO GOD."

THE SCRIPTURES DO DIRECT US TO MAKE OUR REQUESTS AND PETITIONS KNOWN TO GOD DIRECTLY. HOWEVER, THE NOTION OF HAGGLING WITH GOD SEEMS QUITE FOREIGN TO WESTERN CHRISTIANS, BUT THE BIBLE SHOWS PLENTY OF SINNERS AND SAINTS TRYING TO MAKE BARGAINS WITH GOD. AFTER JACOB HAS DECEIVED HIS FATHER AND BROTHER, HE RUSHES INTO THE WILDERNESS AND NEGOTIATES A DEAL WITH GOD.

BURT REYNOLDS PORTRAYS THE ARCHETYPAL HAGGLER. IN 'THE END' (1978), REYNOLDS PORTRAYS SONNY LAWSON, A MAN WHO IS TOLD HE ONLY HAS A LIMITED TIME TO LIVE AND GIVES UP ON LIFE. HE DECIDES TO END IT ALL BY DROWNING IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN. HOWEVER, IMMERSSED IN THE COLD SALT WATERS, HE REALIZES HE WANTS TO LIVE. THUS, HE STARTS TO IMPORTUNE GOD, TRYING TO MAKE A DEAL WITH THE DIVINE. THE DARK COMEDY ADVERTISED ITSELF WITH THE TAGLINE, "THINK OF DEATH AS A PIE IN THE FACE FROM GOD." HE CRIES OUT, "HELP ME, LORD," BARGAINING FOR HIS LIFE LIKE IT IS SOME CONDEMNED PROPERTY IN FLORIDA. HE PROMISES TO BE A BETTER FATHER, A BETTER SON, A BETTER MAN—EVERYTHING LORD, "JUST MAKE ME A BETTER SWIMMER."



CHARACTERS IN 'BAD BOYS FOR LIFE,' 'CABIN THE SKY,' 'MAVERICK,' 'JUMPING THE BROOM,' 'AMADEUS,' AND 'THE BALLAD OF CABLE HOGUE' TRY TO TRADE TIT FOR TAT, MAKING DEALS WITH GOD, OFFERING DESPERATE PROMISES OF REFORMED BEHAVIOR IN EXCHANGE FOR RESCUE FROM VILLAINS OR DELIVERANCE FROM THE DEVIL HIMSELF.

PETUNIA (ETHEL WATERS) PROMISES GOD THAT JOE "WILL MEND HIS WAYS AND GIVE YOU NO MORE TROUBLE," A PROMISE WITH AS MUCH SUBSTANCE AS MARSHMALLOWS IN HELLFIRE. YET, GRACE PREVAILS.

PERHAPS THESE CINEMATIC PARABLES PARALLEL THE STORIES OF THE WIDOW WHO HAGGLES WITH AN UNJUST JUDGE, AND THE NEIGHBOR TRYING TO GET FOOD FOR AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR FROM A FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT. JESUS COMPELS HIS DISCIPLES TO PETITION THE FATHER, TO BE UNRELENTING AND PERSISTENT IN SEEKING HIS KINGDOM.

IN MATTHEW 7:7, JESUS DIRECTS OUR PRAYING: ASK, SEEK, AND KNOCK, ARE VERBS IN THE PRESENT IMPERATIVE TENSE (IN CONTRAST TO THE AORIST IMPERATIVE THAT COMMANDS WE DO A PARTICULAR THING AT ONE SPECIFIC TIME). THE PRESENT IMPERATIVE DIRECTS US TO NOT ONLY TO DO SOMETHING, BUT TO KEEP ON DOING IT INDEFINITELY.

THIS PRESENT TENSE CALLS BELIEVERS TO AN ONGOING, PERSISTENT ACTION. ONE MUST CONTINUALLY ASK, SEEK, AND KNOCK, EVEN IN THEIR TRIADIC STAIR STEP STRUCTURE (EACH REQUIRES MORE ACTION THAN THE PREVIOUS).

IN 'JUMPING THE BROOM' (SALIM AKIL, 2011), SABRINA WATSON (PAULA PATTON) SEEKS HER SOUL MATE. FINDING HERSELF IN A COMPROMISING PREDICAMENT, WHERE THE MAN SHE JUST SLEPT WITH DOESN'T GIVE A HOOT ABOUT HER, SHE PLEADS WITH GOD TO GET HER OUT OF THIS SITUATION. SHE PROMISES NOT TO SHARE HER COOKIES WITH ANYONE UNTIL SHE MARRIES. THEN, DRIVING HER CAR, SHE ASKS GOD TO HELP HER FIND THE RIGHT MAN AS SHE DOESN'T TRUST HER INSTINCTS. JUST AS SHE FINISHES HER REQUEST, SHE RUNS OVER A MAN, WHO TURNS OUT TO BE THE RIGHT MAN.

'AMADEUS' (MILOŠ FORMAN, 1984) TELLS THE TORTURED STORY OF JEALOUS COMPOSER (AND SELF-PROCLAIMED ENEMY OF GOD FOR GIVING HIS GIFTS TO A "BOASTFUL, LUSTFUL, SMUTTY, INFANTILE BOY") ANTONIO SALIERI (F. MURRAY ABRAHAM), WHO BARGAINS WITH GOD TO BE A GREAT MUSICIAN. HE CONFESSES, "WHILE MY FATHER PRAYED EARNESTLY TO GOD TO PROTECT COMMERCE, I WOULD OFFER UP SECRETLY THE PROUDEST PRAYER A BOY COULD THINK OF: 'LORD, MAKE ME A GREAT COMPOSER. LET ME CELEBRATE YOUR GLORY THROUGH MUSIC AND BE CELEBRATED MYSELF. MAKE ME FAMOUS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. ... IN RETURN, I WILL GIVE YOU MY CHASTITY, MY INDUSTRY, MY DEEPEST HUMILITY, EVERY HOUR OF MY LIFE, AMEN.'"

AND YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED? A MIRACLE. SALIERI'S FATHER DIED AND HE PURSUED A GREAT CAREER AS A COMPOSER, BUT THEN FOUND HIMSELF MEDIOCRE COMPARED TO THE VIRTUOSO, BUT UNCOUTH, AMADEUS MOZART.



ABANDONED IN THE DESERT WITHOUT WATER, A THIRSTY JASON ROBARDS WANDERS THE ARID LAND DESPERATELY LOOKING FOR WATER IN 'THE BALLAD OF CABLE HOGUE' (SAM PECKINPAH, 1970). HE LOOKS UP IN THE BLAZING HEAT AND KVETCHES WITH GOD, "YESTERDAY, I TOLD YOU I WAS THIRSTY AND I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT TURN UP SOME WATER. NOW ABOUT SINNIN', YOU JUST SEND ME A DROP OR TWO AND I WON'T DO IT NO MORE...WHATEVER IN HELL IT WAS THAT I DID. I MEAN THAT, LORD." SHORTLY, HE WILL STUMBLE UPON A FRESH SPRING OF LIVING WATER IN THE HOT, DRY LAND, AND SET UP A PROFITABLE WAY STATION FOR STAGECOACHES, UNTIL THE AUTOMOBILE COMES ALONG.

THE DEALING IS LIKE THE WOMAN PRAYING FOR A PARKING PLACE OUTSIDE A CROWDED MALL. "LORD, GIVE ME A PLACE AND I WILL PRAISE YOU ALL DAY." SUDDENLY, A CAR PULLS OUT AND SHE SAYS, "O, NEVER MIND GOD, I FOUND ONE MYSELF."

KIERKEGAARD RECOGNIZED THE IRONY OF SUCH CHARACTERS PRAYING IN NOTING THAT EARTHLY-MINDED PEOPLE THINK AND IMAGINE WHEN THEY PRAY, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THAT "GOD SHOULD HEAR WHAT THEY ARE PRAYING FOR." NOT SO, WRITES THE DANE, IT IS ACTUALLY THE REVERSE. THE TRUE RELATION IN PRAYER IS "NOT WHEN GOD HEARS WHAT IS PRAYED FOR, BUT WHEN THE PERSON PRAYING CONTINUES TO PRAY UNTIL HE IS THE ONE WHO HEARS, WHO HEARS WHAT GOD IS ASKING FOR. PRAYER DOES NOT CHANGE GOD, IT CHANGES THE ONE WHO OFFERS IT. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THE TASK IS TOWARD BEING ABLE TO HOLD FAST TO THE THOUGHT OF GOD MORE AND MORE FOR A LONGER TIME, NOT THE WAY A DREAMER DOES, IDLING AND FLIRTING, BUT BY CLINGING TO IT WITHIN YOUR WORK. GOD IS PURE ACT. A MERE DREAMY LOITERING OVER THE THOUGHT OF HIM IS NOT TRUE PRAYER."

YET GOD ALLOWS OUR SILLY NEGOTIATIONS WITH HIM. HE AWARDS US THE DIGNITY OF A PARENT TO A CHILD, WHO WHINES, POUTS, AND BEGS, THINKING THAT OUR WILLS SHOULD BE DONE.

PRAY BALL!

ATHLETIC EVENTS ELICIT A LEGION OF PRAYERS, OFTEN TRYING TO MAKE DEALS WITH GOD AS WELL. SOME ARE WONDERFULLY RIDICULOUS, SUCH AS 'A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN' (PENNY MARSHALL, 1992), WHERE THE COACH OF AN ALL-GIRLS' TEAM OF THE 1940S, (TOM HANKS) MUTTERS SOME BASEBALL PLATITUDES WITH A SEXIST DOUBLE-ENTENDRE, "MAY OUR BATS BE MIGHTY AND MAY OUR BALLS... BE PLENTIFUL...OKAY, THAT'S IT."



THE MONASTERY COOK NACHO (JACK BLACK) IN 'NACHO LIBRE' (JARED HESS, 2006) WANTS TO BE A LUCHADOR WRESTLER, BUT FAILS MISERABLY. HE ASKS "PRECIOUS FATHER, WHY HAVE YOU GIVEN ME THIS DESIRE TO WRESTLE AND THEN MADE ME SUCH A STINKY WARRIOR?" HE DISCOVERS THAT HE NEEDS A PURE HEART, A HOLY MOTIVE TO HELP THE "LITTLE ONES" AS THE ANSWER TO HIS PRAYERS (AND POSSIBLY WINNING MONEY FOR THEM!).

