

A Reel Epiphany

1) “Unbroken”

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January 15, 2017

Today marks the beginning of a new six-week sermon series entitled “A Reel Epiphany: Finding God in the Movies” In this series Pastor Ron and I will be looking searching out divine wisdom in some our favorite films.

We are very excited about this series and hope that you will enjoy it as much as we have enjoyed planning it.

I do have to warn you that there will be spoilers about the various plots of the movies during this series so one of the best things you can do is watch these films ahead of time so then we aren’t ruining anything for you.

We have handed out flyers with our film selections for the last few weeks and we will make sure to publish the rest of the films for you on our website as well so you can know what to watch ahead of time.

We are kicking off things this morning with a very powerful movie...especially considering that it is based on a true story... “Unbroken.”

The film “Unbroken” premiered in 2014 and chronicles the life of Louie Zamperini.

Growing up in Torrance, California Louie was picked on for his Italian-American heritage. He was getting involved with the wrong people and unhealthy practices. One day, after being caught and running away for a mischievous act, Louie’s brother notices how incredibly fast he is.

With his brother’s guidance and training Louie goes on not only to be a track star for his high school but even qualifies for the 1936 Summer Olympics where he ran in the 5,000 meter race.

Louie heads to college and runs track for the University of Southern California and then joined the US Army Air Corps, became an Officer and served as a Bombardier in the Pacific theatre.

After being shot down and surviving for 47 days on a life raft drifting in the ocean, Louie and one of the plane's Pilots, Russell Phillips were captured by the Japanese and sent to Prisoner of War Camps.

Now...as some folks here know....whether it is being avoiding the bully in school....or being a recruit in basic training....or going through a pledging process of a college fraternity or sorority back in the days before hazing was outlawed....the number one rule when you are in this type of situation is DON'T STAND OUT.

It is your goal to blend in and hope the person in charge doesn't really notice you.

This was the case for prisoners like Louie in the POW camp, where the situation was literally life and death every single moment of every single day.

But unfortunately for Louie, one of the head guards known as "The Bird" knows exactly who he is. And that is where our first film clip this morning picks up.

"You Fail. You are nothing."

Through relentless psychological and physical torture, "The Bird" does all he can to break down Louie during his time in camp.

Yet again and again...Louie gets up...and keeps going...even when he is offered a more comfortable life if he would agree to be used for propaganda against the United States....Louie refuses and is sent back to camp and beaten not by the guards...but by his fellow prisoners...his fellow Americans...his friends.....who are forced to do so....

We will pick back up on Louie's story a little later....But, while watching this film, I started to think of the parallels between Louie's

experience and the experience of two particular Bible characters.... One from the Hebrew Testament and one from the New Testament.

From the Hebrew Testament, Joseph. Whose story concluded in our scripture reading this morning.

To remind you briefly of Joseph's story....He was the son who was favored by his father Jacob....and Joseph was favored so much so that he was given a beautiful coat of many colors.

And Joseph starts having dreams of different symbols representing he and his siblings...and in these dreams his siblings bowing down or submitting to him...and then Joseph decides to tell his brothers about these dreams (which by the way, a good rule of thumb: If you ever have a dream about someone else bowing down to you....I recommend not sharing it with them).

Because as we see in Joseph's case...his brothers didn't take kindly to that news. They decided that they should kill him and make it look like an accident until the opportunity comes to instead sell Joseph as a slave.

But, even in this dire circumstances Joseph is able to impress the Master of the house to which he is sold....so much so that he is put in charge of everything. Given great responsibility...a comfortable life...a meaningful role in the world.

and that would be a pretty great ending to the story right there but then the Master's wife decides she likes the way Joseph looks...and that she wants to get physical with Joseph....but being the dedicated and righteous man that he is, Joseph rejects the woman's advances...which leads her to get angry and accuse Joseph of forcefully making physical advances on her.

With this accusation against him, Joseph now finds himself in Jail.

