

In life, things change. We'd often like things to stay the same. Stability makes us comfortable. And we often hope and prefer that the things we like and the way we're used to doing things will remain constant over time. But the only thing that is truly constant in our world is change.

In our gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus talks about impending changes. Jesus talks about the Temple's future destruction. He says, "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Then Jesus talks about persecution coming for his followers. Then right after our lesson, he also prophesies about the future destruction of Jerusalem and the dark times that will bring.

The disciples were undoubtedly viewing the Temple and the city of Jerusalem as permanent things, things that would always endure, that would remain constant.

But 40 years after Jesus, Jerusalem was invaded, and large chunks the city were destroyed, including the Temple. And in the aftermath, there were huge and seismic changes for the Jewish people that endure to this day.

Sometimes in life there are enormous changes that we have to navigate. We've recently come through a world-wide pandemic, and we're still dealing with some aftereffects. And there are plenty of other changes in our world that can make us nervous.

But we also deal with plenty of changes on a smaller scale. Changes that occur for ourselves and our families. Changes in circumstances at work. Changes that come with growing up and growing older.

Today we continue our once-a-month sermon series looking at biblical themes in classic movies. Our movie today is the 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, the overarching theme is how the two lead characters deal with change, or actually how they don't deal well with change. In fact, *Sunset Boulevard* is on my list because it's a negative example, not a positive one. It is a dark film, ascribed to the 1940's and 50's genre known as *film noir*, which literally means "dark film." But it is instructive, nonetheless.

The first of the two leads is Joe Gillis, played by William Holden. Holden/Joe Gillis is the narrator of the movie. And in total foreshadowing, Joe begins the movie dead. He is shown floating face down in a swimming pool. He reveals in an extended flashback which lasts most of the movie, that 6 months earlier he was a Hollywood screenwriter whose career was going nowhere. His car is about to be repossessed. And he is seriously thinking of shelving his dreams of Hollywood success and returning home with his tail between his legs to Dayton, Ohio.

One day while being chased by the car repo men, he turns into a driveway to hide at what he thinks is a large, abandoned, old Hollywood mansion on Sunset Boulevard. But it's occupied by a former star, the other lead character, Norma Desmond. Norma lives on Sunset, and in a real way the sun had set on her career long ago. But she is in denial about that fact.

When Joe recognizes her for the first time he blurts out,
"You're Norma Desmond. You used to be in silent pictures. You used to be big."

Norma replies with indignation,
"I am big. It's the pictures that got small."

Norma Desmond is played brilliantly by Gloria Swanson. In a real casting coup, with art imitating life, Gloria Swanson, like her character, is also a 50-year-old ex-silent film star who had slipped into obscurity. Gloria was so young looking, however, that they had to use makeup to make her look older like they thought her character was supposed to look.

When Joe meets Norma, she is trying to write a screenplay for a comeback role in a film in which she will star as a young woman. She decides to use Joe to help her hone the screenplay. And even though he knows it's a horrible screenplay, Joe uses excessive flattery so he can land the job and basically use Norma as a meal ticket. She is wealthy and is glad to lavish money and attention upon him, if he in turn will lavish attention upon her. Joe is trying to avoid returning to Ohio. And so he plays off of Norma's desire to return to stardom. And he tries to feed into her insatiable desire for attention and adulation.

It's a horribly dysfunctional relationship they have. And it devolves into a rather nasty downward spiral, with Joe and Norma each trying to use and exploit the other in order to achieve their own purposes.

Their relationship is characterized by self-love and selfishness on both sides. Again, it is a dark film, and neither character grows spiritually. In fact, they both seem to be spiritually empty and bankrupt.

And in a fit of jealousy at the end, their relationship ends with Norma shooting Joe, and him ending up floating facedown in the swimming pool where the movie began.

But there is one last haunting scene. Throughout the movie, Norma's grasp on reality has been tenuous at best. And she finally has a break with reality and descends into madness, literally, as she descends down a staircase in the final scene. Norma is going down the stairs to be arrested and prosecuted, and the news cameras are there to film her apprehension. But she thinks she is filming a scene in a movie. And at the bottom Norma is all excited that she's back in the limelight again. And she gives a little impromptu speech to the "crew" that is gathered there. And then in a final burst of madness she utters the immortal line,

"All right, Mr. De Mille, I'm ready for my close-up."

