

We continue our once-a-month look at biblical themes in classic Hollywood movies with one of the most beloved films of all time, *The Wizard of Oz*. It's one of the all-time greats and is a part of our culture. Who doesn't instantly recognize Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion? The Wicked Witch of the West is still ranked as the 4th nastiest movie villain of all time.¹ And "Over the Rainbow" is ranked as the all-time #1 movie song.²

Plus, *The Wizard of Oz* is one of the great 20th century examples of a classic hero's journey in a movie. The ancient world had epic stories with heroes like Gilgamesh or Odysseus going on heroic journeys to distant lands. There they would meet new companions, and they would battle great monsters. Then they would return home with newly acquired learnings.

That archetypal pattern fits *The Wizard of Oz* to a "T." Young farm-girl, Dorothy Gale, dreams of a far-off mythic land somewhere over the rainbow. And then, one tornado later, Dorothy finds herself in a new land of Oz. And that new land is a land that is very different from Kansas. It is a land of vibrant colors. Also a land of singing munchkins and flying monkeys. And it is a land with powerful spiritual forces who are threatening and dangerous. This new land holds both promise and peril.

In Oz, Dorothy is mentored by the wise Glinda. And she makes 3 great friends who help her battle the Wicked Witch. Then she ends her quest by returning home. Classic storytelling. Add to it a catchy soundtrack, elaborate sets, and state-of-the-art special effects for 1939, and you've got a winner.

When I was a kid watching this movie, Oz seemed more real than Kansas. Kansas was two-toned—the film is black and white, or really sepia and white at the beginning and the end. But when Dorothy arrives in Oz, everything becomes technicolor. Oz seemed more real than Kansas—more on that in a few minutes.

In our Gospel lesson today, we have Jesus also going on a journey. Usually in the Gospels most of Jesus' ministry takes place in a rather small geographic area—the northwest shores of the Sea of Galilee.

It's really a tiny space—Jesus usually confines himself to teaching and preaching in an area of about 8 miles of shoreline that extends inland 3 or 4 miles. And when Jesus goes elsewhere, it's almost always in Jewish territory—further inland to Nazareth in Galilee, or south to Jerusalem in Judea.

But twice in the Gospels, the adult Jesus visits non-Jewish, Gentile territories. Once is to the Mediterranean coast, in the area of modern Lebanon. And the other time is in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus crosses the Sea or Lake of Galilee to the eastern shore. This had been a Gentile, Greek-speaking area for more than 300 years, ever since Alexander the Great came rolling through leaving behind Greek city-states.

¹ AFI's 100 Years...100 Heroes & Villains

² AFI's 100 Years...100 Songs

In today's Gospel, Jesus goes diagonally across the lake, only about 10 miles from Capernaum. But he's in a different world. And in many ways, this episode is like an epic story. Jesus and his faithful companions cross over into a new land. Jesus meets a man possessed with an army or legion of demons.

The demons recognize who Jesus truly is: "(The) Son of the Most High God."³

Jesus casts out the demons. He sends them into a herd of unclean Gentile swine. The swine run into the lake and drown. If this seems strange, remember the Jews originally came out of the desert. They were not a sea-faring people. And they regarded large bodies of water as dangerous and devilish places. So, to a good Jew, demon-possessed swine running into a lake was just the demons returning themselves to a demonic place.

And afterward, the people of the region beg Jesus to leave, and he does so. So at one level, Jesus is a heroic figure who sallies forth to do battle with the forces of darkness, and then returns home.

But interestingly, there is another important figure here who is also on a journey. He doesn't travel very far geographically, but don't miss what happens to him.

It is the demon-possessed man who is living in the tombs. His illness or his possession has forced him out of the city and out of his right mind. He's running around naked in the cemetery. We're told parenthetically that folks try to tie him up for his own safety, and yet he is able to break those bonds.

But after Jesus heals him, his description changes. In Luke's words, he is "clothed and in his right mind."⁴

And in the end, he becomes Jesus' first non-Jewish follower. He doesn't return to Jewish territory with Jesus. He stays home. He remains with his people and shares the message of what has happened to him. And it's a subtle yet wonderful turn of phrase that we find in Luke.⁵

Jesus tells the man: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." And then Luke adds, "So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."⁶

Don't miss that switch. "Declare how much God has done for you." And he declared "how much Jesus had done for him."