And to make and long story short....others who work for Pharaoh Get to know Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams....so Joseph is later

called upon by the Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. One thing leads to another and before you know it, Joseph is the highest official in Egypt serving directly below the Pharaoh himself.

And through the interpretations that God gives to Joseph he is able to save not only Egypt but all the people who live around Egypt...including his brothers and their families from famine.

And when the moment comes for him to have his revenge against his brothers who sold him into slavery....Joseph has this unexpected response:

But Joseph said to them, *“Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.*”

Let's leave a place maker there for a moment and look at another Biblical Character, this time from the New Testament, the Apostle Paul.

Paul is who much of the writings of the New Testament is attributed to...and honestly regardless of how many of the New Testament letters he actually wrote, Paul was one of the greatest influences on the early Christian movement and much of his outlook and theology shaped the beliefs of the church.

That's partly because Paul was someone who wasn't afraid to take the gospel on the road. Through his special status of being both a Jew and a Roman citizen, Paul was able to travel and connect with a wide array of people.

As a missionary, He traveled throughout the Roman Empire sharing the good news about Jesus and helping the churches in each providence and city work together as folks tried to understand what it meant to be a Christian...

However, things did not always go well for Paul either. He went through the pain of rejection....he knows what it is like to be questioned...to be

threatened...he has been run out of places....some Jews didn't seem to like him because he was acting too much like the gentiles....some gentiles are unsure of him or didn't like him because he is a Jew who used to persecute Christians.

Paul knows the pain that came with traveling around the Roman world in the first century. He is out in the elements...he has to deal with all the hardships and threats on the roads and on the sea as he travels.

And he understands the difficulty of the lives of the early Christians in their day to day lives....and yet....even in the midst of all of his hardships and trials, he is able not only to keep moving forward, but also encourage the church.

In Eugene Peterson's Message translation of Paul's letter, we hear Paul's words of encouragement to the church in Corinth like this:

“Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!

We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, “I believed it, so I said it,” we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!

So we're not giving up.... Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.”

Now Switching back to Louie Zamperini's story in unbroken....

Louie through his will to live...his perseverance and honor....survived until the US won the war in the Pacific and the prisoners of his camp were freed.

He made it back home and the story goes that the first thing he did was kiss the soil when he got back.

However, those kind of experiences and hardships stay with a person...and Louie began to struggle as he carried the experience in the camp with him.....until one day when something changed....as we will see in this interview.

Let's watch....

Louie came to the conclusion that "God reaches into people's lives and helps get them through things that seem impossible.....and that God got him through that experience in the camp and that he owed God something."

So here we have three men....with three unique experiences before us....

Joseph: who comes to believe God was able to use his brother's evil acts for Good.

Paul: Who uses the pain and hardships he and the early church is going through to remind us that God still at work....even if we do not always see it...and that these things that we cannot see right now are nonetheless eternal...

Louie: Who through the realization that God was present in his life during his incredible struggle was able to use that belief to free himself from the pain he carried and was able to offer forgiveness to those who had hurt him.

Three incredible stories...three powerful insights...

And unfortunately (or fortunately depending on how you look at it) we don't have time to examine all of their conclusions theologically.

Nor is it really important to right now...because the bottom line is that no matter how it happened or why it happened, God showed up for these three in powerful ways.

And through the recognition of God's presence they were able to offer incredible forgiveness, encouragement and hope not only to the ones who wronged them....but to us as well.

I'm not here this morning to tell you how God does or doesn't work in our individual lives.

I can't tell you why we go through the struggles and pain of life and death...

But I will tell you that God is here....

God is with you....

I believe God desires you to persevere and keep faith through the difficult situation you are enduring....

Why certain things happen in certain ways...I am not sure....

But it is my prayer that we can all be on the lookout for the perseverance that God's presence grants us in the difficult times...

And in recognition of the holy presence, forgiveness. comfort and encouragement of the divine, that we can offer those same things to others.

Amen.