

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Second Sunday after Christmas / Epiphany Sunday–January 3, 2016
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
Matthew 2:1-12

REFLECTION

You are with us, O God, in darkness and in light.

"A Litany of Darkness and Light" NCH # 880
Dept. of Parish Development and Mission, New Zealand

Historical Fantasy

I am a huge fan of science fiction and fantasy – books and movies. I am also drawn to historical fiction as a way to understand the past through an accessible medium – being more interested in character development and plotline than in the orderly laying out of facts. In light of all of this, John and I have been watching a t.v. series called “Da Vinci’s Demons.”

Written by David S. Goyer, the series follows the "untold" story of Leonardo Da Vinci: the genius during his early years in Renaissance Florence. As a 25-year old artist, inventor, swordsman, lover, dreamer and idealist, he struggles to live within the confines of his own reality and time as he begins to not only see the future, but invent it.

- Plot Summary by WellardRockard
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2094262/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl

It is a wild and colorful entryway into Florence, Italy, during the Renaissance. And I began to watch with the idea that it was “historical fiction” – much more accessible to me than straight history books were in high school. But as the episodes got wilder and bloodier – and then put Da Vinci on a ship to South America to interact with Amazons and his dead mother – I needed another description for the experience. John told me that it has been described by critics as “historical fantasy” – and now I have the term I have needed my whole life to describe a number of things – which I will wander over to in a minute. But first...

I should have known where the Da Vinci series was headed by the name of the writer. [David S. Goyer] is a writer and producer, known for *Batman Begins* (2005), *Man of Steel* (2013) and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

And here are a couple of quotations from Goyer that clue us in to his motivation:

“As soon as Da Vinci was mentioned, I went online and saw that he's the most recognized figure in history other than Christ. So I said, 'Well, sounds like he's the guy we should do a show about', just in terms of pre-existing awareness.”

And his description of the historical Da Vinci is telling:

“People think of Leonardo Da Vinci as this sort of professorial bearded figure who painted 'The Last Supper' and the 'Mona Lisa'. If you drill down a little further, you see he's a guy who invented some crazy inventions. But if you read his actual notebooks - at the least the pages still existing - you get a pretty good sense of his character. And there were a lot of contemporaries who were writing about him. **He was a fascinating, mercurial character - a bit of a braggart. He clearly had a chip on his shoulder because he felt he should've gotten more respect and credit for things he'd done.** He clearly was a dilettante, a procrastinator, a practical joker. **He had a sense of humor. He published a book of jokes during his lifetime. He was bisexual. He was arrested twice and put on trial.** He came in contact with a lot of interesting people of the time, from Machiavelli to Borgia. **He was also kind of a jerk, in the way a lot of geniuses are. He was selfish and he had feuds.** He was a friend of Botticelli's, but was dismissive of his artwork. If we get there - but this would probably be in season four or five - he and Michelangelo hated each other. They got into fistfights. He was not this dry, kind of beard-stroking guy. He was this vibrant bigger-than-life character. You just think, 'My God, this guy had enough crazy things in his life to base ten shows on'.”

http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0333060/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

So let me offer one more plot summary before I get us where we are going:

In a world where thought and faith are controlled, one man fights to set knowledge free. The secret history of Leonardo da Vinci's tantalizing life reveals a portrait of a young man tortured by a gift of superhuman genius. **He is a heretic intent on exposing the lies of religion. An insurgent seeking to subvert an elitist society. A bastard son who yearns for legitimacy with his father. He finds himself in the midst of a storm that has been brewing for centuries. A conflict between truth and lies, religion and reason, past and future.** His aspirations are used against him by the opposing forces of the time - luring him into a game of seduction where those who despise his intellect need him most. **Leonardo must take up the fight against foes who use history to suppress the truth. A hero armed only with genius, Da Vinci stands alone against the darkness within, and the darkness without.** Facing an uncertain future, his quest for knowledge nearly becomes his undoing as he explores the fringes of his own sanity. **Da Vinci throws himself into his genius and**

emerges as an unstoppable force that lifts an entire era out of darkness and propels it into light. His story becomes a mirror into our own world, calling us all to join his fight to Free the Future.

- Plot Summary by Official
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2094262/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl

So this young guy Da Vinci is brilliant, funny and illegitimate, a heretic exposing the lies of his religion, an insurgent out to subvert an elitist society. He is arrested and put on trial, he stands against the darkness of the world – propelling it into the light. Goyer's Da Vinci has an uncanny resemblance to the MOST recognized figure in history (according to his online source) – our own favorite protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth aka Christ.

Which brings us to our source material and my newly-named favorite genre “Historical Fantasy.” Think about today's text as I read the definition from another fantastical source, wikipedia:

Historical fantasy is a ... genre of historical fiction that incorporates fantastic elements (such as magic) into the narrative. There is much crossover with other subgenres of fantasy; [such] classes as Arthurian, Celtic, or Dark Ages could just as easily be placed in Historical Fantasy. Stories fitting this classification generally take place prior to the 20th century.

Films of this genre may have plots set in biblical or classical antiquity, often with plots based very loosely on mythology or legends of Greek-Roman history, or the surrounding cultures of the same era.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_fantasy

In our story today, we have sages or wise men or kings following stars, listening to dreams, finding a baby of questionable (could it be divine) parentage – in a shed – who is the culmination of an ancient prophecy. Evil and Godliness are both palpably present.

It is the retelling of a story that has been told since the dawn of time – the battle between darkness and light – in the world – in the human heart.

These are the battles of the Justice League and the Superheroes of my son's competing realities – on screen and on the school playground – and ultimately on the streets of any city patrolled by any police force.

These are the battles fought in our halls of government and justice and in the ballot boxes of any democracy trying to stave off oligarchy and holocaust.

I have no doubt that Jesus, like Da Vinci, lived – that his powerful Life-Light was a challenge to the oppressive Darkness of his time – that he fought a revolutionary

struggle against political and religious hierarchies that threatened to crush the hopes and lives of ordinary people – people he loved with all his heart.

And I have no doubt that there is a Life Force that is larger than all else in the universe – constantly overcoming the forces of death and entropy and darkness and evil – a force still giving birth to stars and hopes.

And I have no doubt that we have no words to adequately describe what is going on in this Universe – let alone in the center of our own hearts.

But we have stories. We have images and plotlines and characters that make these things expressible – accessible – comprehensible – graspable.....

And these stories are true – no matter how fantastical they may seem.

Our Fred knew that same truth as he made choices about the end of his earthly life on Wednesday. He said with certainty that G-d was with him and holding onto him and that his suffering would be healed in the Light of what lay beyond death.

Whatever the plotline was for him up until that day – he knew the power of Love had won in his heart – and told Leslie so – as long as he was allowed and able to speak.

We now have a new story to tell – historical fantasy – true to the bone. We at Mt. Hollywood have known a man who was the hero of his own life – who fought darkness and found light – who touched the lives of others with compassion and love – who left this world a better place – and is now in search of answers and adventures in the next realm.

Thank G-d for Fred's light – for all our lights shining in this room – and for the Christ-Light that shines on the road ahead in this very new and uncertain year ahead.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.