

At the Movies: 2. From darkness to light
Ephesians 5:8-11, 6:10-13
July 8, 2018
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Today, we look at last year's blockbuster film, Rogue One, from the Star Wars franchise and also turn to scripture for the hope that is possible in a world threatened by darkness. The original Star Wars movie came out in 1977. And over the past 41 years, there are been 9 Star Wars films and two additional films based on the Star Wars theme, earning their creator, George Lucas, and others more than \$37 billion. The stories portray the adventures of characters "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." In them, we see the classic story of good versus evil. There is the Evil Empire lead by the evil Emperor, Darth Sidious, who is in charge of the Evil Empire. He started out good but turned to the dark side. And his assistant is Darth Vader. These two represent the essence of evil. They've given in to the dark side. This dark force wants to put the whole galaxy under its control. And if we look for a counterpart in the Bible, it would be the devil, the embodiment of the dark side, the opposite of what God wants us to do.

In this morning's scripture from his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that we face our own struggle with evil. **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** (Ephesians 6:12) There is a dark side that draws us away from God. We feel that struggle. Sometimes in the frustrations of a day that is not going as we wanted as if we are being kept away from what we need to do or kept from seeing the opportunities that God has for us. Or when we are persuaded to invest our time and energy in things that turn out not to be life-affirming. Sometimes it's the temptation of money, sex and power that we find too tempting to resist. We know the dark side. We look at a world where it can seem like violence, injustice, and hatred are winning. But the message of Scripture is that God is good and God wants what is good. God wants a world where there is kindness and compassion, where love is ultimate law of the universe.

When George Lucas wrote Star Wars, he saw this battle as it is found in Eastern philosophy. There is a life force that contains both good and evil and the struggle is to find the right balance between the two. But the Western thought found in the Judeo-Christian tradition sees this differently. There is a good force that is God and an opposing force that is evil, embodied in the devil. These two forces are not equals, because we know that God will ultimately prevail. In the movie, Rogue One, we see a battle between good and evil where humans have a choice – which way will we live?

Let's look at three of the characters from the movie. First is Orson Krennic. He started out as a good guy, an architectural engineer with hopes and dreams, but inside he had an overpowering ambition to achieve and to have power, and it eventually led him to the dark side where he created a weapon of mass destruction called the Death Star which is capable of destroying an entire planet. We live at a time when humans have created weapons that could destroy all life on this planet and the question is whether our global community has the will to keep that power in check. In this scene, Krennic tests his weapon by destroying an entire city. Listen for his ambition for power. [video #1] Throughout the movie, we see Krennic's quest for power which leads him to do what will destroy others. The Bible is filled with similar stories: Adam eats the fruit in his quest to be like God; Cain kills his brother Abel; King David assaults Bathsheba and then kills her husband; Judas Iscariot ends up participating in the plot to kill Jesus. Our actions may seem minor in comparison, but we all have this tendency to do things we know we should

not do but we do them anyway. One reason we come here each week is to say, “God forgive me and help me to live next week in ways that are pleasing to you.” Paul tells us to place our focus on Christ. **Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness.** (Ephesians 5:8-9) Where do you struggle with the dark side in your life?

Another character in the movie is Chirrut Imwe. He is a blind warrior monk, a wise man who wants to protect other people. He has a mantra that he recites: “I am one with the Force and the Force is with me.” The Force is this life force that permeates the galaxy, and in a way, that’s how we sense God with us. In Acts 17:28, Paul says: **“In him we live and move and have our being.** Each day we invite the Holy Spirit, this life force, God’s presence in us. In this scene toward the end of the movie, rebels have gone to steal the plans for the Death Star from the Empire. Chirrut has been told that in order to upload the plans to the rebel spaceship, someone must flip the switch to turn off the force field. Chirrut decides to do it even though he’s blind. Listen to what he says. [video #2] His words remind me of breath prayers – short phrases spoken when we breathe in and breathe out, reminding us who God is and asking God to be at work in us. Here are two that I use: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Remembering God is with me. When I need forgiveness, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” And as I pray these prayers and connect with the power of the Holy Spirit, I find peace. We might take Chirrut’s words and say, “I am one with the Lord and the Lord is with me.”

Let’s look at the heroine of this story. Her name is Jyn Erso. She is a woman who has been hurt and disillusioned, but she signs on to fight against the evil Empire, to help them steal the plans for the Death Star. She knows where the plans are, and if they can get the plans, the Death Star can be destroyed. She becomes part of the rebellion. She becomes the Christ figure, willing to lay down her life to save others. In this scene, the rebel leaders gather, she describes what the Death Star can do, and how she knows where the plans are that can eliminate the threat. She pleads for the rebels to join her. Listen to her courage in her response to the council. [video #3] This is the turning point. I find it interesting that it is a young person with the vision and courage. The people my age are afraid to do something because they know the risks. All of us were once young, but we forget. It’s often the young who are not deterred by those who say, it can’t be done. This summer students from Parkland, Florida whose lives were forever changed by a mass shooting in their school are on a bus tour across this country. A few weeks ago, they were speaking in Osseo. They are not listening to the voices who say, you can’t do anything about gun violence. Every summer, we send out teams of youth to serve here in Minnesota and other regions of the country, believing they can make a difference – that compassion, kindness, and love still have power over forces of poverty.

