

In our once-a-month sermon series on religious themes in classic movies, today I want to focus on George Stevens' 1953 immortal western, *Shane*. I would argue that *Shane* is the finest western film ever made. OK, I know. Usually *Shane* is listed as #3 for greatest westerns after *The Searchers* and *High Noon*. But *The Searchers* is so dark—when the big question is whether or not John Wayne is going to kill his own niece, that's a pretty heavy-duty movie. And in *High Noon* we have a brave sheriff facing down a criminal gang in the midst of a town full of cowards. Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly's characters are awesome, but the remainder of the townsfolk are reprehensible.

No, I believe *Shane* is the greatest. Firstly, you get a wonderful deep dive into the 4 main characters, and you get to spend time listening in on their conversations and see their evolving relationships with each other. This sets *Shane* apart, this is this deep set of interlocking relationships between all 4 people—Shane and each member of the Starrett family: father Joe, mother Marian, and son little Joey. They are all caught up in this wonderful web of love and mutual respect.

Secondly, on top of all of this, in *Shane*, the title character very much functions in a messianic role. He eventually helps usher in a new order for the homesteaders in a Wyoming valley in 1889.

The movie opens with the messianic Shane riding out of the mountains, descending from on high. He rides into the valley where, unbeknownst to him, there is a conflict between a rancher and a group of homesteaders. The rancher, Rufus Riker, is waging a campaign to oust all the homesteaders so he can run cattle in the valley unimpeded.

Shane is a gunfighter trying to give up gunfighting. As he enters the scene, he crosses the life-giving river that runs through the valley. He rides into the homestead of the Starrett family just as they are being harassed by Riker's cowboys. Shane decides to stay with this family. Is it an accident that a messianic figure is making his home with Joe and Marian, which sounds an awful lot Joseph and Mary? I don't think so.

When making his dwelling place in the home of Joe and Marian, Shane humbles himself. He forsakes his gun, his gunfighter garb, and his horse, taking on the appearance of a farmer. He wears work clothes and rides a buckboard. In his first encounter with the cowboys in town, Shane endures their jeers without protesting.

As Paul says, "(Christ Jesus) though he was in the form of God, did not cling to equality with God, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself."<sup>1</sup> That's what the messianic Shane does, at least at first.

In our Epistle lesson today from Revelation we are in the end of the book, the glorious 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> chapters. Last week, we heard, at the beginning of chapter 21, that John saw "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phil 2:6-8

<sup>2</sup> Rev 21:2

And this city is described as God making his home with his people. A heavenly voice tells John: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."<sup>3</sup>

The New Jerusalem will be the place where God will dwell in the midst of his people. In the old Jerusalem, God was present in the temple in the capital city.

But in our Epistle lesson today, we're told, that the New Jerusalem has no temple. It doesn't need any temple. God doesn't need a special place to be present within the city. The whole enormous city is filled with his presence, as well as the presence of the Lamb.<sup>4</sup>

And, the city doesn't need any light, no need of sun or moon, for the Glory of God fills the city, and the Lamb is its light.<sup>5</sup> God will be present with his people in the most intimate way possible.

The walls of the city are described. A city's walls were there for defense. And the walls would have gates to allow traffic to flow in and out during peaceful times. Those gates could then be shut in times of danger.

But in these walls, the gates will never be shut during the daytime, and they won't be shut at night because there will be no night. In the new Jerusalem, there is nothing to fear. The gates are always open.

But in the movie *Shane* there is plenty to fear. Riker and his cowboys try to intimidate the settlers, but Joe Starrett keeps stepping forward to hold the little community together. So Riker sends for a hired gunslinger from Cheyenne named Jack Wilson, played in a very sinister performance by Jack Palance. Given the fact that we've been reading from Revelation, it might be tempting to make comparisons between Riker and Wilson to the anti-Christ and the Beast. But I'll just file that one by title.

Because, meanwhile, in spite of all the dark forces assembling against them, there's a wonderful movement in the movie showing the growing relationships between Shane and each of the members of the Starrett family. Shane becomes good friends with father, Joe. He becomes a second father to little Joey, who at one point tells his mother, "I just love Shane. I love him almost as much as I love Pa."

And it's VERY obvious that there's romantic chemistry between Shane and Marian. But it's also clear that both of them love Joe too much to ever think about betraying him, even in the slightest. So there's a wonderful interlocking web of mutual love and affection between all 4 people on the Starrett homestead.

But unlike the New Jerusalem, that homestead has no walls for defense. And unlike the New Jerusalem, the peace of God has not descended on this valley. Instead things keep cranking up.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev 21:3

<sup>4</sup> Rev 21:22

<sup>5</sup> Rev 21:23

The evil gunslinger Wilson singles out Torrey, the most hot-headed homesteader. He goads him into a gunfight and shoots him down.

