

About once a month for the next 15 months I'm going to be preaching about scripture themes found in classic Hollywood movies from the 30's, 40's and 50's. And since today is Halloween, I want to focus on the 1931 classic, *Dracula*.

In that movie, the first thing we hear from Dracula is the words, "I am Dracula. I bid you welcome."

With those introductory words, actor Bela Lugosi would change forever the way vampires were portrayed in film and in our culture. In the original Bram Stoker novel, and in the 1922 silent film, *Nosferatu*, the vampire was a hideous, repulsive creature. Not so with Lugosi. In *Dracula*, Bela Lugosi is suave and debonair, an exotic eastern-European nobleman in tuxedo and cape.

And yet, there is an underlying menace to his performance. Lugosi had portrayed Dracula on stage successfully for a number of years before the filming of the movie. And some of the most powerful and sinister movie moments are simply images of Lugosi mesmerizingly and menacingly staring into the camera. A chilling performance indeed.

We've been reading through the Gospel of Mark this year. One of the main themes we've encountered is the people and the disciples gradually discovering who Jesus is. We, the readers, are told who Jesus is right off the bat. Mark tells us in chapter 1 verse 1:

"This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."¹

So in Mark, we know who Jesus is immediately. But throughout the rest of the gospel, we watch others gradually discovering who he truly is.

The same applies to the 1931 version of *Dracula*. We are told up front exactly what we're dealing with. Right near the beginning of the movie, one of the villagers warns Renfield, who is about to visit Dracula's castle, about what he can expect. He says:

"You mustn't go there... in the castle there are vampires. Dracula and his wives—they take the form of wolves and bats. They leave their coffins at night, and they feed on the blood of the living."

So we know who Dracula is right from the beginning of the movie. But it will take most of the characters quite a while to discover who Dracula truly is.

There's wonderful foreshadowing early on. As he is welcoming his guest, Dracula tells him,

"The spider spinning his web for the unwary fly... The blood is the life, Mr. Renfield."

Of course, Dracula is a sinister spider spinning many webs in his quest for blood.

¹ Mk 1:1, NLT

A few moments later, Dracula offers Renfield hospitality:
"This is very old wine. I hope you will like it."
Renfield asks, "Aren't you drinking?"
And Dracula replies, "I never drink... wine."

It's a delicious moment. Because we all know that Dracula drinks blood. The blood is the life, after all.

And later, Dracula has bitten Mina Seward. The next evening her wounds are examined by her physician father Dr. Seward, the great vampire expert Prof. Van Helsing, and her fiancé Jonathan.

In a wonderfully tongue in cheek moment, Jonathan asks about the two bite-marks on Mina's neck. He says,
"What could have caused them Professor?"

And we hear a female servant immediately say in a loud voice, "Count Dracula."

But she's not responding to Jonathan's question. She's simply announcing to those in the room that Count Dracula has arrived for a visit. But we know the truth about Dracula.

Dracula is not really alive. He did experience death briefly. He has a coffin. And yet, he's animated. He's undead.

And to maintain whatever sort of quasi-life he has, he has to consume the blood of others. But he is also constrained by his need to return to his coffin during daylight hours. He seems alive, but not really.

And yet Dracula wants to continue his existence, even if it means preying on others and drinking their blood, literally stealing their life from them.

"The spider spinning his web for the unwary fly... The blood is the life."

Our Epistle lesson from Hebrews also deals with blood. The ancient Hebrew people also believed that the blood is the life. That's why they wouldn't eat blood when they slaughtered their animals. Kosher butchering is still all about draining the blood from the meat. The blood is too sacred to consume.

And when the Jewish people did possess a temple, before it was destroyed in 70 AD, they would offer blood to God. They would give to God the blood from their livestock to take away their sins. They would sacrifice something precious, the life-blood of their own animals, in order to secure something even more precious. By sacrificing the life of their animals they hoped to stay in relationship with the God who is the source of life itself.

Our Epistle lesson from the 9th chapter of Hebrews is short—only 4 verses. And it's part of a much larger argument. In fact, Hebrews is a fairly extended and tightly connected discussion.