'ROCKY' (JOHN AVILDSSEN, 1976) BEGINS WITH AN IMAGE OF THE VICTORIOUS JESUS AT THE APTLY NAMED REDEMPTION GYM. LATER, BEFORE HIS BOUT WITH APOLLO CREED, ROCKY KNEELS BEFORE AN ORDINARY SINK, ASKING FOR HELP. HIS CONTINUAL FALLINGS AND RISINGS, HIS DEFEATS AND TRIUMPHS, ARE BRACKETED WITH PRAYERS, AS WHEN IN ROCKY III, HIS JEWISH FRIEND AND MANAGER, SITS IN A CHURCH WITH THE BOXER, AND QUIETLY SAYS, "ROCKY, I'LL STAY AND PRAY."

'RUDY' (DAVID ANSPAUGH, 1993) PRAYS INCESSANTLY TO GET INTO THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AND PLAY FOOTBALL. HE CONFIDES IN THE PRIEST, "*MAYBE I HAVEN'T PRAYED ENOUGH.*" THE PRIEST SIGHS AND SAYS, "*THAT'S NOT THE ISSUE.*" HE CONFESSES HE KNOWS TWO HARD, INCONTROVERTIBLE FACTS: "*THERE IS A GOD AND I AM NOT HIM.*" IN ANSPAUGH'S 'HOOSIERS' (1986), THE DIRECTOR CHOSE ONE BASKETBALL PLAYER TO BE THE SYMBOL OF THE SMALL INDIANA COMMUNITY'S ETHOS.

STRAP PRAYS. NO ONE KNOWS HOW LONG IT WILL TAKE HIM TO FINISH. WHEN THE SECOND-STRING ATHLETE LEAVES HIS KNEES AND GOES INTO THE GAME, HE HITS TWO CRUCIAL SHOTS, FEELING THE "SPIRIT" WITHIN HIM. STRAP'S DAD, THE TOWN MINISTER, BOUGHT A BUS NOT ONLY FOR HIS SUMMER REVIVALS, BUT ALSO FOR THE BASKETBALL TEAM DURING THE WINTER SEASON. HE DELIVERS A VERY SHORT SERMON IN HIS PRAYER FOR A CHAMPIONSHIP GAME AGAINST A BIGGER, MORE TALENTED TEAM: "*AND DAVID PUT HIS HAND IN THE BAG AND STRUCK THE PHILISTINE ON THE HEAD AND HE FELL TO THE GROUND.*" PRAYERS DO NOT HAVE TO BE LONG.



QUESTIONS:

- WHEN HAVE YOU HAGGLED WITH GOD? FOR WHAT? WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME? WHAT DID YOU PROMISE AND DID YOU KEEP ANY OF YOUR PROMISE?
- DO YOU PRAY DURING SPORTING EVENTS? DO YOU PRAY FOR YOUR TEAM TO WIN, FOR SAFETY FOR ALL THE PLAYERS, OR FOR SOME OTHER PURPOSE? DO YOU THINK GOD CARES WHO WINS OR LOSES?



CHAPTER FOUR: ADORATION AND SONG

IN 1637, ANGLICAN CLERGYMAN THOMAS KEN COMPOSED THE DOXOLOGY THAT MANY OF US SING TODAY (CURIOSLY, RIGHT AFTER THE OFFERING IS TAKEN). THE WORD “DOXOLOGY” DERIVES FROM TWO GREEK NOTIONS OF A WORD (LOGOS) OF GLORY (DOXA), WHICH OFFERS A SHORT HYMN OF PRAISE TO GOD. AFTER STUDYING AT OXFORD, KEN PENNED A *MANUAL OF PRAYERS FOR THE USE OF THE SCHOLARS OF WINCHESTER COLLEGE* (1674). HE COLLECTED PRAYERS FOR DIFFERENT TIMES AND OCCASIONS, SUCH AS A MORNING PRAYER AND AN EVENING PRAYER, AND EVEN FOR MIDNIGHT (FOR THOSE STUDENTS HAVING DIFFICULTY SLEEPING AND BEING, LIKE PAUL AND SILAS, CONFINED IN THE MIDNIGHT HOUR). LIKE THE PRAYERS IN THOMAS CRANMER’S *BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*, HE COMPOSED PRAYER TO USE WHEN TEMPTED AND THEN, KNOWING HUMAN NATURE, ONE TO USE AFTER FALLING INTO SIN. HE LISTED THEM IN A DRAMATIC WAY, CALLING THEM “ACTS OF SHAME” AND “ACTS OF ABHORRENCE”. HIS MOST FAMOUS COMPOSITION WAS THE DOXOLOGY, A CALL TO SING WHEN THE HEART IS GRATEFUL. EVEN THOSE WITHOUT ANY MUSICAL TALENT CAN BELT OUT SUCH THANKSGIVING FROM THE BOTTOM OF THEIR HEARTS IN THIS PRAYER OF PROFOUND SIMPLICITY.

OUR SECTION ON ADORATION CONCERNS ITSELF WITH MUSICAL PRAYERS, PRAYERS OF PRAISE OFFERED WITH THE VOICES OF ANGELS. IT CELEBRATES THE TRINITY, FINDING THE GENEROSITY OF GOD IN ALL THREE PERSONS. IT SEES THE SOURCE OF ALL BLESSING AS THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER AND IT CALLS ALL CREATURES IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH TO SING PRAISES TO GOD.

*PRAISE GOD FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW;
PRAISE HIM, ALL CREATURES HERE BELOW;
PRAISE HIM ABOVE, YE HEAVENLY HOST;
PRAISE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST.*

ONE FILM NOT INCLUDED IN HOLLYWOOD IS ‘*SHENANDOAH*’ (ANDREW V. MCLAGLEN, 1965), IN WHICH PRAYERS ARE GIVEN AT THE BEGINNING AND ENDING OF THE FILM AT THE DINNER TABLE, HE PROMISED HIS DYING WIFE THAT HE WOULD TAKE THE FAMILY TO CHURCH – THOUGH ALWAYS LATE AND ONLY TO SATISFY HIS WIFE’S LAST REQUEST. AT THE FIRST MEAL, WITH ALL THE FAMILY GATHERED, CHARLIE ANDERSON (JIMMY STEWART) “PRAYS,” BRAZENLY TELLING GOD HOW HARD THEY WORKED FOR THE FOOD AND REMINDING HIM THAT WITHOUT THEIR HARD WORK THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE HAD ANY. HIS HUBRIS IS TESTED AS FAMILY MEMBERS DIE THROUGHOUT THE WAR. THE CIVIL WAR DECIMATES THE FAMILY. A YOUNG SON HAS BEEN LOST AND ASSUMED DEAD AS WELL. BY THE END, A REMNANT REMAINS AT TABLE, AND HE STUTTERS THROUGH THE PRAYER AGAIN, BARELY ABLE TO MAKE IT. THE DEPLETED FAMILY GATHERS IN CHURCH, SINGING LUTHER’S “*A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD,*” ALLOWING “*LET GOODS AND KINDRED GO... THE BODY THEY MAY KILL, GOD’S TRUTH ABIDETH STILL; HIS KINGDOM IS FOREVER.*” HOWEVER, IN THE MIDST OF THE HYMN, A LOST SON UNEXPECTEDLY REAPPEARS AND THE SONG TURNS TO THE DOXOLOGY.

THE SONG OF LOST INNOCENCE SPRINGS OUT OF COURTESAN-IN- TRAINING GIGI (LESLIE CARON) IN ‘*GIGI*’ (VINCENT MINNELLI, 1958), WHO LILTINGLY ENTREATS SOMEONE TO “*SAY A PRAYER FOR ME TONIGHT,*” BUT JUST TO “*GET HER BY.*” SHE ANTICIPATES AN EVENING WITH GASTON, AND SINGS, “*OH, SAY A PRAYER FOR ME THIS EVENING / BOW YOUR HEAD, AND PLEASE STAY ON YOUR KNEES / TONIGHT.*” AS SHE STROKES HER CAT, HER HEART SEEKS SUCH GUIDANCE AND GOODNESS. WHEN MAURICE CHEVALIER THANKS HEAVEN FOR “*LITTLE GIRLS,*” ONE CRINGES.

YUL BRYNNER AS KING MONGKUT OF SIAM IN ‘*THE KING AND I*’ (WALTER LANG, 1956) PRAYS TO BUDDHA, CALLING FOR HEAVEN TO SHOW THE WAY, HE ASSERTS THAT, “*EVERY DAY I DO MY BEST FOR ONE MORE DAY!*” UNEXPECTEDLY FOR THIS PATRIARCH, A CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WOMAN, ANNA (DEBORAH KERR), INVADERS AND UPENDS HIS DOMAIN (ET CETERA, ET CETERA, ET CETERA!).

IN ‘*WEST SIDE STORY*’ (ROBERT WISE, 1961) MARIA AND TONY EXCHANGE VOWS, BEGINNING WITH THE RITE OF MARRIAGE FROM THE *BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*, AND THEN ASK GOD TO MAKE OF THEIR HANDS, ONE HAND, AND MAKE OF THEIR HEARTS, ONE HEART.