Shane has spent the entire movie trying to leave his gunfighter life behind. But it's clear that he's the only one amongst the homesteaders who is fast enough to have a chance in a quick-draw fight with Wilson.

Thus, in the end, Shane, the would-be suffering servant, again becomes Shane the warrior, taking up gun in hand.

Shane does final apocalyptic battle with the beastly Wilson and his boss, the Antichrist Riker. Shane defeats, eliminating the old order. Though he is wounded in the battle, he is not slain.

After the gunfight, Joey's remarks show that his faith in Shane is absolute, "I knew you could Shane, I knew it just as well as anything."

After consigning the unrighteous to the realm of death, Shane exhorts his disciple Joey to follow a righteous path: "Grow up strong and straight." By defeating the old, evil order, and ending the range war, Shane ushers in a new era of peace in the valley, where mourning and death and crying and pain are no more. Or are they?

The problem with this analysis is that, unlike God, Shane is never able to settle down with the settlers. He cannot dwell with them eternally in their midst. His time with the homesteaders is temporary, not eternal. That's because Shane is not only the solution, but he's also a part of the problem.

Shane tells Riker, "You've lived too long; your kind of days are over."

Riker retorts, "My days, what about yours, gunfighter?"

Shane replies, "The difference is I know it."

To ensure for the homesteaders that "there are no more guns in the valley," Shane himself must leave. As a killer, Shane becomes marked like Cain, for, as he says, "there's no living with a killing ... the brand sticks."

Upon closer examination, the climax of the movie and the redemption of the valley do not occur during the night in the gunfight at Armageddon, otherwise known as Grafton's Saloon. The true redemption, and the event that ushers in the new order occurs earlier that day, at Torrey's funeral.

The Lewis family has all of their worldly possessions packed and loaded in the wagon with them. As they're moving away, they stop off at Cemetery Hill just long enough to pay their last respects to Torrey at his funeral.

And at that moment of sadness and death, Joe has a vision of new life. Joe has a vision of a new Jerusalem, the new community in the valley, "We can have a regular settlement here, we can have a town with churches and a school," a place where families can be raised as God intended, for "God didn't make all the country for one man ... he made it to grow families."

At the end of the funeral, the settlers see Riker's men burning the Lewis's now empty house. The new community is crystallized when Joe tells Lewis, "If we just stick together, we can put the place right back up."

The other settlers concur, and the startled Lewises ask, "You'll do all that for us?"

The reply comes, "Not just for you, for all of us." The new order comes, not through the actions of Shane, though he may have hastened the coming of the final outcome. But the true birth of this new community in this valley comes through them choosing to live not only for themselves as individuals, but also as a group committed to remain faithful to each other and to God's vision.

Riker's selfishness, wanting the entire valley for himself and his cattle, is defeated by the group of people with a vision of themselves as a community. They will dwell together in that Wyoming valley with a life-giving river that runs through it.

At the end of our Epistle lesson, John the Divine describes the River of Life, flowing from the throne of God. Thus we have a vision of abundant life issuing forth from God's throne, flowing through the city to his people. And the water is pure and bright as crystal. The life God promises is perfect.

And beside that river is the Tree of Life.

Back in Genesis, Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden so they wouldn't partake of the Tree of Life. Now, Revelation brings the Bible full circle. In Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were disobedient to God. They ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. And God exiled them from the garden so they wouldn't partake of the tree of life as well.

God even sent an angel with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life. And after humans were exiled from the garden, things started going downhill quickly.

By contrast, in the new Jerusalem, the gates of the city are open. The Tree of Life is accessible to all of God's people.

Genesis is about paradise lost.

Revelation is about paradise regained.

It is a tremendous promise. God's intimate presence in the midst of his people. Light and the River of Life streaming from God's throne. And the Tree of Life bringing healing to all.

It is a tremendous and glorious promise. God reigning forever and ever. And his faithful people gathered around him, reigning with him forever and ever.

Shane ends with little Joey imploring Shane to return even as he is riding out of the valley. His words echo poignantly: "Shane, come back."

Next week we'll hear the last words of Revelation. In the second to the last verse, Jesus says, "Surely I am coming soon."<sup>6</sup>

And John sums up the book of Revelation, and the New Testament, and the bible with this reply. "Amen. Come Lord Jesus."

So be it. Come Lord Jesus.

We await your return. We await your perfect kingdom.

Lord Jesus; come back. Lord; come back.

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<sup>6</sup> Rev 22:20