But the essence of today's section is this.

There are sacrifices which are offered in the Temple, and there were earlier sacrifices in the portable tent-temple, known as the tabernacle. But these sacrifices are imperfect.

Now, the book of Hebrews says that offering the blood of animals does bring forgiveness. These sacrifices are about restoring people to unity with God.

But these sacrifices are also temporary. They have to be offered again and again.

But Hebrews says we don't have to worry about offering such sacrifices anymore. Because Jesus has acted as our perfect high priest. Jesus has gone into the temple in heaven, the real temple, the perfect temple. The earthly temple built by human hands is just a pale imitation or reflection of the perfection of the heavenly temple. So Jesus has gone into the perfect temple.

And Jesus is the perfect priest. Human priests and high priests fall short. Only Jesus is perfect and sinless.

And there in the perfect heavenly temple, Hebrews says, the perfect priest offers the perfect sacrifice. And the sacrifice is himself. Jesus brings his own shed blood, his own sacrifice on the cross. And unlike earthly sacrifices which have to be repeated, this one perfect offering by the perfect priest in the perfect temple solves the problem of sin and separation for all time. Jesus brings us forgiveness of sins and unity with God forever. And he does this once and for all time through his perfect offering of his perfect life, symbolized by his own blood shed on behalf of the entire world.

Because of that, we are redeemed. The word Hebrews uses is the word for releasing someone who is enslaved. Jesus brings us true freedom. And Jesus does so by offering his own perfect life as a sacrifice, by offering his own blood.

By contrast Dracula has to steal blood from others every night to maintain his quasi-life. And just once, you get a little bit of a hint that Dracula understands the futility of his quasi-existence. Dracula says,

"To die, to be *really* dead, that must be glorious... There are far worse things awaiting man than death."

But in the meantime, Dracula has to enter his coffin every morning, and go out searching for blood every night. He is surrounded by death, and has to seek out the blood of others, the life of others to maintain his pale imitation of life.

Dracula is caught in a never-ending cycle of futility. That is, until Professor Van Helsing is able to track him down and drive a wooden stake through his heart. That not only releases Dracula from his cycle of futility. It also releases those who have been under Dracula's power. Dracula's death brings an end to his reign of terror.

By contrast, Jesus' death brings new life. It brings release from captivity. It brings an end to never-ending cycles of futility. At the end of our lesson from Hebrews, our Epistle reflects on the blood of bulls and goats sacrificed on our behalf brings us temporary cleansing. Then in a marvelously poetic turn of phrase, Hebrews says,

"How much more will the blood of Christ... purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!"²

Dead works—the futility of doing things over and over again... the need for those dead works is eliminated by the blood of Christ.

It is Jesus' own offering of his own blood shed on the cross on our behalf, that allows us to worship a living God, and to share in God's perfect life.

Jesus takes us from the futility of dead works to the freedom that gives us life and allows us to worship the living God. And he does it through the blood of the cross.

It's no accident that in the movie *Dracula*, there is an extended confrontation between Prof. Van Helsing and Dracula. Dracula tries to summon all of his hypnotic mesmerizing power to bring Van Helsing under his spell.

But Van Helsing is able to somehow resist. To which Dracula remarks.
"Your will is strong, Van Helsing."

So Dracula physically advances on Van Helsing. And Van Helsing reaches into his pocket.

Dracula sneers, thinking Van Helsing is reaching for wolfbane, for the anti-vampire flower he's been using to protect Mina. Dracula says arrogantly,
"More wolfbane?"

To which Van Helsing replies,
"More effective than wolfbane, Count."

And Van Helsing pulls out a crucifix, and Dracula cowers, and hisses, and flees. Dracula recognizes the power of the cross. That is the source of life.

Dracula's limited power comes only from his ability to steal blood from others.

On the cross, Jesus gives his blood, sheds his own blood on behalf of others.

His blood brings us eternal freedom.
His death brings us eternal life.

² Heb 9:14