In the movie, Jyn says, “Rebellions are built on hope.” The New Testament tells us that the struggle between darkness and light is really a rebellion to push back the darkness. Jesus came to launch a rebellion against darkness, to push back selfishness and greed and injustice in this world. Paul says: **Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then...** Are you ready to join the rebellion? To push back the darkness, to establish the beloved community, this uncommon fellowship that the Bible identifies as the Kingdom of God. A world where people actually love God and love each other.

When Jyn is rejected by the council, who shows up? The misfits. In this scene, they talk about the bad things they have done in the past but they are willing to sacrifice their lives to save others. No matter what they have done in the past, they want to do the right thing and push

back the darkness. [video #4] That's us! We are the band of misfits – we are far from perfect but we come alongside each other trying to live according to the way of Jesus. We work together on homelessness and hunger, the rights of women and children. That's why we sent a missionary to Kenya, believing teen-aged moms and their children have worth and value and can make a difference in this world. Last school year, we sent a team of people into Oakwood Elementary School so that children would have a chance to succeed. We don't just talk about what to do, we have joined the rebellion. And the sign that you've joined the rebel force is your baptism. When an adult is baptized, we say, "repent and be baptized." When it is parents who bring their child, they are saying, I want my child to be part of the rebellion – to push back the darkness.

Are you ready? Regardless of the cost – to be rebels? To join the movement of God's people? To stand for justice and when we see injustice or we see hatred, we take a stand. Jesus said to his disciples: You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before other. What could happen in this neighborhood, this community, this nation, this world, if we did that? In the movie, Jyn and most of those with her sacrifice their lives to push back the darkness. They are successful in destroying the Death Star, but the battle isn't over – there is more light, but there are still dark places in the galaxy. The final word of this story is projected in large letters across the screen – and it is also the final word for those us who join the rebellion launched by Jesus Christ. HOPE. Hope will not be defeated. Every day we have a choice to make: How will we push back the darkness and live in the light?

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of July 8, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Awaken us, O God, to the dawning of a new day. Open our eyes to see the light of your presence and the ways you are calling us to live in your light. Lead us in the way of goodness, righteousness, and truth. Keep our eyes open to the needs of others and send us into the world to show forth the power of the Light that we know as Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Monday, July 9

Scripture: Romans 5:1-4

Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God's glory. Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope.

Observation: Ancient Greeks invented the literary form of the "tragedy," a story that shows humans growing stronger and more noble through enduring terrible suffering. In Romans 5:1-3, the apostle Paul seemed to echo the idea that enduring suffering makes us stronger. But at the end, Paul added "character produces hope," something that never would have occurred to a noble pagan.

Application: In Rogue One, many realists in the rebel group argued that the Death Star weapon's power made it futile to continue resisting the evil Empire. In Paul's day, realists said that the Christian message he preached had no chance of even altering the course of the all-powerful Roman Empire, much less outlasting it. We have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight. Can you think of other instances (such as the American Revolution, the Civil Rights movement) in which hope triumphed over seemingly immovable powers?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, so often this world seems dark and dangerous, and I feel like giving up. Nurture the flame of your hope in my heart as a force that can carry me forward in your kingdom's work every day. Amen.

Tuesday, July 10

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-17

Finally, be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Clothe yourselves with the full armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. For this reason, take up the full armor of God so that you may be able to stand your ground on the evil day, and having done everything, to stand. Stand firm therefore, by fastening the belt of truth around your waist, by putting on the breastplate of righteousness, by fitting your feet with the preparation that comes from the good news of peace, and in all of this, by taking up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take *the helmet of salvation* and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Observation: To an Empire planner who embraced the Dark Side and said the Death Star would bring peace, Jyn's father replied, "You're confusing peace with terror." In the first century that's how the Roman elite also saw it – peace for them, terror for everyone else. But Ephesians saw not just human powers at work, but cosmic spiritual forces—and promised that God's spiritual armor could allow God's people to defeat even "forces of cosmic darkness."

Application: The city of Ephesus held temples of many pagan gods and cults. Paul's list of the powers of darkness in verse 12 were commonplace among the people of his time. What forces in today's world make it hardest for you to hold to your commitment to God? Which parts of God's armor have been most vital in pushing back the darkness in your own life, and in the lives of others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, this broken, violent world did the very worst it could do to you—yet you emerged alive and victorious. Help me to realize that my ultimate security lies with you and your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, July 11

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-3

Now, this is what the LORD says, the one who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel: "Don't be afraid, for I will protect you. I call you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I am with you; when you pass through the streams, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not harm you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer. I have handed over Egypt as a ransom price, Ethiopia and Seba in place of you.

