

We continue our once-a-month look at biblical themes in Golden-Age Hollywood movies with the 1956 epic, *Giant*. Not only is *Giant* a well-loved Texas classic, partly filmed on location near Marfa in the Big Bend region—it's also Hollywood's first film to mention Texas Tech.

When *Giant* was filmed, the 3 principal stars were all in their 20s: Elizabeth Taylor was 23, James Dean was 24, and Rock Hudson was 29. And yet the movie follows their characters over a period of almost 4 decades, requiring them all to age significantly. That also means that the plot develops a number of long-term, longitudinal storylines as we watch these characters age and change.

In fact, probably THE key theme of *Giant* is about dealing with change. Some characters deal with change in a positive way and grow. Others refuse to change, and they either stagnate or die.

In *Giant*, the changes that confront the characters are basically two-fold: there are external changes in society and circumstances, and there are internal changes in their family.

And in that way, *Giant* resonates with the story of a family we heard about in both our Old Testament and Epistle readings today: the family of Abraham.

The story of Abraham's family is a "giant-sized" epic that makes up more than three-quarters of the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Abraham and his descendants dominate the narrative from the end of Genesis chapter 11 to the end of the book at chapter 50. And Abraham is also mentioned in 71 verses of the New Testament, including the book of Hebrews.

So we hear this morning about Abraham in both Genesis and Hebrews.

In Genesis Abraham is still known by his older name of Abram or Abram.¹ And his biggest concern in Genesis 15 is passing on his inheritance. Abraham doesn't have any land to pass down. But as a nomadic shepherd, he's got considerable holdings of livestock.

God promises that Abraham will have an heir. In fact, his heirs will outnumber the stars in the sky. And Genesis says, "(Abram) believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."² Abraham believed or trusted in God's promises. He had faith in God and was obedient to God. The New Testament will later reflect on Abraham's faithfulness. We'll come back to that in a bit. But bottom line—it is a giant-sized promise from God. And in Genesis, Abraham responds with giant-sized faith or trust throughout the changes that will occur in his life.

In the movie *Giant*, Rock Hudson plays wealthy Texas rancher Bick Benedict, whose west Texas ranch, the Reata, is a sprawling 595,000 acres. When the movie begins, he's back east in Maryland to purchase a spirited stallion named War Winds, for the sum of \$10,000, which when adjusted for inflation would be about \$150,000 today. In Maryland, Bick also falls

¹ "Áy-brum" or "Uh-bráhm"

² Gen 15:6

in love with the owner's daughter Leslie, played by Elizabeth Taylor. Leslie is one of the few who can ride War Winds. Bick and Leslie marry back east, and they and the expensive horse travel back to Texas on the ranch's private railroad car.

A dusty west Texas ranch is very different from a verdant Maryland horse-farm, and Leslie has to try to adapt to her new circumstances. But her new sister-in-law Luz obviously has difficulty adapting to having another woman in the house. Luz also shows a fair amount of disdain for Leslie's lack of ranching experience. And Luz is killed fairly early on when she takes War Winds out for a ride, and brutally tries to break his spirit with her spurs. She is unable to adapt to changing circumstances, and she thinks she knows everything there is to know about horses, and it costs her her life.

As I said earlier, dealing with change is THE key theme of *Giant*. Bick and Leslie have deal with internal changes in their family. They have 3 kids. Bick wants to groom his son to take over running the ranch. The son, Jordy, is played by a VERY young Dennis Hopper. Jordy has no interest in ranching and wants to go to Harvard to study medicine.

Leslie wants their older daughter, Judy, to go to finishing school in Switzerland which Judy has no interest in. Judy wants to go to Lubbock and study animal husbandry at Texas Tech.

Later, Bick hopes that Judy and her new husband can be groomed to eventually run the ranch—but they have no interest in such a giant operation—they just want to have a small place of their own.

So much of *Giant* centers on this family drama and melodrama as the Benedicts deal with changes in their family. And though the movie is released in 1956, it is already also dabbling around the edges of dealing with the changing roles for women that will become a bigger theme in subsequent decades. And a traditionalist rancher like Bick Benedict has a hard time navigating such changes, but he moves forward as best he can.

But the other big part of the *Giant's* theme centers on dealing with societal changes. And much of these plotlines center around the third star and the movie's antagonist, Jett Rink, played in an iconic way by James Dean in his third and final film role.

In *Giant*, Jett is a hand at the Reata ranch who doesn't get along with Bick but is protected by Bick's sister Luz. Upon Luz's death, she wills Jett a small piece of the ranch as his own. Lo and behold, Jett strikes oil on his land, and becomes fabulously wealthy. Bick refuses to let anyone drill on his land, at least until World War II begins. Then he gives in out of a sense of patriotic duty. Thus, the Benedict family goes from being wealthy to being fabulously wealthy.

