

We continue our once-a-month sermon series on the Gospel and the Golden Age of Cinema. This week we've got one of the greatest: *Casablanca*. Of all of the Golden Age Hollywood movies, the top two contenders for the title of greatest movie of all time tend to be *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*. I'll talk about *Citizen Kane* in 6 months. And while I greatly admire *Citizen Kane* intellectually, in my heart and in my gut, I strongly prefer *Casablanca*. Adventure, an exotic setting, Nazis for villains, what's not to love? And then there's the love story, which is why I'm preaching on it the day before Valentine's Day. It's a wonderful love story, actually two of them—one a romantic triangle, and the other a different relationship triangle that ends up in the development of a "beautiful friendship."

As Sam sings,
It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die

Casablanca is set in the north African city of that name during the early days of World War II. The city of Casablanca is technically under the oversight of the Vichy French government. But they're only quasi-independent—they're basically a puppet government for the Nazis who have overrun France and captured Paris. And the city is full of refugees who have fled Europe and are trying to get to a neutral country, and then on to the United States. They're very much in a state of limbo or purgatory. As the narrator says, most of these folks have "to wait, and wait, and wait." And one of the favorite places to hang out while waiting is a nightclub called "Rick's Café Américain" owned by an American expatriate named Rick Blaine who is played by Humphrey Bogart.

Rick is the center of the movie. *Casablanca* could easily be called *The Redemption of Rick Blaine*. Rick seems to be self-centered and cynical. He repeats his mantra: "I stick my neck out for nobody."

In this he is very similar to the local chief of police, Captain Louis Renault played by Claude Rains. Louis and Rick are not friends per se. But they are similar personalities, and even when they work at cross purposes, they seem to admire each other. But Louis suspects there is something deeper to Rick.

At one point Louis tells Rick about what he has found digging into his past. Rick had run guns to Ethiopia as they fought the Italian Fascists. Later Rick fought on the Loyalist side against the Spanish Fascists.

Rick counters, "(I) got well paid for it on both occasions."
Louis replies, "The winning side would have paid you much better."

So Louis suspects there is something Rick is hiding. And we later find out that it is a heartbreaking former relationship with a woman named Ilsa. And as fate would have it, one day, "out of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world," Ilsa walks into Rick's. And she walks in with her famous husband, Victor Laszlo, a widely known and admired Czech leader of the anti-Nazi resistance.

When Ilsa had originally met Rick, she thought her husband was dead and that she was a widow. But that wasn't the case. And so she left Rick in Paris, and he felt like his "insides (had) been kicked out."

And so we have a complicated love triangle. Ilsa and Rick love each other. Ilsa and Laszlo love each other. And Rick has a deep admiration for Laszlo and his principles. What will they do? That's the question at the heart of *Casablanca*.

In our Old Testament lesson today, the Prophet Jeremiah compares two different desert plants:

"Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land."¹

But by contrast, Jeremiah says, "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

Jeremiah's basic question is this—from where are you trying to draw your strength? From yourself?

That may work for a while. But like a desert shrub without roots, that's not a good long-term strategy.

Or do you sink your roots down into God and draw upon God's strength, like a tree planted by water?

In terms of *Casablanca*, Rick is trying to navigate one romantic triangle with Ilsa and Laszlo.

Meanwhile, Rick is trying to navigate another, perhaps even more difficult triangle. Is he going to sink his roots into deeper principles, or is he going to maintain his mantra of "I stick out my neck for nobody"? Is he going to continue to be self-centered like Louis, or is he going to follow a higher purpose like Laszlo?

We get a couple of wonderful hints midway through the movie. First, Rick allows a young newlywed Bulgarian couple to win back-to-back spins at Rick's apparently crooked roulette table. That increases their money by 122,000%. That means the young bride won't have to betray her husband and sleep with the corrupt Captain Louis in order to escape Casablanca.

Louis shrugs it off, but asks Rick not to interfere with his next sexual liaison with a blonde. And Rick gets nothing from doing this—in fact he loses a lot of money—but it's the right thing to do.

¹ Jer 17:5-6

Later in Rick's nightclub, a group of Nazi officers is boisterously singing songs of praise to the Fatherland. In a stirring scene, Laszlo asks the band to play the forbidden French national anthem, "La Marseillaise." Rick nods his agreement to the band leader, and the Café erupts in a heavily emotional version of the song that drowns out the singing of the Nazis.

One quick digression. The scene is undoubtedly powerful. And part of the reason is that many of the tears in people's eyes as they sung were real.

Casablanca only had 3 Americans in the cast. A large number of the actors were real refugees who had escaped from Nazi occupation. This not only included a large number of the extras, but it also included the actor who played Victor Laszlo, as well as the actor who played the villain, the Nazi major—in real life, he had escaped from Germany with his Jewish wife.

In *Casablanca*, this patriotic outpouring leads to Rick's Café being closed. And again, it is a sacrifice that costs Rick, but it was the right thing to do.

This was not accidental. One of the screenwriters who won a Oscar for this script later said, *Casablanca* "was a picture that American audiences needed" during World War II. And he added that the intent of the script was to argue that "there were values that were worth making sacrifices for."²

And Rick Blaine finally turns out to be more like Laszlo than Louis. In the stirring final scene at the foggy airport tarmac, Rick puts Ilsa on the plane with her husband. Rick sacrifices his own happiness for their marriage, and for the anti-Nazi cause that Laszlo is fighting for.

Like Jeremiah's desert tree, Rick has sunk his roots again into deep principle. And that gives him the strength to do the right thing.

Rick breaks the romantic triangle. He tells Ilsa that if she doesn't go with her husband, "You'll regret it... Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life."

And he adds, "I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world."

Except Rick is VERY good at being noble. He does the right thing. He sacrifices for the greater good. And his sacrifice inspires Louis also to do the right thing.

After the Laszlos' plane leaves Casablanca, Louis suggests that it might be good for Rick to leave Casablanca. Rick will have to journey deeper into the desert then into the jungle in order to join the Free-French troops fighting the Nazis. And not only that, but Louis will also join him.

² Howard Koch, interview on DVD special feature

As these two formerly self-centered and cynical men walk off into the night fog together to fight for freedom, Rick says, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Casablanca is a great movie because it reminds us that we have choices in life.

We can rely on ourselves. We can be like desert shrubs who have no rootedness.

Or we can sink our roots into deeper principle. We can sink our roots into God's way of serving and loving others. We can strive to do the right thing.

*It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die*

*The fundamental things apply
As time goes by³*

³ I know, I mixed the last line from first verse with the first lines from the last verse. ☺