IN HIS GRAND SATIRE OF HOLLYWOOD MOVIES, 'SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS' (1941), WRITER/DIRECTOR PRESTON STURGES TAKES HIS COMIC HERO TO THE DEPTHS OF A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY. FALSELY ACCUSED AND CONVICTED OF KILLING "HIMSELF," JOHN L. SULLIVAN (JOEL McCRAE) FINDS HIMSELF IN A BRUTAL SOUTHERN PRISON CAMP. ONE NIGHT A MONTH, THE SHACKLED PRISONERS OF A CHAIN GANG MARCH TO A LOCAL BLACK CHURCH WHERE THEY GET TO SEE A MOVIE. THE LAMENTS OF ISRAEL ECHO INTO A POOR CONGREGATION WHERE A MOSAIC PASTOR (JESS LEE BROOKS) WELCOMES THE CONVICTS WITH GRACE AND LEADS HIS PEOPLE IN SINGING A BIBLICAL PRAYER THAT CONNECTS BOTH GROUPS OF THE OPPRESSED: "*WHEN ISRAEL WAS IN EGYPT LAND, LET MY PEOPLE GO.*" EVEN AS ONE READS THE PSALMS, THE CALL TO GOD FOR JUSTICE RINGS OUT IN RICH, RESONANT MUSIC. SOMETHING OF ST. AUGUSTINE ECHOES WHEN HE WROTE, "*HE WHO SINGS, PRAYS TWICE.*"



THE PSALMS COME ALIVE NOT ONLY IN FILMS LIKE 'THE SOUND OF MUSIC' (WHERE ROBERT WISE'S OPENING BURSTS WITH HILLS THAT ARE ALIVE, AND ONE SUPPOSES TREES AND RIVERS). IN STEVEN SPIELBERG'S 'THE COLOR PURPLE' (1985), WHERE THE CHOIR SINGS "GOD IS TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING" IN A CALL-AND-RESPONSE TO SHUG'S PUNGENT PLEA, "*SPEAK TO ME LORD RIGHT NOW, RIGHT NOW.*"



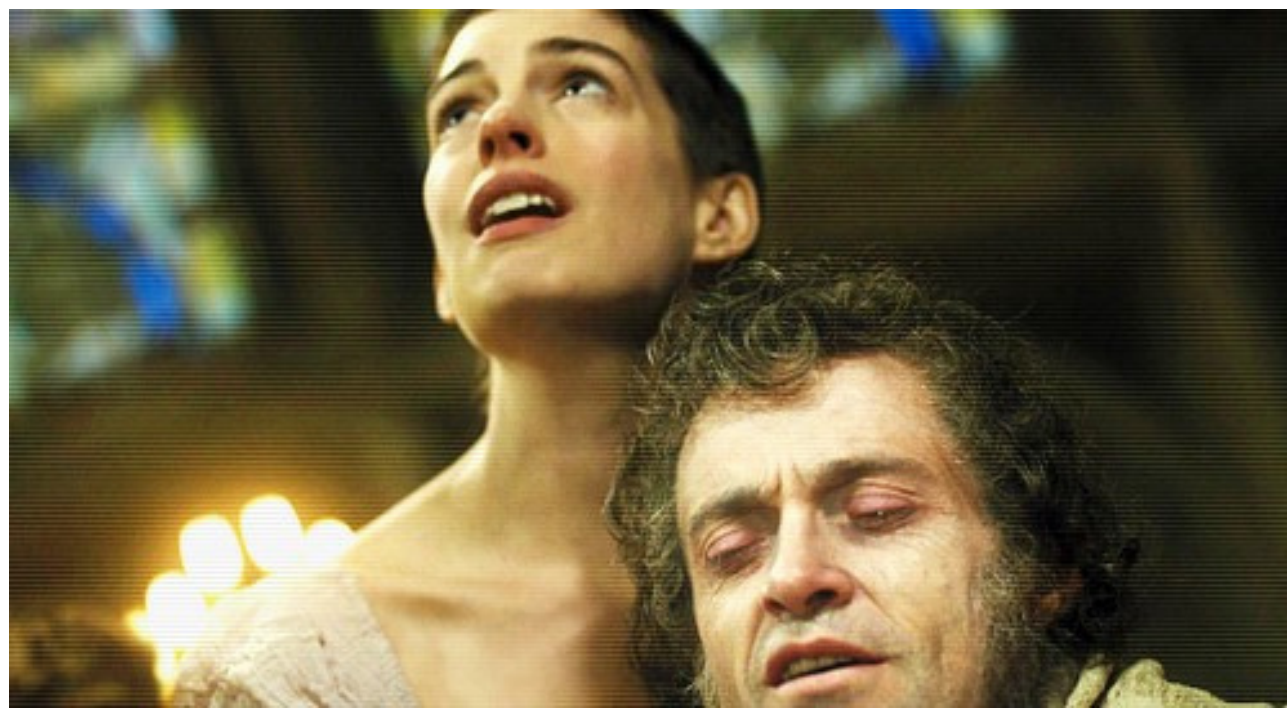
THE HUMAN/DIVINE CONVERSATION SWINGS BACK AND FORTH UNTIL THE RECONCILIATION OF FATHER AND DAUGHTER AT THE FRONT OF THE CHURCH. "*SEE DADDY,*" SHE CRIES TO HER FATHER, "*SINNERS HAVE SOUL, TOO.*"

AUTHOR JODIE BERNDT CONFESSED TO THE POIGNANCY OF THE MUSICAL PRAYERS IN 'LES MISERABLES' (TOM HOOPER, 2012). SHE POINTS OUT THAT THE FILM ARTICULATES WHAT WE ALL LONG FOR: FORGIVENESS, REDEMPTION, A HOME, AND ULTIMATELY, GOD. WHEN REDEEMED CONVICT JEAN VALJEAN (HUGH JACKMAN) REACHES THE END OF HIS DAYS, HE WHISPERS "GOD ON HIGH, HEAR MY PRAYER."

TAKE ME NOW, TO THY CARE. WHERE YOU ARE, LET ME BE. TAKE ME NOW, TAKE ME THERE. BRING ME HOME. BRING ME HOME."

THE SPIRIT OF FANTINE (ANNE HATHAWAY) APPEARS WITH A BLESSING AND CALLS HIM "MONSIEUR, LAY DOWN YOUR BURDEN.... YOU RAISED MY CHILD IN LOVE." AS HE WEEPS "SHE'S THE BEST OF MY LIFE."

FANTINE PROMISES "AND YOU WILL BE WITH GOD."



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ONE OTHER FILM THAT CAPTURES ONE OF THE MOST AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONAL PRAYERS REMAINS 'FIDDLER ON THE ROOF' (NORMAN JEWISON, 1971), IN WHICH GENUINE INTERACTION OCCURS BETWEEN THE DIVINE AND THE SOMEWHAT HAPLESS TEVYE (TOPOL). LIKE A CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND, KVETCHING AND TALKING, COMPLAINING AND HAGGLING, THE CHATS OF THE RUSSIAN JEW TALK TO G-D LIKE HE WOULD AN ELDER, NOT A SUPREME BEING.

ONE MUST REMEMBER ANOTHER JEW TOLD HIS DISCIPLES THAT HE NO LONGER WOULD CALL THEM SERVANTS, BUT NOW THEY WERE HIS FRIENDS. THE INTERCHANGE CULMINATES IN A DEEPLY NUANCED SABBATH PRAYER, WHICH COMPOSITIONALLY SHOWS US GOOD HUSBANDS AND WIVES, FATHERS AND MOTHERS. AROUND THE PASSOVER TABLE, TEVYE LEADS THE HYMN: "MAY GOD BLESS YOU AND GRANT YOU LONG LIFE," AND HIS WIFE, FAMILY, AND THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY SING ALONG.



QUESTIONS:

- WHAT DO YOU SING?
- WHAT SONGS AND HYMNS THAT DWELL IN YOUR HEART AND IN YOUR MOUTH ARE LIKE PRAYERS?
- HOW DO YOU ADORE AND PRAISE GOD WITH MUSIC?

CHAPTER FIVE: BOOK OF COMMON (HOLLYWOOD) PRAYER

TWO OF THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF PRAYING, AND OF TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO PRAY, ARRIVES THROUGH TWO PRIMARY TRADITIONS: THE NEW ENGLAND PRIMER'S "NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP," AND THE 23RD PSALM.

THE STORY OF COHN BROTHERS INDICATED THAT HOLLYWOOD COULD NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE CLASSIC 18TH CENTURY CHILDREN'S VERSION AND THE LORD'S PRAYER. IN HIS BIOGRAPHY OF THE COHN BROTHERS OF COLUMBIA STUDIOS, BOB THOMAS TELLS AN APOCRYPHAL TALE OF THEM DISCUSSING WHETHER TO MAKE A RELIGIOUS FILM.

HARRY ACCUSED HIS BROTHER JACK OF KNOWING NOTHING ABOUT RELIGION. "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE BIBLE, JACK? I BET YOU FIFTY BUCKS YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW THE LORD'S PRAYER".

"YES, I DO," HE BOASTED. "WELL THEN, LET'S HEAR IT," COUNTERED HARRY.

"NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP..."

"OKAY, OKAY, YOU WIN," CONCEDED HARRY, "HERE'S THE FIFTY BUCKS."

YET MOVIES MAKE A POINT OF SHOWING CHILDREN PRAYING, FROM JACKIE COOGAN IN 'THE KID' (CHARLIE CHAPLIN, 1921) SNEAKING INTO A FLOPHOUSE AND BEING DISCOVERED TO SHIRLEY TEMPLE (IN SO MANY MOVIES). EVEN THE HORROR FILM 'POLTERGEIST' (TOBE HOOPER, 1982...AND 'NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET' WES CRAVEN, 1984) FEATURES A YOUNG IMPRESSIONABLE GIRL RECITES THIS PRAYER WHEN SHE AND HER MOTHER BURY HER PET CANARY IN A GARDEN. SO, TOO, JERRY THE MOUSE (AS WELL AS DONALD DUCK) PRAY DESPERATELY WHEN IN THE CLUTCHES OF TOM THE CAT, A SHARK, OR SOME OTHER DANGER.

IN THE FASCINATING 'BAD TIMES AT THE EL ROYALE' (DREW GODDARD, 2018), PRAYERS ABOUND FROM MANY CHARACTERS. FBI AGENT SULLIVAN (JON HAMM) IS BUSY DEBUGGING A ROOM WHILE SAYING A PRAYER WITH HIS SON ON THE PHONE. SUDDENLY, HE PAUSES AND ASKS, "WE'RE NOT SAYING THAT PRAYER ANYMORE? WHY? BECAUSE IT'S MORBID. WHERE DID YOU LEARN THAT?"



EVEN MICKEY MOUSE AND PLUTO KNEEL BESIDE A BED AND PRAY THAT GOD WOULD BLESS "EVERYBODY." SORROWFUL JONES TEACHES HIS YOUNG CHARGE TO PRAY. EVEN SNOW WHITE KNEELS TO ASK GOD THAT GRUMPY WOULD LIKE HER.



