

Reel Faith Sermon Series  
“Contact” – Psalm 8  
June 2, 2019  
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I have shared with you all before that in a previous life, I was a movie reviewer for the Louisville Courier-Journal. Each Friday afternoon I would see a newly released movie and give it my critique, which would appear in the Saturday paper. I saw lots of movies during that time, but nothing worse than the first movie I ever reviewed, “Weekend at Bernie’s II.” If you’ve never seen of it, consider yourself lucky.

My love of movies started at an early age and continues to grow. I love how movies can transport us to different worlds, can stir up within us deep emotions, can make us laugh or cry or, in the case of “Weekend at Bernie’s II,” ask for our money back. We can be saddened or inspired or convicted. Our hearts race during action scenes or break at unrequited love or jump at the sight of monsters. Thanks to movies, for a couple of hours, we can escape the burdens of our lives and find sanctuary in the theater, where the only limit is our imagination.

Once I went into ministry, I started looking at movies as more than pieces of entertainment to be critiqued. I started seeing the spiritual themes that were present in them, sometimes overt, sometimes as subtext. That was the inspiration for our summer sermon series, called “Reel Faith.” We’ll be looking at some movies that were popular when they came out – “Weekend at Bernie’s II” is NOT on the list – but that you may not have considered from a spiritual perspective, movies like “Field of Dreams,” “Dead Man Walking,” and “The Shawshank Redemption.” My hope is to introduce you to a new way of seeing how God speaks to us through the medium of popular culture.

Our first movie is “Contact,” which came out in 1997. “Contact” tells the story of Dr. Ellie Arroway, an astronomer who is obsessed with finding proof of intelligent life beyond our planet. She discovers a pulsing signal originating from the star Vega that contains instructions for building a machine that will transport someone from earth to Vega and back. The government gets involved and everything goes smoothly...kidding! Things get intricately more complicated as Ellie faces roadblocks in getting the machine built. But she is motivated because she desperately needs proof that there’s more in the universe than just us humans. As her father once told her, “If it’s only us in the universe, that’s a lot of wasted space.”

It’s important to note that this movie is based on a book written by Carl Sagan, the world-renowned astronomer and self-proclaimed agnostic. Sagan had no place in his worldview for traditional religion and popular notions of God, but he had a deep appreciation for the unresolvable mysteries of the universe. Ellie mirrors Sagan’s skepticism. She claims to be an atheist because she can’t find any empirical evidence for the existence of God. When she was young, she was sent home from Sunday School because she asked too many questions, and when her father dies while she’s still young, the pastor’s explanation – “It’s God’s will” – leaves her cold. At one point, she asks, “What’s more likely? That an all-powerful, mysterious God created the universe and decided not to give any proof of his existence? Or that He simply doesn’t exist at all and that we created Him so that we wouldn’t have to feel so small and alone?”

The movie sets up the tense conflict between science and faith. Ellie is the science, and Palmer Joss, played by a dreamy Matthew McConaughey, is the faith. Palmer is a renegade priest who questions the advances of science’s impact on our morality. He asks Ellie, “Is the world a fundamentally better place because of science and technology? We shop at home, surf

the Web...at the same time, we feel emptier, lonelier, and more cut off from each other than at any other time in human history.” Remember, this came out in 1997. Are things any better 22 years later? Palmer also challenges Ellie’s assertion that God is fictitious. He counters Ellie’s theory about the lack of proof for God’s existence by asking her, “Did you love your dad?” She says of course she did, and he says, “Prove it.” Not everything in our world has to be proven to be real.

Ellie eventually gets to make the once-in-a-lifetime journey into outer space. She’s transported to Vega, where she meets an alien who’s taken the form of her father so that she would feel comfortable. It’s during this journey that Ellie starts to undergo a transformation. While she’s being transported through this celestial tunnel, she says, “This is some kind of celestial event. There are no words to describe it. Poetry! They should have sent a poet. So beautiful, I had no idea.”

When Ellie returns from her fantastic voyage, she learns that what took her 18 hours only lasted less than a second on earth. In other words, the powers that be seriously doubt that she went anywhere and accuse her of making up her story about going to Vega in order to justify the money spent on the project. The pivotal moment of the movie takes place during a congressional hearing, where Ellie is being grilled by about her supernatural assertions. Here’s how the dialogue does:

A panel member asks, “Doctor Arroway, you come to us with no evidence, no record, no artifacts. Only a story that to put it mildly strains credibility. Over half a trillion dollars was spent, dozens of lives were lost. Are you really going to sit there and tell us we should just take this all... on faith?”

She responds, “Is it possible that it didn't happen? Yes. As a scientist, I must concede that, I must volunteer that.”

The panel member says, “Wait a minute, let me get this straight. You admit that you have absolutely no physical evidence to back up your story. You admit that you very well may have hallucinated this whole thing. You admit that if you were in our position, you would respond with exactly the same degree of incredulity and skepticism!”

Ellie answers angrily, “Yes!”

The man says, “Then why don't you simply withdraw your testimony, and concede that this ‘journey to the center of the galaxy,’ in fact, never took place!”

Now, listen to Ellie’s response: “Because I can't. I had an experience. I can't prove it, I can't even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real! I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever, a vision of the universe, that tells us, undeniably, how tiny, and insignificant and how rare and precious we all are! A vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, that none of us are alone! I wish I could share that. I wish, that everyone, if only for one moment, could feel that awe, and humility, and hope.”

Isn't that beautiful? “A vision of the universe that tells us, undeniably, how tiny and insignificant and how rare and precious we are!” The psalmist writes, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” We are tiny and insignificant and rare and precious.

Those are all things that science can't tell us. There's a humility that should come with being human, a recognition that, even with all the technology we have out our fingertips, there's

a place where what we can know ends. Beyond that point is what we call “faith.” It’s the place for poets, not scientists. Ellie was so dead-set against the idea of God because there was no proof anyone could show her, and yet she comes to learn that God is nothing something to be proven but someone to be experienced. Not everything in our world has to be proven to be real.

We’re smart and productive people and that can sometimes get in the way of our faith. Our desire for proof of God’s existence, God’s forgiveness, God’s love, can be the blinders that keep us from seeing the poetry of God’s work around us. Our tendency to put ourselves at the center of the universe can cause us to lose perspective on how tiny and insignificant and rare and precious we are.

Science is not the enemy of faith; it’s simply one expression of how God works. Doesn’t matter whether its creationism or evolution or the Big Bang Theory or intelligent design. It’s all the work of God’s fingers. It doesn’t prove God’s existence any more than we can prove our love for one another, but that doesn’t mean God is not real.

I think more of us are Ellie than we care to admit. We question God’s existence, we ask for proof, we search for something that will calm our doubts and definitely show us God is real. And in the meantime, we miss all the moments around us when God breaks through and lets us experience God’s presence with us. Reading a book with a child. Telling a story during Worship and Wonder. Visiting a friend in the hospital. Walking in the Arboretum. Is this world, are our lives, just all wasted space? Or is there more to it, more than we can understand?

So what happens to Ellie Arroway? Does she instantly become a believer in God? Not that we know of. But she does become more open to the idea that there are things in this world that can’t be explained, that extend beyond science’s reach, that have to be taken on faith. I don’t know that any of us will ever reach the place in our lives where we can show without a doubt that God exists. All we can do is point to divine experiences we’ve had, moments when Heaven touched earth and we glimpsed God’s glory, and say, “I can’t prove it, I can’t even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real.”