It's subtle but wonderful. The Gentile man who had been possessed is now equating what God does with what Jesus does.

³ Lk 8:28

⁴ Lk 8:35

⁵ As well as in Luke's source, the earlier version in Mark 5:1-19

⁶ Lk 8:39

This is at the heart of the Christian proclamation. The Almighty and All-powerful God is made known in a new way, in the person of Jesus Christ. God does what Jesus does. Jesus does what God does.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy and her companions first encounter the Wizard, he does appear to them in a rather overwhelming way.

Think of the scene. The disembodied giant holographic green head floating over a green throne, with fire and smoke.

And the loud voice proclaims, "I am Oz, the Great and Powerful."

And if that's not terrifying enough, he calls the Tin Man a "clinking clanking clattering collection of collagenous junk." And he calls the Scarecrow a "billowing bail of bovine fodder." His message is basically, 'You don't count for much. I am great and powerful, and you're not.' That's a scary picture. Maybe the Cowardly Lion's reaction is correct: run away as fast as you can.

And if you want anything from such a Wizard, then you'd better do something to bribe or appease or placate such a powerful being. In the words of the Wizard, "First you must prove yourselves worthy by performing a very small task... Bring me (the Wicked Witch's) broomstick and I'll grant your requests."

A lot of people think of God that way.

To be fair, there are places in scripture where God is described that way. In Exodus God came down upon the mountain in fire and smoke and earthquake to give the Law to the Israelites. God the great and powerful. God the awesome and terrible.

That's a common picture of God. And, yes, God's glory, and power, and awesomeness, and holiness are certainly aspects of his nature. But there's far more to God than that.

Last week we celebrated Trinity Sunday, and the week before was Pentecost. These are reminders that God comes to us in many different ways. But central to Christianity is the proclamation that God walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ. That's the point from our Gospel.

Jesus tells the man, "Declare how much God has done for you." And the man declares "how much Jesus had done for him." In Jesus, we have an experience of God's presence, not in an overwhelming way in the midst of fire, and smoke, but in a person. Jesus does what God does.

And since Pentecost, we also experience God's presence in the person Jesus calls, "The Advocate," and the Holy Spirit.

We know that in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy has three companions, three advocates who journey with her. The Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion all come alongside her. They stand beside her in the face of the Wicked Witch. They walk the path beside her on the journey. Dorothy has done nothing to earn their friendship or their help. It is simply a gift. In Christian terms, it is grace.

This grace, this gift, is not magic. Dorothy has these advocates who are with her. But she still has to go through the difficulties of her journey. These companions don't automatically ensure that Dorothy will never suffer. But they do promise to be with her.

And in the end, the Wizard turns out to be a sham. He's not Oz the Great and Powerful. He's simply a man behind the curtain pulling the levers.

In fact, in the book, the entire Emerald City is something of a sham. It's not even green. In the book it only appears green because the Wizard makes everyone wear green-colored glasses.

Remember when I said that when I was a kid, I thought the technicolor Oz part of the movie seemed more real. Now when I watch it as an adult, I notice that the large pretty flowers and plants look plastic and fake. And the wonderful scenes of the yellow-brick road that seemingly show the road going on toward the horizon, actually abruptly end at paintings on some backdrops at the edges of the set.

Oz turns out to be the illusion. Dorothy finds that she doesn't really want the beautiful imaginary place over the rainbow. She wants the real place with real relationships. There's no place like home.

It turns out her true companions are not really a Scarecrow, Tin Man, or Cowardly Lion. That was the dream. But in reality, they are the farmhands: Hunk and Hickory and Zeke. They didn't rescue her from the witch's castle, but they did pull her out of the pigsty. And there were there waiting along with Uncle Henry and Auntie Em for Dorothy to awaken. Dorothy crosses over into Oz and back to Kansas again. And she now has deeper insight and a new appreciation for home.

In the waters of Baptism, we cross over from one world to another. We pass through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then we return to this world to live our lives in the light of the Cross and Empty Tomb. And we do so as we also look forward to crossing over again, into our true home, God's perfect kingdom, God's eternal kingdom.

And every time we gather on Sunday, and break the bread and share the cup, we proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection until he comes again. And we enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits us in God's heavenly kingdom, the place that will be our true and eternal home.

Jesus has made his home with us. And Jesus is preparing a new place for us in our Father's house. Let us look forward to joining him there. After all, there's no place like home.