And again, as circumstances change, both Bick and Leslie show moral growth in spite of their own shortcomings. But Jett Rink does not. He is at best stagnant, or perhaps at worst he lets his wealth amplify his own worst impulses. In the early part of the movie Jett craves respect. But at the end of the movie at a nationally broadcasted event designed to honor him, Jett implodes publicly in a drunken stupor.

Luz refuses to change and it costs her her life. Jett doesn't change and in reality, regresses, and it costs him the respect he craves.

But the Benedict family, Bick and Leslie, and their kids, all grow as they move forward through life's circumstances.

And one of the key areas highlighted by *Giant* is the question of racial equality. Remember the context of our country when movie was released in 1956. Rosa Parks was famously arrested soon after filming ended. And the movie was released during the waning days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Civil rights was very much an active issue.

And *Giant* doesn't deal much with black and white racial issues, except in the scenes set in Maryland. But it heavily deals with Anglo and Hispanic issues in Texas. I don't know if it's intentional, but ironically in the scenes set in Maryland, Bick is polite to the black household servants while Leslie basically ignores them. But when they get to Texas, it flips. Bick is not mean to his Hispanic servants and ranch hands. But he is EXTREMELY condescending and patronizing towards them, and he also thinks Leslie is giving them WAY too much positive attention. He tells her point blank, "Here we don't make a fuss over 'these people'... You're a Texan now."

But Leslie becomes increasingly concerned with the living conditions of their Hispanic employees. And when a child named Angel is sick, she asks the local doctor to go pay a visit. And she is told by her husband, "Our doctor... he doesn't tend 'these people.'" Eventually Leslie secures the services of a Hispanic physician to care for them.

But we see Bick's attitudes evolve over the years. A poignant set of scenes centers on the events when a grown-up Angel goes off to serve as a soldier in World War II. Angel eventually comes home in a flag draped coffin. Before the funeral, Bick is shown opening his personal flag case with the six flags of Texas and removing his Texas state flag. After the military honor guard presents the American flag to Angel's mother, Bick presents his own Texas flag to Angel's father. At one level it may seem an empty gesture. But I believe it shows Bick trying to say, at some level, that he is trying to recognize Angel as a fellow Texan, and no longer one of "those people."

But Bick's biggest growth comes in the following decade when his son, Jordy, marries a Hispanic woman named Juana. And Bick eventually has a half-Hispanic grandson. When Bick sees the prejudicial treatment Juana receives from others, he at first seems to brush it off under the aegis of "What do you expect?"

But eventually, in the penultimate scenes of the movie, Bick literally goes to battle in a fistfight with a diner owner to defend his grandson, his daughter-in-law, and another Hispanic family who are being treated prejudicially. And in the movie's final scenes, Bick and Leslie are admiring their two grandchildren standing in the playpen, one Anglo, and one half-Hispanic. It's clear that the future of Texas will include them both. The message we are left with is that Bick can grow and change. And Texas can grow and change.

Parenthetically, I'm always amazed by our stained-glass windows which are just a few years older than the movie *Giant*. In Lubbock Texas, in the late 1940s, our ancestors here at St. Paul's depict a couple of groupings of cowboys hearing a sermon and receiving communion from the back of a chuckwagon. OK, there are no women pictured. But in the sermon window there is one cowboy who is definitely non-Anglo. I've had discussions with several members about whether he is intended to be Hispanic or African American. The jury is out on that one. But he's definitely not Caucasian. And in the communion window, one of the congregants is unmistakably a Native American. Even in the pre-civil rights days of the late 1940s, our forerunners here at St. Paul's have sent us a message that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for ALL people, regardless of ethnicity or race.

Does that mean that our windows show us that Lubbock reached full racial equality in 1949? Or is *Giant* trying to show that we reached some racial nirvana in 1956? Hardly. But remember 1956 is as close to 1890 as it is to 2022. Texas, and for that matter, the United States have grown a lot during those intervening years. True, we have not reached perfection in the 66 years that have elapsed since *Giant* or since the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But we have made progress, nonetheless. And we still have the opportunity to grow further.

After all, in the opening preamble of our US Constitution, the words "We the people of the United States" are followed immediately with words "in order to form a more perfect union..." We are not perfect. But we hold up as an ideal that we're trying to be more perfect in our union as we move forward. We can continue to grow. And that is a cause of hope as we look to the future.

Which brings me back to Abraham. I don't have time for an extended look at our Epistle lesson. But I do want to highlight one central thing that Hebrews says about Abraham.

Hebrews praises Abraham for being faithful in trying to obey and follow God.³ And it says that Abraham showed that faithfulness as he "looked forward" to God's kingdom coming in all of its fullness.⁴

Looking forward. In that, Abraham is an example and role-model for us. And I would say, so is Bick Benedict and his family.

May God help each of us to continue to grow during our lives. And may we look forward to God's kingdom coming and God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

³ Heb 11:8

⁴ Heb 11:10—the kingdom being represented in this verse by God's perfect heavenly city