A CHALLENGE COMES WHEN ONE OF THE PARENTS IS ROMAN CATHOLIC AND THE OTHER PROTESTANT. IN *'WE WERE SOLDIERS'* (RANDALL WALLACE, 2002), LT. COL HAL MOORE'S (MEL GIBSON) DAUGHTER WANTS TO BE A "METHODIST, LIKE MOMMY, SO I CAN PRAY WHATEVER I WANT," BUT HE INTERPRETS HER PROTESTATIONS NOT AS HERESY BUT SIMPLE STUBBORNNESS.

COMMON PRAYERS BECOMES PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION WHERE ONE PRAYS FOR OTHERS, MARIELLE HELLER'S *'A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD'* (2019) FEATURES PRESBYTERIAN TELEVISION FRIEND, MR. ROGERS (TOM HANKS), PRAYING BY HIS BEDSIDE FOR PEOPLE BY NAME. HE CONTINUES HIS LIST THROUGHOUT THE DAY, EVEN WHILE SWIMMING. FOCUSING UPON HIS ESTRANGED DAUGHTER, KATIE, TOUGH BOXING TRAINER FRANKIE DUNN (CLINT EASTWOOD) KEEPS HIS PRAYERS SUCCINCT, ASKING FOR HER PROTECTION IN *'MILLION DOLLAR BABY'* (EASTWOOD, 2004). HE ENDS SAYING THERE IS NO NEED REPEATING HIMSELF ON OTHER REQUESTS AS THE LORD KNOWS WHAT HE NEEDS.



23RD PSALM :

IN THIS INTERWOVEN MONTAGE OF THE 23RD PSALM, DEVOUT ROMAN CATHOLIC MUTANT NIGHTCRAWLER (ALAN CUMMING) TRANSPORTS HIMSELF AND STORM (HALLE BERRY) WHILE RECITING THE PSALM IN *'X2 X-MEN'* (BRYAN SINGER, 2003). STRANDED AT SEA, PASSENGERS TRY TO REMEMBER THE PSALM IN *'LIFEBOAT'* (ALFRED HITCHCOCK, 1944). ONLY THE SHIP'S STEWARD, THE HEROIC AND COMPASSIONATE JOE SPENSER (CANADA LEE), KNOWS THE WORDS BY HEART. YOUNG AND ANXIOUS MEGAN WHEELER (SYDNEY PENNY) BURIES HER MURDERED DOG AND WONDERS ALOUD THE MEANING OF THE SCRIPTURE IN *'PALE RIDER'* (CLINT EASTWOOD, 1985), AND BEGS FOR HELP. THE PREACHER IS ALREADY DESCENDING THE MOUNTAIN. WHEN HE ARRIVES WITH HIS OWN WORD OF JUSTICE, HE SAYS, "THE LORD DOES WORK IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS."



THE NAÏVE AND PACIFIST PASTOR DR. MATTHEW COLLINS (LEWIS MARTIN) TRIES TO ENGAGE ALIENS BY SPEAKING PSALM 23, WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF DEATH TO HIS OWN DESTRUCTION IN *'WAR OF THE WORLDS'* (BRYON HASKINS, 1953) (ALTHOUGH THE FILM CULMINATES IN NUMEROUS CONGREGATIONS PRAYING FOR DELIVERANCE AND HAVING THEIR PRAYERS ANSWERED BY ONE OF GOD'S TINIEST CREATURES).

IN CONTRAST, THE INDOMITABLE MINISTER'S DAUGHTER, EULA GOODNIGHT (KATHARINE HEPBURN), STANDS BEFORE HER ENEMIES ASSERTING THE PROVIDENTIAL CARE OF GOD WITH THE PSALM IN 'ROOSTER COGBURN' (STUART MILLAR, 1985).

BOTH 'TITANIC' (JAMES CAMERON, 1997) AND 'LOVE AND DEATH' (WOODY ALLEN, 1975) FEATURE COMIC TWISTS ON RUNNING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.



QUESTIONS:

- WERE YOU TAUGHT THE CHILDREN'S PRAYER OF "NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP" BY YOUR PARENTS?
- DO YOU HAVE IT MEMORIZED?
- HAVE YOU TAUGHT IT TO OTHERS?
- DOES IT PROVIDE COMFORT OR STIR MORE ANXIETY?

CHAPTER SIX: KNOCKIN' ON HEAVEN'S DOOR THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY.

WHAT LIES BEYOND DEATH AND AT ODDS?

35 *"WHO SHALL SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF CHRIST? SHALL TROUBLE OR HARDSHIP OR PERSECUTION OR FAMINE OR NAKEDNESS OR DANGER OR SWORD? 36 AS IT IS WRITTEN, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE FACE DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE ARE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."* 37 *NO, IN ALL THESE THINGS WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM WHO LOVED US. 38 FOR I AM CONVINCED THAT NEITHER DEATH NOR LIFE, NEITHER ANGELS NOR DEMONS, NEITHER THE PRESENT NOR THE FUTURE, NOR ANY POWERS, 39 NEITHER HEIGHT NOR DEPTH, NOR ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL CREATION, WILL BE ABLE TO SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD."* ROMANS 8: 35-39

THE PROSPECT OF DEATH HAUNTS THE PRAYERS OF SEVERAL KEY FILMS. IN JOHN HUSTON'S 1951 *'AFRICAN QUEEN,'* GIN-SWILLING CHARLIE ALLNUTT (HUMPHREY BOGART) AND STRAIGHT-LACED METHODIST ROSE SAYER (KATHARINE HEPBURN) FIND THEIR BOAT STRANDED IN A DRIED UP SWAMP. CHARLIE CONTRACTED A DEATHLY FEVER AFTER LEECHES SUCKED HIM DRY. DESPERATE, ROSE KNEELS BESIDE HIS BROKEN EXHAUSTED BODY AND PRAYS: *"DEAR LORD, WE'VE COME TO THE END OF OUR JOURNEY. IN A LITTLE WHILE, WE WILL STAND BEFORE YOU. I PRAY FOR YOU TO BE MERCIFUL. JUDGE US NOT FOR OUR WEAKNESS, BUT FOR OUR LOVE, AND OPEN THE DOORS OF HEAVEN FOR CHARLIE AND ME."* THE CAMERA TILTS UPWARD INTO THE HEAVENS AND SUDDENLY, MIRACULOUSLY, THEY OPEN AND A TORRENTIAL RAINSTORM LIFTS THEIR BOAT AND RESCUES THEM FROM DEATH.



CHAPLAIN DUFFY (PAT O'BRIEN) MINISTERS LAST RITES IN *'THE FIGHTING 69TH'* (WILLIAM KEIGHLEY, 1940) TO A JEWISH SOLDIER, PRAYING THE JEWISH DEATHBED VIDUI. IT OFFERS A FINAL CONFESSION AND AN AFFIRMATION OF FORGIVENESS, COMFORT AND, PEACE, *"SHEMA YISRAEL ADONAI, HEAR O ISRAEL, THE LORD IS GOD; THE LORD IS ONE."* MOLLY, THE OLDEST ORPHAN ON A HORRENDOUS SWAMPLAND BABY FARM (MARY PICKFORD), SILENTLY PRAYS FOR A DYING ORPHAN IN *'SPARROWS'* (WILLIAM BEAUDINE, 1926). SHE DREAMS THAT JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD, COMES TO TAKE THE CHILD FROM HER ARMS INTO HIS PASTURE. IN HER STATE OF REVERIE, MARY AWAKENS TO SEE THE CHILD HAS DIED, AND THEN REMEMBERING HER DREAM, GENTLY AND TEARFULLY LOOKS TO HEAVEN IN HUMBLE ACCEPTANCE.



THE HARROWING STORY OF 'DEAD MAN WALKING' (TIM ROBBINS, 1995) REVEALS AS MUCH ABOUT HOLLYWOOD'S TREATMENT OF PRAYER AND FAITH AS DRAMATIZING THE HORRIFIC STORY OF SISTER HELEN PREJEAN AND HER COMPASSION FOR A CONVICTED MURDERER. THE STRIKING CONTRAST BETWEEN ACTUAL LIFE AND CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS COMES AS SISTER PREJEAN SHARES HOW DIRECTOR TIM ROBBINS ALTERED HER STORY (AND STARRED HIS GIRLFRIEND, SUSAN SARANDON AS THE NUN) IN TRYING TO WALK A DELICATE LINE BETWEEN ART AND PROPAGANDA. EMPHASIZING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHARACTERS, THE FILM NEVERTHELESS DOES POINT TO THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE ONE'S ENEMIES, AND HOW HARD THAT CAN ACTUALLY BE.



AT ODDS: "BUT I TELL YOU, LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU."
(MATTHEW 5:44).

BASED ON THE 19TH CENTURY RIVALRY OF THE HATFIELDS, AND THE McCOYS, 'OUR HOSPITALITY' (JOHN BLYSTONE, 1923) THROWS WILLIE McCAY (BUSTER KEATON) INTO A DEADLY APPALACHIAN FEUD, HAVING FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE DAUGHTER OF THE CANFIELD CLAN. HE FINDS HIMSELF THE RECIPIENT AND VICTIM OF SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY.

THE CODE OF CHIVALRY REQUIRES SAFETY AND GENEROSITY TO ANYONE WHO ABIDES IN YOUR HOUSE, EVEN IF HE IS OF THE OTHER CLAN. AND BUSTER IS. HE HAS FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE DAUGHTER, WHO IS ALSO OBLIVIOUS OF THE LONG-STANDING ENMITY BETWEEN BUSTER'S FAMILY AND HERS.

BUSTER OVERHEARS THE FACTS JUST AS HE IS READY TO SIT DOWN FOR THE MEAL, AND REALIZES THAT IF HE LEAVES THE HOUSE, IT IS HUNTING SEASON, AND HE IS THE GAME. WHEN HE SITS AT TABLE, THE OLD MINISTER BEGINS HIS PRAYER. SUSPICIOUS OF HIS HOSTS, BUSTER LEARNS TO "WATCH AND PRAY." BUT THEN, EVERYONE SEEMS TO PEEK OUT OF ONE EYE, NOT SEEKING GOD, BUT BECOMING WARY OF OTHERS.

