

FAITH AND FILM: III – “LA LA LAND”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 139:13-18

Mark 14:66-72

The big hit movie of 2016 was called “La La Land.” I thought it was a great movie and loved the music so much that I bought the soundtrack. But I discovered something after talking with people about it – you either loved the movie, or hated it. There was no really in between. It was in the style of a classic old Hollywood musical, where the stars would break into song, and there were great dance scenes and such.

The movie starred Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling, among others. Emma played Mia, an aspiring actress who moved from her hometown to Hollywood, to try to break into movies. Ryan Gosling played Sebastian, a jazz pianist also in Hollywood seeking fame and fortune.

The movie is about their relationship, but more importantly about each of their struggles to try to make it big, to break into the big time. And, as you might expect, it wasn’t easy – never is.

Audition after audition, Mia gives it her all. She tries and tries and tries until one day she can’t try anymore. She is discouraged, she can’t see anything happening, so she packs up and moves back home – determined to give up what now she sees was her pipe dream, and get back in touch with reality – go to school, take some courses and figure out what to do with her life now that her dream is dead.

So the scene we’re about to see between Mia and Sebastian takes place in front of her family home. Sebastian has traveled from Hollywood to give Mia some news. So take a look . . .

(Film clip where Sebastian tells Mia a movie executive wants to see her for a possible role in a movie, and Mia, afraid of getting hurt yet again, says no.)

Mia is worn out. She’s tried and tried and tried for six long years, and she’s decided she doesn’t want to try any longer. Nothing’s going her way. She’s doubting herself and her abilities. She’s done. She’s hit a dead end and doesn’t want to keep going.

You know, her story is not unlike Peter's in the Gospel lesson this morning. Peter's had a long journey as well, and it's taken a bad turn – a really, really bad turn. Unlike Mia, Peter has pretty much caused his own hopeless, dead-end situation when he denied knowing Jesus, and let him down when he needed him the most. Nevertheless, they're both at a bad place in their lives, where they are worn-out and don't want to go on.

Sadly, I suspect that there are a lot of people who have been where they are, maybe even some of you here today have been where they are. You're worn out. Life hasn't turned out the way you thought it would and sometimes you feel like giving up.

Maybe, for you, like Mia, the plan you thought you had for your future isn't happening. You're not where you thought you would be at this point in your life and no matter how hard you try, it's not happening. And maybe, like Mia, you have started to doubt yourself, thinking like her, "Maybe I'm not good enough."

Or maybe you're like Peter, struggling because of something you've done, some sin you've committed. Maybe you're overwhelmed by the feeling you have of guilt.

Friends, the pictures we have today from both the film and the scripture are in reality a look at part of what it means to be human – and that is, that sometimes things go wrong, don't go as we wanted them to, and it takes a toll on us.

So what are we to do when that happens? Are we to forever doubt ourselves? Are we to blame everybody and everything and the unfairness of it all for not getting what we wanted? Are we to let the struggles of life defeat us? Are we to give up and just say forget it – it's not worth it? Truth be told, we could do any and all of those things, but as people of faith, we have the opportunity to do otherwise, so let me lift up a few ideas this morning.

First, remember who you are. Don't let the sadness, sorrows and struggles of life define you. Don't let them make you ask that question Mia asked, "Am I good enough?" Remember who you are. You are a child of God, a beloved child of God. Created just as you are by God himself. You are unique, one of a kind. As it said in today's Psalm, "you were fearfully and wonderfully made" by God. Remember that and believe it.

You could see by Mia's situation how easy it is for us to forget that, because the world tries to define us. The world tries to tell us we're not talented enough, or good looking enough, or whatever enough. Don't listen! Remember who you are – a beloved, precious child of God.

Secondly, remember that your story is not over yet. You are a work in progress. Your life is a work in progress, and God is in the middle of it all. Sadness, sorrow, struggles will never have the final word, so don't give up.

You didn't see what went on in the movie after this clip, but at 8:00 the next morning when Sebastian showed up, Mia got in his car, went back to Hollywood, did the audition, got the part and went on to have a stellar career in acting. Her dreams came true.

