

FAITH AND FILM: II – “E.T.: THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Romans 8:31-38

John 14:15-27

Today’s lesson from John is part of what is called “the Farewell Discourse of Jesus.” It is an account of a conversation Jesus had with his disciples just before he would go to his death on the cross. He knew it was coming, they knew it was coming, and it was an incredibly sad time for them all.

So in this passage Jesus is saying goodbye to these dear friends, his disciples. It would be hard to overestimate how profoundly sad this was for them. Think about it. Just three years earlier, he had come into their lives and called them out of those lives into a new adventure. They had left everything familiar and walked into an uncertain future with this man, and he had absolutely, positively changed each and every one of their lives.

They had watched him do amazing things, and done some pretty amazing things themselves because of him. He had changed their way of looking at life, of what was truly important, of how to live and give and forgive, of how to treat their enemies and their friends. Every day when they got up it was a new adventure, a time of discovering what real love looks like.

And now, he says he’s leaving, and they’re heartbroken, not to mention scared, uncertain and in pain.

And he says this to them: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid. I will be with you.”

You know, when I was thinking about this moment in their lives and also praying about what film clip to use today, the answer came to me pretty quickly. It’s a scene from the movie ET: The Extra Terrestrial. I’m sure many, if not most of you have seen this movie directed by Steven Spielberg which came out in the early 1980’s.

Let me remind you a little bit about it. A vessel lands on the earth from outer space, and when it leaves again, it leaves behind this little being, this extra-terrestrial, ET. He is discovered by a little boy by the name of Elliot, and the movie is about their relationship, and how they struggle to and finally manage to communicate with each other. Well, suffice it to say it became a very special relationship and Elliot and his family would have liked ET to stay with them

forever, but it was not to be. He had to return to his home, and in this final, heartbreaking scene, they say goodbye to one another. (You might want to get out a Kleenex!)

Film clip showing the closing scene to ET: The Extraterrestrial.

Well, I don't know about you but I think that's a pretty good reflection of today's Gospel lesson – the pain, the sorrow and the reassurance.

I could see the disciples and Jesus, like Elliot and ET, saying “Ouch!” because they were hurting over their impending separation. They dearly loved each other, and they would miss seeing each other face to face every day, and they were heartbroken. “Ouch!”

I daresay that there's not a one of us here today who hasn't said “Ouch!” this week because of everything that's transpired since we were here one week ago. On Sunday night, actually early Monday morning, I woke up around 3 am as I am wont to do, couldn't sleep, and turned on the television. Scrolling across the bottom of the screen were these words: “2 Dead, 50 wounded in Las Vegas shooting.” It didn't take very long for those numbers to start going up and up and up, and for all of us to be sickened by the horrible act of violence that struck that night.

It's hard to wrap your mind around something so horrible and senseless. We are a nation in pain. “Ouch!” to the core. And put that on top of the hurricanes that struck so viciously and wiped out so many and so much. Add to that the current state of affairs in our world with war and threats of war, and in our nation, with rampant drug problems and equally rampant division among so many – and well, we're in pain. “Ouch!”

At times, it's overwhelming. I had lunch with a bunch of clergy friends on Monday and we all looked at each other and saw the toll of sadness on each other's faces. But, my dear friends, we have gathered here today in spite of that, no probably because of that, to remind ourselves that “ouch” is never the final word, evil is never the final word. Think back to Jesus' words to his disciples – not to “I am leaving” but “I will be with you.” Not to the pain, but to the reassurance of his never-ending presence with them and us.

Those are the words we need to dwell on in these trying days. “I am with you,” or as ET said to Elliot, “I will be right here.” That's how we get through times like these, to remember that we are never alone, that the Lord is with us, always and forever, and will carry us through whatever life brings our way. Did you hear it in the passage from Romans? What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or

peril, or sword? No! We are more than conquerors through him who loved us!” We are more than conquerors because he is with us, right here, always.

The writer James Moore, in a beautiful sermon entitled “Celebrating God’s Greatest Promise,” suggests that we see God in our midst most vividly in three ways. First, here in this place, in the church, in worship with each other. Oh, he’s so right. We feel God with us as we hug and kiss one another and greet each other before worship. We feel God with us in the beautiful hymns we lift up together, the prayers we pour forth together, the words of scripture which speak to us, the beautiful music offered, like this morning’s Pie Jesu. In those and so many other ways, we see evidence that the Lord is here, right here, by our side. And I don’t know about you, but I hope, like me, you do feel his presence in some way every week through worship.

Moore says that another way we know God is here with us is when we’re serving others. As a matter of fact, he writes this: “Christians will tell you that they never feel a greater consciousness of the Lord’s presence than when they are serving him by sharing their faith and love with others.” (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture Is on It*, “Celebrating God’s Greatest Promise,” p. 75ff.) I’ll bet anybody who has served on one of our mission teams could tell you how true that is. Or better yet, you can experience it yourself in the next few weeks in any number of ways. Give some blood next week and know you’re helping to save a life, and you’ll feel God right there with you. Or run or walk in the 5K and know that you’re helping to work toward that day when the scourge of dementia and Alzheimer’s can be wiped away. Or today, take home a grocery bag, and when you fill it up, knowing that you’re going to help fill a hungry belly, you’ll sense God with you and feel his love touching your heart.

You know, Mr. Rogers, when he was despairing to his mother about awful things happening in life, remembers her telling him to “Look for the helpers.” She said look for the helpers in bad situations, for they will remind you of the good in the world – and I would add, they will remind you of God in the world. Surely we saw that happen in abundance in Las Vegas, when so many did so much to help save others’ lives.

Finally, James Moore says, the living God can be seen in your life when you’re in pain. He put it so beautifully – “At first glance, it seems like it would be so easy to find Christ in the beautiful, sacred, lovely places of life, or in those situations where all the breaks are going our way. But the truth is that the risen Lord is never nearer to us than when we are hurting. Time after time, I have heard people say it. ‘This is the hardest thing we’ve ever gone through, our hearts are broken, but we will be all right because God is with us as never before.’”

He concludes: “When we are hurting, we are more open to him. We are more willing and anxious and ready for him to come and help us, and second, God is like a loving parent, and all good, loving parents want to be with their children when they are hurting. When our children are suffering, everything else goes on the back burner.” (Ibid)

Friends, in this time of pain, our hearts are broken, but we will be all right because God is with us. So I want to go back for a moment to that wonderful children’s book that we heard a little while ago – and that beautiful image of the mother kissing her child’s hand and it serving to him as a reminder of her never-ending, always-present love. I think that’s a beautiful image for all of us to think about today, and so I’d like us to do just that, and I would like to invite you all to do me a favor and just close your eyes right now.

Now, put your hands in your lap, and open up your left hand with your palm up – open it like a fan, like it said in the book.

Now, with your eyes closed and your mind quiet, picture Jesus leaning over the kissing the palm of your hand with tender love.

Now, with your eyes still closed, bring your hand up and place it on your cheek and repeat to yourself in silence again and again, “Jesus loves me! Jesus loves me! Jesus loves me!”

May that image stay with you as you leave this place today, and whenever you feel alone and “ouch!” is the only word you can say, put your hand on your cheek and remember he is with you always, and it’s going to be okay. May it be so.

Amen.