IT RAISES THE QUESTION OF WHAT DISTRACTS US DURING OUR PRAYER TIME? WHAT CAUSES US TO OPEN AN EYE AND LOOK AROUND?



IN THE DARK COMEDY, 'ELECTION' (ALEXANDER PAYNE, 1999), THREE STUDENTS ARE RUNNING TO BECOME THE STUDENT PRESIDENT. EACH PRAYS BEFORE THE HIGH SCHOOL ELECTION. THE SELFISHNESS OF TWO EXPOSES HOW MANY OF US USE PRAYER AS A WEAPON AGAINST OTHERS. TRACY FLICK (REESE WITHERSPOON) ACKNOWLEDGES THAT SHE DOESN'T REALLY SPEAK TO THE LORD THAT OFTEN, "BUT NOW, I REALLY MUST INSIST THAT YOU HELP ME WIN THE ELECTION TOMORROW BECAUSE I DESERVE IT AND PAUL METZLER DOESN'T. I'M ASKING THAT YOU GO THAT ONE LAST MILE AND MAKE SURE TO PUT ME IN OFFICE WHERE I BELONG SO THAT I MAY CARRY OUR, YOUR WILL, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. AMEN."

TAMMY METZLER WANTS TO DISBAND THE STUDENT GOVERNMENT AND MAKES A CAMPAIGN PROMISE TO DO AWAY WITH SUCH USELESS ASSEMBLIES. THE STUDENTS GIVE HER A STANDING OVATION. SHE DOESN'T REALLY BELIEVE IN GOD, CHOOSING THE PRAYER TO VENT AGAINST A FELLOW STUDENT AND ASK FOR A "REALLY EXPENSIVE PAIR OF LEATHER PANTS" AND SOMEDAY TO BE "REALLY GOOD FRIENDS WITH MADONNA." THEIR COMPETITION IS JOCK PAUL (CHRIS KLEIN) WHO IS HUMBLY VAIN AND DUMB, THANKING GOD FOR ALL HIS BLESSINGS, INCLUDING LARGE BODY PARTS. HE DOES PRAY THAT TAMMY WOULD BECOME A "HAPPIER PERSON." HE WANTS TO WIN, BUT KNOWS THAT IT IS "TOTALLY UP TO YOU. YOU'LL DECIDE WHO THE BEST PERSON IS AND I'LL ACCEPT IT. AND FORGIVE ME FOR MY SINS, WHATEVER THEY MAY BE. AMEN."



THE SUPERFICIAL AND SELFISH PRAYERS COMPETE FOR GOD'S ATTENTION. NONE SEEK GOD. SO, TOO, IN THE VIOLENCE OF 'GANGS OF NEW YORK.' (MARTIN SCORSESE, 2002), RIVAL MOBS ENTREAT GOD FOR BLOODSHED OVER THEIR ENEMIES. PRAYERS OF IMPRECATION CLASH WITH ONE ANOTHER IN THE VESTIBULES OF HEAVEN. NATIVIST BILL "THE BUTCHER" CUTTING (DANIEL DAY LEWIS) CALLS OUT BRAZENLY, "YOU ARE THE LORD GOD OF RETRIBUTION" AND CALLS UPON THE DEITY TO QUASH HIS ENEMIES, THE IRISH ROMAN CATHOLIC IMMIGRANTS. HIS PRAYERS CLASH IN CROSS-PURPOSES WITH THOSE OF ROMAN CATHOLIC AMSTERDAM VALLON.

VALLON DEVOTES HIS WEAPONS TO THE ACT OF CLEANSING OUT THE WICKEDNESS OF HIS ENEMIES, CHARGING THE LORD TO "PLACE THE STEEL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN MY SPINE AND THE LOVE OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN MY HEART." HIS FAITH TRADITION IS THE WEAPON HE BELIEVES MOST FEARED BY HIS ENEMIES. THESE WARLIKE COMPETITIVE PRAYERS HARKEN BACK TO MARK TWAIN'S HYPERBOLIC "WAR PRAYER", WHICH CALLED UPON GOD TO UTTERLY DESTROY ONE'S ENEMIES, TO CRUSH THEM, TO LET THEIR BLOOD RUN IN THE STREET.

BILL THE BUTCHER CHARGES A HYPOCRITICAL BOSS TWEED, WHO OFFERS ROTE THANKSGIVING, WITH BEING "NEITHER COLD NOR HOT. SO BECAUSE YOU ARE LUKEWARM, I WILL SPEW YOU OUT OF MY MOUTH."



QUESTIONS:

- WHAT PRAYERS DO YOU SAY IN THE PRESENCE OF DYING AND DEATH?
- WHAT SCRIPTURES COME TO MIND?
- HOW HAS ANGER OR RESENTMENT ENTERED YOUR PRAYERS?
- HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU PRAY FOR YOUR ENEMIES? AS CHESTERTON QUIPPED, "GOD TOLD US TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS AND TO LOVE OUR ENEMIES, PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY'RE THE SAME PEOPLE."

CHAPTER SEVEN: TABLE MANNERS

“O TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD.” PSALM 34: 8 “BLESS, O LORD, THIS FOOD TO OUR USE AND US TO THY SERVICE, AND KEEP US EVER MINDFUL OF THE NEEDS OF OTHERS. IN JESUS’ NAME, AMEN.”

“FOR THIS AND ALL WE ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE, MAKE US TRULY GRATEFUL, LORD. THROUGH CHRIST WE PRAY. AMEN.”

THE MOST COMMON FORM OF PRAYERS IN COMEDY FILMS CENTERS ON SAYING “GRACE” BEFORE MEALS. THE COMIC JUXTAPOSITION OF PIETY WITH HUMOR SETS UP THE EXPECTATIONS OF “NORMAL” PRAYERS DISRUPTED IN SOME SILLY WAY. THE INCONGRUITY OF THE GAGS CONTRASTS THE ACT OF GRATITUDE WITH THE DESIRE TO EAT QUICKLY.

ROBIN WILLIAMS AS PETER PAN IN ‘*HOOK*’ (STEVEN SPIELBERG, 1991) CALMS THE WILD BOYS TO SAY “GRACE,” WHICH IS ALL THEY SAY BEFORE PANDEMONIUM BREAKS OUT, AS THE BOYS SCRAMBLE LIKE CORINTHIANS TO BE THE FIRST TO EAT AND DRINK TO THEIR SURFEIT.

OR, IN SEVERAL CASES, CHARACTERS WHO ARE NOT USED TO PRAYING END UP GULPING DOWN FOOD NOT REALIZING THE RITUAL. IN ‘*THE GOAT*’ (BUSTER KEATON, 1921), A GIRLFRIEND INSTRUCTS BUSTER KEATON TO BOW HIS HEAD, WHICH HE DOES, EXCEPT IT FALLS FLAT INTO THE BOWL OF SOUP.

IN ‘*WITNESS*’ (PETER WEIR, 1985), PHILADELPHIA COP JOHN BOOK (HARRISON FORD) REMAINS WITLESS IN GOBBLING HIS FAST FOOD WHILE RACHEL, AN AMISH MOTHER (KELLY MCGILLIS), AND HER CHILD SAMUEL (LUKAS HAAS) QUIETLY PREPARE THEIR HEARTS WITH THANKSGIVING.

ALL BOW THEIR HEADS AND HE BEGINS A LITTLE PARABLE, ALBEIT ONE WITH A TOUCH OF PELAGIAN HERESY IN WHICH WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR OWN SALVATION.

TWO LITTLE MICE FELL IN A BUCKET OF CREAM. THE FIRST MOUSE QUICKLY GAVE UP AND DROWNED, BUT THE SECOND MOUSE, HE STRUGGLED SO HARD THAT HE EVENTUALLY CHURNED THAT CREAM INTO BUTTER AND HE WALKED OUT.

AFTER EVERY ONE SAID “AMEN,” THE MOTHER CAROL (NANCY LENEHAN) COOS “OH, THAT WAS BEAUTIFUL. THE MOUSE, HE CHURNED THAT CREAM INTO BUTTER.” CARICATURES OF BIBLICALLY IGNORANT CHRISTIANS EASILY RAISES A LAUGH.



IN ‘*CATCH ME IF YOU CAN*’ (STEVEN SPIELBERG, 2002), POSER AND CON MAN FRANK ABAGNALE JR. (LEO DICAPRIO) DATES THE DAUGHTER OF AN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS COUPLE. AT A DINNER TABLE, THE FATHER ROGER STRONG (MARTIN SHEEN), A LUTHERAN (BUT NOT TOO THEOLOGICALLY INFORMED), ASKS HIM IF HE WOULD LIKE TO SAY GRACE, UNLESS HE WASN’T COMFORTABLE. “ABSOLUTELY,” HE AVERS, HE CAN PRAY.

IN A SIMILAR VEIN, MALE NURSE GREG FOCKER (BEN STILLER) IS ASKED BY HIS GIRLFRIEND’S SUSPICIOUS FATHER (ROBERT DE NIRO) WHETHER HE WOULD PRAY FOR THE MEAL IN ‘*MEET THE PARENTS*’ (JAY ROACH, 2000). USING HIGH-FALUTIN’ LANGUAGE, HE QUOTES THE SONG FROM GODSPELL, ONE THAT HE JUST HEARD IN THE DRUG STORE.

“O DEAR GOD, THANK YOU. YOU ARE SUCH A GOOD GOD TO US. A KIND AND GENTLE AND ACCOMMODATING GOD. AND WE THANK YOU, O SWEET, SWEET LORD OF HOSTS FOR THE SMORGASBORD YOU HAVE SO APTLY LAIN AT OUR TABLE THIS DAY, AND EACH DAY... BY DAY. DAY BY DAY... BY DAY. O DEAR LORD, THREE THINGS WE PRAY: TO LOVE THEE MORE DEARLY, TO SEE THEE MORE CLEARLY, TO FOLLOW THEE MORE NEARLY DAY BY DAY... BY DAY. AMEN.