We know how Peter's story went on. Even after his shameful behavior when Jesus needed him the most, even after he never thought he'd be able to show his face again, or lift his head because of his shame, his life went on as well, and we know how incredibly well it turned out. Because not long after Jesus rose from death, he came to Peter and offered him new life.

If you remember that wonderful moment when, on the lakeshore, he asked Peter, "Do you love me?" not once, not twice, but three times – giving him the chance to confess his faith in Jesus as many times as he had denied him. And then he sent him off on a new mission to form the early church. And because Peter did, because he lifted his head, left behind his guilt and went on into a new future he could have hardly imagined possible, we are sitting here today in church.

The story of our lives always goes on, and God is in the midst of it. So do not despair, if right now things are not going well for you – the story's not over! The last chapter hasn't been written. All things are possible.

I read a blog post this week by a woman named Rachel Wojo entitled "When You Feel Like Giving Up," in which she shared some of her struggles. Her mother had died from cancer, she was going through a divorce, and now, her daughter was diagnosed with a terminal illness. It was overwhelming, too, too much for her.

She was a faithful person, and she says she cried, she prayed, she poured out her heart to God. She really, really needed to know in her soul that God was not just near, but would get her through everything that was facing her. One day, she was reading the Psalms and read this phrase in Psalm 18, "You gave a wide place for my steps under me and my feet did not slip."

All of a sudden she thought, "That's it! That's what I need to remember! When I feel like giving up, I don't have to comprehend the entire journey. I only need enough strength to take one more step." And so, she wrote, "Finally, I moved my dangling feet from the bedside and placed them solidly on the ground, knowing his power would carry me through whatever came my way." (On-line, Rachel Wojo, Proverbs 31 Ministries, "When You Feel Like Giving Up," 10/30/15)

We would be wise to take a lesson from Rachel, and not try to comprehend the whole journey, but just take one step at a time, knowing the stories not over, and trusting God to make a way.

Who knows how God will make that happen? For Mia, the first step was her friend Sebastian coming to her side, inviting her to try again, and being there with her. For Peter, the first step was the risen Jesus coming to him as he fished, offering him a new opportunity to serve him.

There's a man I read about this week who came to a church service and was in a very bad way. His life was filled with problems and he had nowhere to turn. In the midst of this prayer service, he blurted out, "I give up. I give up. I can't take it anymore." Well, it made a lot of people around him uncomfortable, except for one young boy, who came up to him and said, "Sir, I know what's wrong."

"What?" the man replied, "how would you know what's wrong with me? You're just a child. You can't even begin to know what's wrong."

"Sir," the boy said. "You said, 'I give up.'"

"Yes, so?"

"Well, my mom said that I should never give up. Whenever I feel like I want to give up, I just need to look up. God's hand will be there to lift me up."

The man's head fell back into his hands and he began to cry again. The young boy never left his side. Slowly the man lifted his head to find the young boy still standing there with his hands stretched out toward him. The man reached out and took them, and as he did, he looked up and said, "Thank you, dear God, you do love me!"

And then he looked back at the little boy and said, "In my frustration I have been angry with God. I thought he never heard my prayers. All morning I prayed to him with no results. Finally, I asked God for a sign. I told him that I couldn't handle the weight of all my burdens. I begged him to give me a hand." Then, taking a breath, he said, "I never expected them to be so small. He sent me yours." (On-line, Bob Perks@BobPerks.com)

Friends, when the storms of life are raging, and things are not going well, don't give up, because God is with you and you'll never know how or through whom he'll make a way for you – but, trust me, he will.

As with that man who was struggling, God will always give us a hand, and make a way through anything life brings.

In a moment, we are going to stand and sing together, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” As we sing, the chancel rail is open for prayer. If you’re struggling right now, if life is hard, or if you know someone else who is struggling and for whom life is hard and want to pray for them, please come and do so. Remember, the story’s not over, the final chapter hasn’t been written, and God will make a way, and all will yet be well. Believe it, trust it and go forth from this place strengthened by knowing it. May it be so.

Amen.