

Sermon: August 15, 2021

“Love Wins”

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Scripture: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 and John 11:30-45

This is, of course, August at the Movies: Superhero Edition and today, we are talking about my favorite character from the DC Comic universe: Diana Prince, aka Wonder Woman. Specifically, we're talking about the story of Wonder Woman from the 2017 film starring Gal Gadot and directed by Patty Jenkins. Wonder Woman follows the story of Diana, princess of the Amazons who is trained to be an unstoppable and unbeatable warrior. Raised on the hidden island of Themyscira, Diana comes into her power despite the reluctance of her mother, Queen of the Amazons, who keeps the secret that her father was Greek god, Zeus. This doesn't just make Diana a warrior princess, it makes her part Greek god, and much more powerful than her training can possibly prepare her for—she's been sheltered, really, on this little island home, from the world of humankind. So when Steve Trevor, an American spy for the Allies during WWII crash lands off the coast of Diana's home, she and the rest of the Amazons are completely unprepared for the guns that the Nazi soldier's will follow with. The Amazons take quite a hit and Diana becomes convinced that she must chase down the God of war, Ares, who she assumes is responsible for turning mankind toward more war. The film then follows Diana's attempts to find and stop Ares as well as Steve's attempts to stop a lethal gas from being unleashed on the unsuspecting populace.

At one point in the film, Diana is incredulous about the depths of human degradation and says, “My mother was right, they (mankind) don’t deserve (her help).” To which Steve replies that it’s not about (what they deserve), it’s about “what you believe.” Which, actually, may have many meanings in the course of the film, but I took that to mean that saving humankind wasn’t about their worthiness, but about doing what’s right and doing what is good. And Diana is all about doing what is right and what is good.

One of the things about Wonder Woman that makes her such a special character is that she displays real emotion. She allows herself to feel and that leads her to compassion in determining what to fight for. We can see this in stories all throughout the bible. Two of which we read a bit about today. We started this morning with scriptures from the book of Esther in which we find A secretly Hebrew woman named Esther finding the favor of the King of Persia and made queen after the former queen is cast out. The narrative leads us through a series of events that might be seen as brutal, and they are, but we also see throughout the story that Esther is moved to compassion for her people, the Hebrews.

Now, this is one of two books in the bible that never mentions God. Not ONCE. The other that leaves God’s name out of the equation is Song of Solomon. But these books are included as part of the biblical cannon for important reasons. In the case of Esther, regardless of how present God’s name is in this story (or not present, as the case may be), there can be no denying that, for a people of faith, it’s clear God’s fingerprints are all over this narrative. In this story, it is God’s work behind the scenes that helps Esther, Mordecai, and the rest of the Hebrews survive. It is God, who

created Esther for, as Mordecai puts it famously in chapter 4 verse 14, “such a time as this.”

This is a book of the bible that really needs to be read and digested in its entirety because no selection of scriptures fully captures the spirit of the book. But I’ll do my best to very briefly summarize: In the story, the Hebrew people have been targeted by Haman, a man so riddled with hatred that he convinces the king to enact a decree that will kill effectively wipe out all the Hebrews in Persia. While the story does not specifically mention Esther being moved by her compassion, it does tell us that Esther is distressed at what is about to happen and at the fact that her cousin, Mordecai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and was weeping and wailing at the gates of the city. She tries to convince him to give up wearing the painful sackcloth, but Mordecai cannot, so great is his grief over what is about to happen to his people. Through a complex series of events, Queen Esther gets the king to agree to do anything she wishes and this eventually leads to Haman’s brutal downfall and the king issuing a new decree allowing the Hebrews to defend themselves against the attacks to come, which, in turn, saves them from destruction. This is the story of how the Jewish feast day Purim comes into being, commemorating the Jew’s deliverance from destruction.

God’s silent action through Esther’s story shows us a God and a woman in power who are motivated by compassion to save the lives of the Jews. Esther is, when it comes down to it, quite a Wonder Woman of the biblical narrative. Strong, bold, decisive, and cunning, she works the only way a woman can in this ancient world, to save the day. There can be no question of the courage it took for her to stick her neck out, quite literally, for her people. She used her privilege as a queen, as a woman in a position of

power, to rescue those who, in the Persian kingdom, were the least of these. This is a narrative example of what it means to love sacrificially. She could have easily turned her back on her people just as Wonder Woman could have turned her back on mankind in favor of going back to Themyscira to be in paradise with the Amazons and protect just them from the violent world of mankind. But neither Esther nor Diana do this. They let compassion win the day. They let their positive emotions toward others, real and powerful, guide their actions.

But they aren't the only ones whose stories today show a remarkable depth of compassion. In our gospel passage today, we heard about Lazarus's death and how, upon receiving news of this heartbreaking event, Jesus, literally, wept. We're told Jesus weeps precisely three times in scripture, but this passage from John may be the most moving as we see this verse, the shortest verse in the KJV of the bible, John 11:35: Jesus wept. What does it mean that Jesus, God incarnate, God made flesh, Emmanuel, the Messiah, Son of God weeps over the death of a human being? Well, I think it shows that ours is a God who willingly came to be among us and to truly be in solidarity with us. To feel what we feel, intimately.

Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15 says that Jesus is not some high priest, wholly separate from unable to sympathize with us, but one who has been through what we've been through, felt what we've felt. And here, in the gospel called John, we get a perfect example of Jesus's humanness as Jesus feels what Mary and Martha feel at the loss of their brother, Lazarus. While Jesus could well have moved forward with the knowledge that Lazarus would rise, instead, he allows himself to feel one of the most painful of human emotions, grief, alongside Mary and Martha. This shows us that

ours is not an aloof god in the sky unable to empathize with us, cold, unfeeling, angry, and vengeful; but a loving, merciful one who came to be among us, to live as we live, to feel as we feel. This means that our God knows all too well how much mercy and grace we really need, and yet we're told that mercy and grace is offered in abundance.

Here we have three people with immense power in their circumstances, Diana Prince (Wonder Woman), Queen Esther, and the ultimate power, Jesus Christ. Each could have kept themselves above. Apart. But instead, they chose to become a *part* of humankind. They chose to relate. To be led by their compassion and, in doing so, be moved to bold action on behalf of those they could have left behind. Here we have three stories in which compassion leads the way, in which love wins.

At the end of Wonder Woman, as Diana is facing down Aries in the final battle, she recalls Steve's words to her. She says, "It's not about deserve, it's about what you believe. And I believe in love." Friends, if you believe in nothing else this book talks about. If you balk at the miracles. If you look with doubt upon the historicity of *all* the stories and find it all a bit too far-fetched. If you just can't wrap your head around the idea of the resurrection or the virgin birth. At least allow yourself this one thing: believe in love. Believe in the power of compassion and the ways in which it can move us if we let it. Believe the apostle when he says that God is love. Because, at the end of the day, that's the one thing Jesus elevated above all else. That's what the covenant between God and the Israelites is based in. The love of God for God's creation. Love, above all else. Love wins. Amen.