IN A UNIQUE WAY, THE FILM DEMONSTRATES HOW THE HOLLYWOOD AND BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF 'GODSPELL' DIRECTLY TEACHES GREG FOCKER HOW TO PRAY, AND SUPPLIES THE WORDS FROM A SONG'S LYRICS.

'TALLADEGA NIGHTS' (ADAM MCKAY, 2006) EXPLOITS THE RITUAL OF SAYING GRACE TO SHOW HOW WE MAKE GOD IN OUR OWN IMAGE. RICKY BOBBY (WILL FERRELL) GIVES LAVISH THANKS TO GOD AT A SIMPLE, FAST FOOD LUNCH WITH HIS FAMILY AND HIS FRIEND CAL NAUGHTON JR. (JOHN C. REILLY). HE BEGINS HIS PRAYER WITH THE CLASSIC LINE: "DEAR 8 POUNDS, 6 OUNCES...NEWBORN INFANT JESUS, DON'T EVEN KNOW A WORD YET."

HIS CONCEPTION OF JESUS AS AN INNOCENT CHILD OPENS UP DISCUSSION OF HOW OTHERS SEE HIM, FROM CAL'S PICTURING "JESUS IN A TUXEDO T-SHIRT BECAUSE IT SAYS 'I WANT TO BE FORMAL, BUT I'M HERE TO PARTY.'" HE CONTINUES WITH AN IMAGE OF "GIANT EAGLE'S WINGS, AND SINGIN' LEAD VOCALS FOR LYNRYD SKYNYRD WITH LIKE AN ANGEL BAND AND I'M IN THE FRONT ROW AND I'M HAMMERED DRUNK."



HE THANKS THE LORD BABY JESUS, NOT ONLY FOR HIS BEAUTIFUL SONS AND HIS "RED-HOT SMOKIN' WIFE, CARLEY," BUT ALSO FOR THE POWERADE AND OTHER ENDORSEMENTS, WHICH HIS SPONSORS REQUIRE HIM TO MENTION IN EVERY PRAYER. THE REDUCTIONISM AND MATERIALISM OF SUCH A WONDERFULLY CARICATURED PRAYER REVEALS A CULTURE MORE CONCERNED WITH CONSTRUCTING FALSE IMAGES OF GOD. GOD, AS C. S. LEWIS ONCE NOTED, IS THE "GREAT ICONOCLAST," IN THAT HE BREAKS DOWN EVERY GRAVEN IMAGE WE MAKE OF HIM.

HE COMES TO US IN OUR IGNORANCE, BUT REVEALS OUR TENDENCIES TO COMMIT IDOLATRY. HIS LIGHT SHINES ON OUR FOLLIES. SO, TOO, 'NATIONAL LAMPOON'S CHRISTMAS VACATION' (JEREMIAH S. CHECHIK, 1989) HILARIOUSLY EXAGGERATES THE MIX OF RELIGION AND PATRIOTISM AT A CHRISTMAS DINNER, WHERE A GOOFY IN-LAW ENDS UP WEAVING THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE INTO THE GRACE.

'MISS CONGENIALITY' (DONALD PETRIE, 2000) COVERS A PECULIAR TENDENCY OF HOLLYWOOD TO TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD IN VAIN. IN HER NOVEL, *WISE BLOOD*, FLANNERY O'CONNOR CREATES A CHARACTER THAT TRIES TO ESTABLISH THE "HOLY CHURCH OF CHRIST WITHOUT CHRIST." THE PROBLEM IS THAT PEOPLE STILL SWEAR IN THE NAME OF "JESUS CHRIST," AND VET HAZEL MOTES REALIZES HE CAN'T GET AWAY FROM A GOSPEL PROCLAMATION THAT "JESUS IS THE MESSIAH" EVEN IN THE GUTTER. SO, WHEN UNDERCOVER FBI AGENT GRACIE HART (SANDRA BULLOCK) BLURTS OUT THE HOLY NAME DURING A MISS UNITED STATES PAGEANT LUNCHEON, SHE COVERS FOR HER INAPPROPRIATE BLASPHEMY BY OFFERING A QUICK SUPERFICIAL PRAYER (IT IS A BEAUTY PAGEANT). PRAYERS AS SUCH ARE EASY TO PARODY, BUT ONE RECOGNIZES THEIR DELICATE SOCIAL PRESENCE AND SPIRITUAL POWER.

CRITIC JUSTIN CHANGE ASKS THE CRUCIAL QUESTION: "WHY ARE AFRAID TO PRAY?" IS IT A FEAR TO BE MOCKED? PRAYING IN PUBLIC IS A VERY VULNERABLE THING, AND WHAT HOLLYWOOD SHOWS IN SUCH COMIC CARICATURES IS THAT REAL PEOPLE, IMPERFECT AND FLAWED PEOPLE, TRY TO PRAY AND TOO FREQUENTLY FAIL.

THE TURN FROM COMEDY TO COMMUNITY OCCURS IN 'THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS' (ROB COHEN, 2001) WHERE OUTCASTS GATHER TO THANK GOD FOR THINGS THAT MATTER TO THEM. THE ENDANGERED FAMILY IN 'A QUIET PLACE' (JOHN KRASINSKI, 2018) MUST KEEP SILENCE LEST MONSTERS DEVOUR THEM, BUT THEY CONNECT WITH A TENDER TOUCHING OF HANDS AND HEARTS, A CARESSING OF CARES IN LOVE AND FAITH.



THE APOTHEOSIS OF COMMUNAL PRAYER ERUPTS AT THE END OF ROBERT BENTON'S AMAZING FILM, 'PLACES IN THE HEART' (ROBERT BENTON, 1984). THE FIRST SHOT THAT BENTON DIRECTED WAS THE FINAL SCENE OF THE EUCHARIST AS PRAYER, TAKING THE BODY AND THE BLOOD OF CHRIST IN THE BREAD AND WINE. ROBERT BENTON ENDED HIS FILM WITH A SACRAMENTAL MYSTERY. IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH IN WAXAHACHIE TEXAS, THE FINAL SCENE OF TAKING COMMUNION INCLUDED BLACK AND WHITE, LIVING AND DEAD, BELIEVERS IN A STARTLING ENDING.

MANY PEOPLE, INCLUDING ONE PERSON WHO SAT WITH HIM AT THE PREMIERE, DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE SCENE. IRONICALLY, THE REVEREND WILLIAM COFFIN SLOANE, THE GREAT PEACE ACTIVIST AND THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS SENIOR MINISTER PASTOR OF NEW YORK CITY'S RIVERSIDE CATHEDRAL, DIDN'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT THE FINAL SCENE'S QUIET MESSAGE OF GRACE MEANT, NAMELY THAT THE EUCHARIST UNITES ALL SINNERS, THE QUICK AND THE DEAD.



QUESTIONS:

- WHICH OF YOUR PRAYERS LEAD YOU INTO AUTOMATIC PILOT? HAVE YOU LOOKED AT PRAYERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS OR FROM CRANMER'S BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER? HAVE YOU EVER WRITTEN OUT YOUR OWN PRAYERS?
- ARE YOU AFRAID TO PRAY IN PUBLIC? IS IT OSTENTATIOUS TO SAY GRACE AT PUBLIC RESTAURANTS OR IS IT A GENUINE RITUAL OF THANKSGIVING?
- WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EUCHARIST (COMMUNION, THE LORD'S SUPPER) AS A PRAYER? HOW DOES IT MAKE THE "QUICK (LIVING) AND THE DEAD" INTO ONE BODY? DO WE JOIN WITH SAINTS WHEN WE PARTAKE THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST.
- HOW DO WRITTEN PRAYERS HELP US IN OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD AND HOW DO THEY DETRACT?

CHAPTER EIGHT: DELIVER US

CHASED BY SADISTIC VILLAINS, A WOMAN IN *'MAD MAX: FURY ROAD'* (GEORGE MILLER, 2015) GESTURES IN THE BACK SEAT OF A MONSTER TRUCK. HER FRIEND ASKS HER WHAT SHE IS DOING. SHE CONFESSES SHE IS PRAYING, JUST IN CASE ANYONE IS LISTENING.

ANXIOUS PRAYERS ERUPT FROM CHARACTERS IN MANY FRAUGHT PREDICAMENTS. PETUNIA (ETHEL WATERS) FRANTICLY PRAYS FOR HER WAYWARD HUSBAND JOE IN *'CABIN IN THE SKY.'* (VINCENTE MINNELLI AND BUSBY BERKELEY, 1943). DISTRESSED PASSENGERS ON THE *'TITANIC'* (JAMES CAMERON, 1997) PLEAD FOR RESCUE. IN *'THE KID'* (1921), CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S ADOPTED WAIF (JACKIE COOGAN) LOOKS TO THE HEAVENS WITH INCONSOLABLE DESPERATION.



AS A GROUP OF ASYLUM SEEKERS LOOK FOR SANCTUARY FOR A FERTILE WOMAN IN *'CHILDREN OF MEN'* (ALFONSO CUARÓN, 2006), ONE CALLS OUT FOR MERCY. IN *'FOREST GUMP'* (ROBERT ZEMECKIS, 1994), LITTLE JENNY ASKS GOD TO DELIVER HER FROM HER ABUSIVE FATHER, MAKING HER INTO A LITTLE BIRD SO SHE COULD FLY FAR, FAR AWAY FROM HER SUFFERINGS.



FACING THE PROSPECT OF HER HUSBAND'S DEATH, (KATHERINE HEPBURN) BEGS GOD FOR HIS LIFE IN *'ON GOLDEN POND'* (MARK RYDELL, 1991). IN A MERRY MIX OF HONESTY AND HUMOR, (GEORGE CLOONEY) TALKS TO GOD ABOUT HIS LOVE FOR HIS FAMILY AND HIS DESIRE TO LIVE IN *'O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?'* (COEN BROTHERS, 2000), JUST AS HE AND HIS FRIENDS ARE ABOUT TO BE HANGED (AND ARE IMMEDIATELY RESCUED BY A FLOODING BY THE TVA). IN A RETURN TO *'COOL HAND LUKE,'* PAUL NEWMAN DOUBTS AND ACQUIESCES ("DO WHAT YOU WILL" AKA "THY WILL BE DONE") IN HIS OWN GETHSEMANE EPIPHANY.