Well, we've gotten a close-up view of both Joe and Norma. They've both turned out to be manipulative individuals who will stop at almost nothing to achieve their own selfish desires. And Joe ends up dead. And Norma winds up insane. A dark film indeed.

But there are 3 other characters in *Sunset Boulevard* who are more positive examples, though some are more positive than others.

The least positive is Norma's butler Max. We later learn that he is also her ex-husband. And not only that he was one of her silent film directors. And in another brilliant casting incidence of art seeking to imitate life, Max is played by the great Austrian silent-film director, Eric von Stroheim, who decades earlier was a director for a silent film starring Gloria Swanson

The redeeming thing about Max is he is focused on someone else, in this case on Norma. But the problem is that he enables and feeds her fantasies. In the long run, he is thus partially responsible for her eventually break with reality. His motives are good—love and concern for Norma. But Max also lies to Norma incessantly, even writing fake fan letters to her daily. The road to Norma's madness is partially paved with Max's good intentions.

The 2nd minor character who is more of a positive example is the director Cecille B. DeMille who plays a fictitious version of himself. He too had been a fictitious director for Norma Desmond as well as a real-life director for Gloria Swanson. And there are some wonderful scenes where Norma comes to Paramount Studios and is welcomed not only by DeMille but also by some of the old-time crew who remember Norma from a couple decades earlier. This is the emotionally warmest part of the movie. And again, it is art imitating life. The director Billy Wilder was inspired to write in these scenes when he saw the way that the real-life Gloria Swanson was warmly welcomed back to Paramount Studios by the old-timers who worked there.

Now, DeMille won't be totally honest with Norma. He has no intention of making a movie starring her as a 25-year-old seductress. But DeMille also tries to treat Norma with kindness and tactfulness and genuine affection. In the end, perhaps a bit more of a dose of reality might have been more helpful. But DeMille's motives come from a place of genuine concern.

But the third and most positive minor character is Betty Schaefer. She's a young would-be script writer at Paramount. And she spends a fair amount of time collaborating with Joe Gillis on a new script. She eventually falls for Joe.

And even when she learns the truth that Joe is basically Norma's boy toy, a gigolo for hire, Betty doesn't care. Betty pleads with Joe to leave the dysfunction of Norma's Sunset Boulevard mansion behind. But Joe refuses. And Betty sadly has to walk away.

Of all the people in the movie Betty is the one who is ready to make genuine sacrifices out of her genuine love for another. But unlike Max's sacrifices to keep Norma in a world of deception, Betty's sacrifices offered for Joe would bring Joe into freedom. But Joe refuses. It is a dark film, after all.

In the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus says,
"The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

In *Sunset Boulevard*, for Joe, for Max, for Norma, nothing is left. All their world is also thrown down.

Did it have to be that way?

A few moments before he is shot, Joe says,
"Norma, you're a woman of 50. Now, grow up! There's nothing tragic about being 50—not unless you try to be 25."

But Norma refuses.

Fortunately for us, Gloria Swanson didn't refuse. She was a woman of 50 who played a fictitious woman of 50 and she turned in one of the greatest, most iconic performances in the history of cinema.

After that, her career was at a place where she started getting offers again. AND because of the high level of her performance, she could pick and choose roles. She stayed active until she was 75, in her last role playing a fictitious version of herself in a Charlton Heston movie, *Airport '75*.

Gloria Swanson was able to do what Norma Desmond refused to do. In Norma's world, all would be thrown down. In Gloria's world, there was hope and work yet to be done.

Changes will come in life. It's unavoidable.

The choice we have is how will we respond to those changes.

We can deny them and try to live in the past. We can admire past glories in our lives or in the world we used to live in. And we can do everything in our power to deny the changes that are all around us, and try to advance our own selfish goals. That's very much the negative lesson of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Or we can move into the future. We can love and serve God. We can love and serve others.

We can face uncertain times knowing that God loves us.

We can move forward knowing that with God, the best is yet to come.

And unlike Norma Desmond, we will get to share in eternal glory that surpasses and transcends any past glory.

As St. Paul says,
"May (you) know... the hope to which (God) has called you"; and may you find "the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints."¹

¹ Eph 1:18