

Seeing Noah

Seeing begins as light reflected off objects found in our visual field. The light enters the human eye through the cornea, passes through the iris and then hits the rods and cones of the retina. The retina converts the light into electrical impulses. These electric impulses travel along the optic nerve to the visual center of the brain where an image is produced and we “see” the objects that are in front of us. However, seeing is more than just experiencing the images produced in our brain’s visual center.

We see with our whole mind. As images pass before us, we constantly analyze them. We look for the familiar. We scan our environment for risks so that we can avoid them. Reading is never a passive process. Words produce thoughts and pictures in our “mind’s eye”. The visual arts are a perfect example of this process in action. Paintings, pictures, sculptures and movies all represent an artist’s vision produced by words of a book or screen play or other subjects and objects in the artist’s visual field.

Recently, I saw the movie Noah, directed by Darren Aronofsky and starring Russell Crowe. In a review of the movie, columnist Annalee Newitz both warned and enticed her audience with these words: “Get ready to see the Bible through new eyes.” She was right. Aronofsky saw things in the text I had never seen. I always saw Noah and his sons build the ark over decades with the sweat of their brow. Aronofsky saw some helpers that were a complete surprise to me. I always saw eight adult human passengers on the ark’s manifest: Noah and his wife, their three adult sons and their sons’ adult wives. Aronofsky’s portrayal of how two of the wives came on the scene was mindboggling. I never saw the human stowaway who broke into the ark, or the amazing battle between Noah and this stowaway, in the Biblical text. Aronofsky’s portrayal of the account of the flood and its aftermath is very different.

During a lull in the noise and the action of the movie, a voice in the theater cried out: “I suggest that everyone go home and read the Bible for the real story.” I agreed with him! (Read Genesis Chapters 1-9)

Aronofsky did affirm that “long ago, by God’s word, the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water.” (2 Peter 3:5). He also acknowledged that Noah’s flood was a global flood, not a local flood or tsunami. He affirmed that humankind’s vision was completely changed by the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. He affirmed that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they saw one another, God’s word and God, in a different way. They had to hide from God and cover one another up. They passed on their defective vision to their descendants. Cain came to see his brother Abel as a rival for God’s love and approval. Cain saw the murder of his brother Abel as the only way to gain God’s undivided love and approval. Cain has been killing Abel ever since.

I saw the whole movie revolve around themes central to Aronofsky’s vision. Noah was utterly convinced that God had judged humanity and all other living things and would destroy them by a catastrophic flood. He was equally convinced that he had been commissioned by God to save a remnant of all the animals for the purpose of starting all over again in the post-flood world. Noah was, however, unclear as to God’s mission for him and his family after the flood. Noah

wondered if humankind was fit to live in the new world. In Aronofsky's movie, God was silent on this issue. He left Noah and his family to debate the issues and take action.

Despite his best intentions to obscure God's will, Aronofsky spoke volumes about God's intent for humanity. Aronofsky stated clearly that humanity was made in God's image. He clearly affirmed that God had issued a decree that Adam and Eve could not transgress. They could not eat the forbidden fruit, on pain of instant death from even touching this fruit. Despite God's warning, they ate the fruit. God could have punished them then and there, and wiped out all humanity by killing Adam and Eve. However, God did not wipe out humanity. He gave Adam and Eve the opportunity to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth before they returned to the dust from whence they came. Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel. When Cain killed Abel, by rights, God could have wiped Cain off the face of the earth, yet God let him live and be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

Aronofsky's screenplay declared that, despite God's grace and mercy, almost every human being in the world eventually turned his/her back on God. The director chronicled their evil and abusive lives. God's grace and patience could finally not endure the evil that Noah's contemporaries practiced and judged them for it and executed His judgment. While God grieved the loss of man's innocence and resulting sinfulness, God did not give up on us. God chose to save Noah and his family. God saved them and a remnant of animals for His sovereign purpose. Whether he realized it or not, Aronofsky revealed a God who does not give up on those made in his image and the animals He made for us.

Aronofsky's portrayal of the end of life on earth used the latest and greatest technology. It was hard to watch. Noah and his family and all other passengers survived and, in time, left the ark. The animals resumed life with great gusto. However, Noah and his family moved slowly and even grudgingly into the future. God was once again silent. Noah and his family are left to figure things out. The End.

However, we all know that the Biblical text does not end here. We all know that God did not keep silent. God spoke to Abraham, one of Noah's descendants. God promised to bless Abraham with a nation and a homeland and a descendant that would one day bless the entire world.

It is during Lent and Easter that we see God's promise for a descendant of Abraham fulfilled, His great love for us, and His desire to save us. The Bible reveals that Jesus, God's one and only Son, became incarnate in human flesh. Jesus was at one and the same time both Son of God and human being. Jesus does what is impossible for us. He lives a perfect human life. In addition, He reveals His divinity through preaching, teaching and the miracles He performed. Jesus openly admitted that He was the Son of God. His reward for living the perfect life and declaring his divinity? Conviction of the crime of blasphemy (pretending to be God), beating, mocking and death by crucifixion. Out of the ugliness of this sin, violence and death, God made something beautiful: Jesus' resurrection from the dead to eternal life.

By His resurrection from the dead, Jesus became God's new ark of salvation.

'Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." '(John 11:25-27).

It is by faith in Jesus, that He is the Son of God who died for our sins and was resurrected to new life, that we can enter Jesus' ark of salvation today and journey with Him to eternity. How does one obtain this faith? Curiously, Aronofsky's movie shed some light on this subject. In his creation sequence, Aronofsky revealed that God created the universe and the planet earth by speaking words into a swirling chaos filled with water. God's word changed water into the heavens and the earth. When God's word is used with the water of Baptism, we are joined to Jesus' death, our sins are forgiven and we are joined to His resurrection. The waters convey the Holy Spirit to the baptized person. The Holy Spirit uses the words of the Holy Bible to create something within us: faith and trust in God. Faith changes our eyes: we get new eyes. With new eyes, Scripture and the Bible come alive and we see Jesus within its verses. The creative and redeeming word of God goes out every Sunday at Grace Lutheran Church at 9:00 and 10:30 AM. Hope to see you there.

In Christ, Pastor Ed.