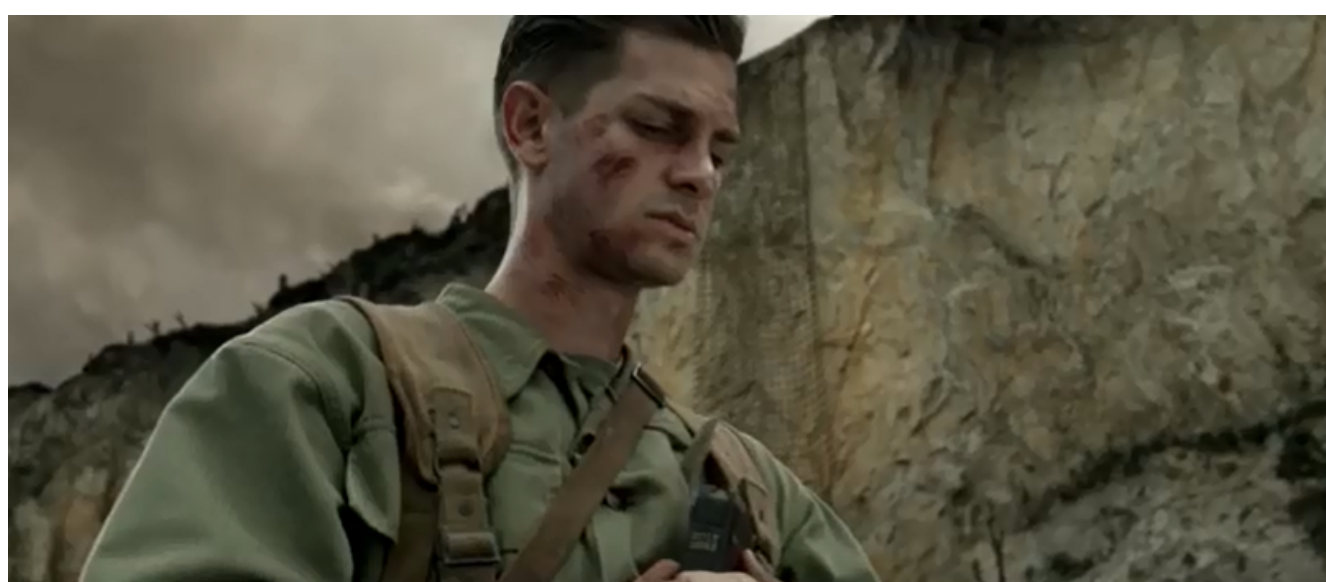
THREE FINAL MOMENTS OF ALMOST HOPELESS CRISES BRING RESCUE AND REDEMPTION TO CHARACTERS. GEORGE BAILEY (JIMMY STEWART) IN THE PRAYER-FILLED *'IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE'* (FRANK CAPRA, 1946), SITS IN A BAR AND GROANS, "SHOW ME THE WAY." HERE, A SUICIDAL MAN AT THE END OF HIS ROPE, DOESN'T KNOW WHERE ELSE TO TURN. AS JODIE BERNDT OBSERVED, "HOW MANY OF US HAVE PRAYED THE SAME THING?" *'BEN HUR'* (WILLIAM WYLER, 1959) PUTS THE PROTAGONIST IN A DESPERATE MOMENT OF THIRST AND DEPRAVATION, BARELY Eeking OUT THE WORDS, "HELP ME, GOD," WHEN JESUS HIMSELF COMES TO GIVE HIM A CUP OF LIVING WATER. AND THE RESCUER OF SO MANY RUNAWAY SLAVES, *'HARRIET'* (KASI LEMMONS, 2019), UP TO HER NECK IN A PRECARIOUS SITUATION, LOOKS TO GOD FOR "LIVING WATER TO FLOW THROUGH ME. HELP ME CROSS. LEAD ME THROUGH."



...AND PASS THE AMMUNITION:

THE APHORISM THAT "THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS IN FOXHOLES" INFORMS MANY WAR FILMS. IN *'1917'* (SAM MENDES, 2019), A SOLDIER BESTOWS A QUICK BLESSING UPON TWO COMRADES ON A SUICIDAL MISSION. IN *'THE FIGHTING 69TH,'* CHAPLAIN DUFFY PRAYS FOR A DYING JEWISH SOLDIER. SO TOO IN *'GLORY'* (EDWARD ZWICK, 1989), *'A BRIDGE TOO FAR'* (RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH, 1977), AND *'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN'* (STEVEN SPIELBERG, 1998), PRAYERS MIX WITH BLOOD AND DEATH.

HOWEVER, WHERE MOST OF THESE FILMS CENTER ON BEING RESCUED OR BEING VICTORIOUS OVER ONE'S ENEMIES, *'HAWKSAW RIDGE'* (MEL GIBSON, 2016), HONORS AN ACTUAL HERO, DESMOND DOSS (ANDREW GARFIELD) WHO SOUGHT TO SAVE OTHERS. "LORD, HELP ME GET ONE MORE."



QUESTIONS:

- HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED SEASONS OF ACTUAL OR SPIRITUAL BATTLE IN WHICH YOUR PRAYERS CRY OUT DESPERATELY?
- HOW HAVE TIMES OF DANGER, SUFFERING, DEATH, AND DEPRESSION SHAPED YOUR PRAYERS?
- DO YOU SEEK OTHERS TO PRAY WITH OR CHOOSE TO PRAY ALONE?

CHAPTER NINE: TRANSCENDENCE

MANY CRITICS AND CLERGY VIEW *'THE TREE OF LIFE'* (TERRENCE MALICK, 2011) AS A RARE FORM OF A CINEMATIC PRAYER. THE QUIET VOICE OVER OF YOUNG JACK (HUNTER MCCrackEN) CONFESSES TO GOD AND QUESTIONS GOD. SEEING A MAN ARRESTED, HE WONDERS "CAN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO ANYONE?" WHEN A FIRE BURNS A HOUSE AND A YOUNG BOY'S SCALP, YOUNG JACK MEDITATES ON WHY A BOY WOULD DIE OR "WHERE WERE YOU?" THROUGHOUT ALL OF CREATION, THE INQUIRIES OF A YOUNG JOB MOVE THE VIEWER INTO THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE. VOICE PRAYERS INFORM THE NARRATION OF THE FILM, OF PEOPLE PONDERING, WONDERING, CHALLENGING IMAGES OF JUSTICE AND GRACE IN THE WORLD. THE PRAYERS OF A BOY FLOW FROM ACCUSATIONS TO WONDERMENT, EVEN IN HIS PLAYTIME. "ARE YOU WATCHING ME? I WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU ARE. I WANT TO SEE WHAT YOU SEE."



ANGLICAN GEORGE HERBERT'S POEM CALLED "PRAYER" CELEBRATES "THE CHURCH'S BANQUET, ANGELS' AGE, / GOD'S BREATH IN MAN RETURNING TO HIS BIRTH, / THE SOUL IN PARAPHRASE, HEART IN PILGRIMAGE." AS IT PUTS LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE, MALICK'S FILM COMES AS CLOSE TO THE POEM AS A PRAYER AS ANY FILM EVER MADE.

THESE FILMS WORK IN AT LEAST TWO WAYS, AS WINDOWS AND MIRRORS. AS A WINDOW WE CAN EAVESDROP ON OTHER, WATCH THEM EXPOSE THEMSELVES FROM BEHIND A SAFE DISTANCE. AS A MIRROR, WE SEE OUR OWN PUNY PRAYERS AND OUR DESPERATE PLEAS AND EXCLAMATIONS OF THANKSGIVING. CINEMATIC PRAYERS TELL US THE STORIES OF OTHERS AND OF OURSELVES.

QUESTIONS:

- HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO "BREATHE" PRAYERS, THAT IS, WHISPER TO GOD DURING THE DAY OF ISSUES THAT REALLY BOTHER OR INTRIGUE YOU?
- CAN YOU PRACTICE PRAYERS WHILE WASHING DISHES, DRIVING THE CAR, WALKING PAST TREES, OR SITTING QUIETLY IN A ROOM?
- HAVE YOU EVER SENSED THE HOLY SPIRIT LIFTING YOU INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD, QUIETLY TRANSCENDING YOUR ORDINARY LIVING WITHOUT LEAVING IT?

THE LORD'S PRAYER

SOME THINK ROTE PRAYERS LACK SINCERITY. HOWEVER, AS DAVID DEAVEL OBSERVED, "EXTEMPORANEOUS PRAYER IS ALSO SUBJECT TO WHAT THE THEOLOGIANS OUGHT TO CALL SPIRITUALLY 'PHONING IT IN.' EXTEMPORANEOUS PRAYER IS AS EASY TO DO AS RECITING ROTE PRAYERS. FOR, AS ANYONE WHO'S ACTUALLY LISTENED TO EXTEMPORANEOUS PRAYER KNOWS, MOST PEOPLE WHO PRAY EXTEMPORANEOUSLY SIMPLY CREATE A PATCHWORK OF BIBLICAL AND PIOUS PHRASES STRUNG TOGETHER WITH SOME CONNECTING WORDS." ONE LEARNS TO PRAY BEST BY ATTENDING TO THE SCRIPTURES AND CHURCH TRADITION, ESPECIALLY THE MOST FAMILIAR AND ECUMENICAL ONE, THE PRAYER KNOWN AS THE LORD'S PRAYER TO PROTESTANTS AND THE OUR FATHER TO CATHOLICS.

THE PRAYER THE LORD GAVE HIS DISCIPLES ENCOMPASSES ACTS OF ADORATION, CONFESSION, THANKSGIVING, AND SUPPLICATION. AFTER JESUS HAD PRAYED, THE DISCIPLES ASK HIM TO TEACH THEM TO PRAY. THERE ARE TWO VERSIONS (THE MORE HEBRAIC MATTHEW AND THE SHORTER LUKE); ROMAN CATHOLICS KNOW IT AS THE PATER NOSTER (OR ORATIO DOMINICA IN LATIN). ITS USE CROSSES ALL GENRES: WESTERNS, SATIRES, WAR, HORROR, COMEDIES, SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND DRAMATIC FILMS. ITS BREADTH OF CONCERNS - FROM CONFESSION TO PETITION TO ADORATION - OPENS UP NUMEROUS POSSIBILITIES FOR CHARACTERS.

THE LORD'S PRAYER ADDRESSES ALL ESSENTIAL NEEDS AND CONCERNS. ST. AUGUSTINE INSTRUCTED US RECOGNIZING THAT "WHATEVER BE THE OTHER WORDS WE MAY PREFER TO SAY, WE SAY NOTHING THAT IS NOT CONTAINED IN THE LORD'S PRAYER, PROVIDED, OF COURSE, WE ARE PRAYING IN A CORRECT AND PROPER WAY. BUT IF ANYONE SAYS SOMETHING WHICH IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH THIS PRAYER OF THE GOSPEL, HE IS PRAYING IN THE FLESH, EVEN IF HE IS NOT PRAYING SINFULLY." IT IS THE MODEL FOR HOW WE ARE TO PRAY.

FOR MANY, ONE RECITES IT BY ROTE, WITHOUT THINKING, ALMOST ON AN AUTOMATIC PILOT. ON THE OTHER HAND, IT CAN OVERWHELM THE ONE WHO SEEKS GOD, FINDING DEPTHS OF WISDOM, GUIDANCE, ABSOLUTION, AND COMMUNITY IN IT. IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS, IT CAN EVEN SURPRISE BY ITS POWER OR PERSONAL RELEVANCE. SOME FILMS LIKE 'I HEART HUCKABEES' (DAVID O. RUSSELL, 2004) CYNICALLY CAPTURE ITS FORMULA BEREFT OF RELATIONSHIP. BUT OTHERS, LIKE 'JOHNNY BELINDA' (JEAN NEGULESCO, 1948), CREATE A POIGNANT SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN SORROW AND SUGGESTING SEVERAL OF THE MOST PROFOUND HOPES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. IT REMAINS THE PRAYER OF PRAYERS, *THE SUI GENERIS*, NOT ONLY THE MOST MEMORIZED PRAYER, BUT THE SCHOOL FOR TEACHING ONE HOW TO PRAY.

THE FILM MONTAGE BEGINS WITH 'LOGAN' (JAMES MANGOLD, 2017), WHERE PROFESSOR X (PATRICK STEWART) WATCHES A CLIP FROM GEORGE STEVENS' 1953 MOVIE 'SHANE' (GEORGE STEVENS, 1953) ON TV. IT SHOWS A GROUP OF BELEAGUERED FARMERS TAKING OFF THEIR HATS AND BEGIN, "OUR" FATHER, WITH ITS EMPHASIS ON A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS, RATHER THAN AN INDIVIDUAL.



'THE FIGHTING 69TH' (WILLIAM KEIGHLEY, 1940) TAKES THE PRAYER TO ONE BATTLEFIELD, AS 'APOCALYPSE NOW' (FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA, 1979) LEADS US INTO VIETNAM. VARIOUS CLIPS UNITE WITH EACH EXPRESSING A PARTICULAR PHRASE, WITH FROM THE LOCKER ROOM IN 'FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS' (PETER BERG, 2004), "FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO HAVE SINNED AGAINST US" IN 'JOHNNY BELINDA' AS THE MUTE (JANE WYMAN) POIGNANTLY SIGNS OVER HER MURDERED FATHER.



THE PRAYER CONTINUES AS THE ADULTEROUS DEACON (LIONEL BARRYMORE) PRAYING WITH THE HOOKER (GLORIA SWANSON IN 'SADIE THOMPSON,' 1928 AND JOAN CRAWFORD IN LEWIS MILESTONE'S 'RAIN,' 1932) NOT TO BE LED INTO TEMPTATION.



EVEN THE MARVEL UNIVERSE RELEASES CRIES TO BE DELIVERED FROM EVIL IN 'SPIDERMAN' (SAM RAIMI, 2002) AS IT SHOUTS IN 'THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE' (SCOTT DERRICKSON, 2005). THE CRIES OF THE HEART END WITH A FINAL DOXOLOGY OF OBEDIENCE AND PEACE FROM 'MASTER AND COMMANDER' (PETER WEIR, 2003).



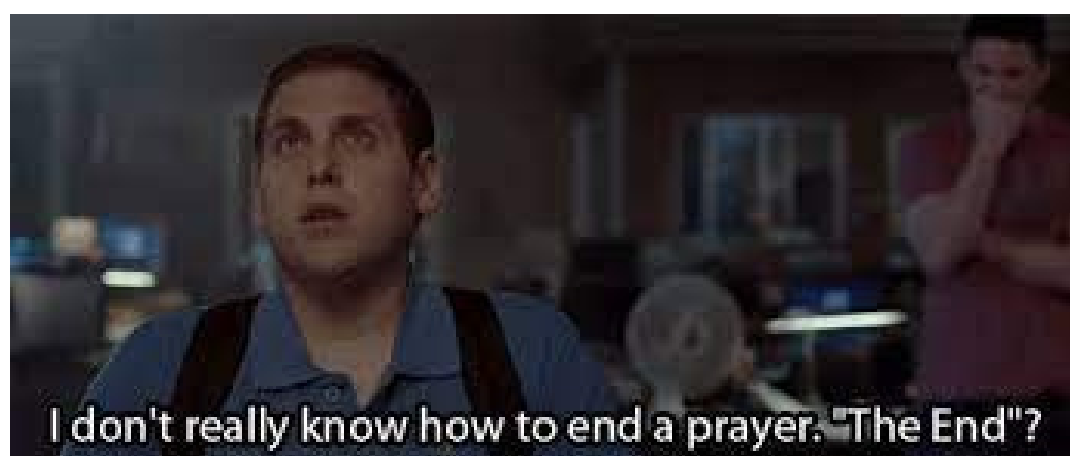
CHAPTER TEN: CREDITS

WHO WOULD KNOW THAT DONALD DUCK, BUGS BUNNY, AND THE TASMANIAN DEVIL PRAYED? FUNERAL EULOGIES ('CITY SLICKERS,' RON UNDERWOOD, 1991) AND BEDTIME PRAYERS ('SOUND OF MUSIC,' ROBERT WISE, 1965) POP UP ALONGSIDE SAYING GRACE ('THE YEARLING,' CLARENCE BROWN, 1946). AND TO TOP IT OFF, TOM HANKS, LOST AT SEA, PRAYS WITH PRAISE, THANKSGIVING AND ADORATION ("DEAR GOD, WHOSE NAME I DO NOT KNOW—THANK YOU FOR MY LIFE. I FORGOT HOW BIG... THANK YOU. THANK YOU FOR MY LIFE.") IN 'JOE AND THE VOLCANO' (JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY, 1990) WHILE JACK BLACK PRAYS TO MELT FACES IN 'SCHOOL OF ROCK' (RICHARD LINKLATER, 2003).



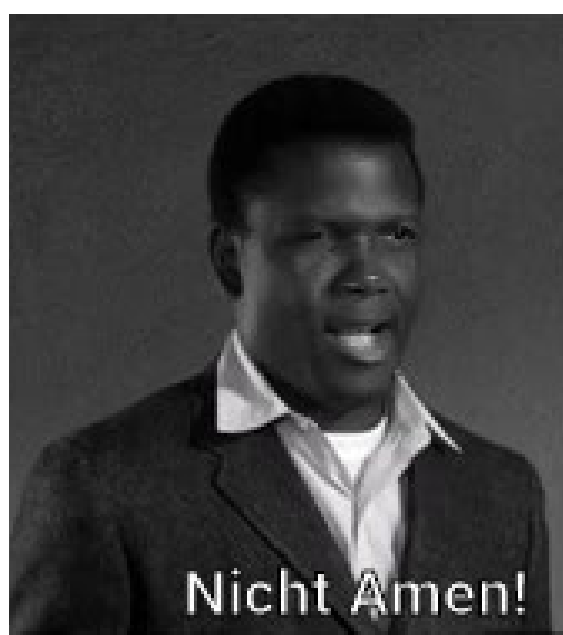
SO MANY FAVORITE PRAYERS IN MOVIES CROWD IN, BUT WERE LEFT ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: 'HELL'S HINGES' (CHARLES SWICKARD, 1916); 'KEY LARGO' (JOHN HUSTON, 1948); 'THE GREAT SINNER' (ROBERT SIODMARK, 1949); 'SHENANDOAH' (ANDREW V. MCLAGLEN, 1965); 'EASY RIDER' (DENNIS HOPPER, 1969); 'PATTON' (FRANKLIN SCHAFFNER, 1969); 'M*A*S*H*' (ROBERT ALTMAN, 1970); 'NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET' (WES CRAVEN, 1984); 'GROUNDHOG DAY' (HAROLD RAMIS, 1993); 'HOME ALONE' (CHRIS COLUMBUS, 1990); 'BABY BOY' (JOHN SINGLETON, 2001); 'DESPICABLE ME 2' (PIERRE COFFIN, CHRIS RENAUD, 2013); THE COMIC APOCALYPTIC 'DON'T LOOK UP' (ADAM MCKAY, 2021); AND WES ANDERSON'S 'ASTEROID CITY' (2023).

AND JUST WHEN YOU THINK IT IS ALL OVER, JONAH HILL, IN '21 JUMP STREET' (PHIL LORD AND CHRISTOPHER MILLER, 2012), ASKS "HOW DO YOU END A PRAYER? DO YOU JUST SAY 'THE END?'" GARY OLDMAN FROM 'THE BOOK OF ELI' (ALBERT HUGHES, ALLEN HUGHES, 2010) RESPONDS, "THE WORD YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IS 'AMEN.'"



FOR THE CHRISTIAN, THE "AMEN" MEANS "SO BE IT," OR ACKNOWLEDGING "THY WILL BE DONE." HOWEVER, WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IS PAUL'S ADMONITION TO "PRAY UNCEASINGLY." IN OTHER WORDS, OUR PRAYERS NEVER END.

THEY PAUSE, BUT DO NOT END. THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES THROUGHOUT ETERNITY.



AMEN.

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