Observation: The rebels fighting the Empire in *Rogue One* faced dangerous, difficult tasks. As they stuck together in the face of reverses, Jyn realized that this was different from many of her earlier life experiences. Isaiah 43 reflected the truth that, sooner or later, difficult times come to all of us. The prophet wrote, "When [not 'if'] you pass through the waters.... When [not 'if'] you walk through the fire." But the promise began with familiar words: "Do not fear."

Application: A Hebrew tradition said evil King Manasseh killed Isaiah. We know Jesus was crucified, and the Romans beheaded Paul the apostle. Does that history mean Isaiah 43's promises were false? Hebrews 2:15 said Jesus' resurrection can "set free [even] those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death." How might fear of death (perhaps not just physical, but financial or social) limit your ability to live for God and others? To what extent has faith in Jesus freed you from even that fear?

Prayer: Lord God, you're the maker and sustainer of all that is, and your word says, repeatedly, "Do not fear." Increase my trust in your loving presence with me in both good times and bad. Amen.

Thursday, July 12

Scripture: Acts 5:17-33, 40-42

Now the high priest rose up, and all those with him (that is, the religious party of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple courts and proclaim to the people all the words of this life." When they heard this, they entered the temple courts at daybreak and began teaching. Now when the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they summoned the Sanhedrin—that is, the whole high council of the Israelites—and sent to the jail to have the apostles brought before them. But the officers who came for them did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, "We found the jail locked securely and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside." Now when the commander of the temple guard and the chief priests heard this report, they were greatly puzzled concerning it, wondering what this could be. But someone came and reported to them, "Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts and teaching the people!" Then the commander of the temple guard went with the officers and brought the apostles without the use of force (for they were afraid of being stoned by the people). When they had brought them, they stood them before the council, and the high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood on us!" But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than people. The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus, whom you seized and killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Now when they heard this, they became furious and wanted to execute them.

...and they summoned the apostles and had them beaten. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. So they left the council rejoicing because they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ.

Observation: In *Rogue One*, the rebels with Jyn took great and costly risks as they faced the Empire's fury and power. When Jesus' first followers faced a "furious" Sanhedrin, they said, "We must obey God rather than humans! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead...We are witnesses of such things" (verses 30, 32). When the authorities beat them, we read that instead of complaining, they astoundingly "left the council rejoicing because they had been regarded as worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name."

Application: At the end of Luke's gospel (of which Acts was volume 2), Jesus told his disciples: "A change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in [Christ's] name to all nations....You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:47-48). When the council and the high priest ordered them NOT to preach, they were crystal clear about who they must obey. Have you ever had to decide whether to obey God or some human authority? If so, what did you decide to do?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, empower me to live a life that, in easy decisions and hard ones, glorifies you through my loyalty and obedience. Help me to never give up on your calling to me. Amen.

Friday, July 13

Scripture: Matthew 21:33-45

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a pit for its winepress, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and went on a journey. When the harvest time was near, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his portion of the crop. But the tenants seized his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and get his inheritance!' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will utterly destroy those evil men! Then he will lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his portion at the harvest."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: '***The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes***'? For this reason I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and the one on whom it falls will be crushed." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

Observation: Jyn (and because of her, the rebels) knew something the arrogant Empire had overlooked. A small flaw in the Death Star made it vulnerable to defeat. (If you've seen the first Star Wars movie, you know how that worked out.) The arrogant religious leaders plotting to kill Jesus looked invincible, too. But Jesus' story said they, like the vicious tenants in the vineyard, had forgotten the vineyard's owner (God). Killing the son didn't make them owners—it only meant the true owner would hold them accountable for their violent actions.

Application: The answer to Jesus' question was too obvious to avoid (verses 40-41). His hearers pronounced sentence—on themselves. To what extent are you willing to submit your life to Jesus? What people and experiences have shaped your willingness to respond to Jesus, either positively or negatively? What steps can you take to ensure that you are not like the wicked tenants in the vineyard?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep growing me into a faithful, responsive servant in your vineyard. Deliver me from the temptations of arrogance, that I may bear a rich harvest, not for my glory but for yours. Amen.

Saturday, July 14

Scripture: Hebrews 6:11-20

But we passionately want each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of your hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises. Now when God made his promise to Abraham, since he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself, saying, “***Surely I will bless you greatly and multiply your descendants abundantly.***” And so by persevering, Abraham inherited the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and the oath serves as a confirmation to end all dispute. In the same way God wanted to demonstrate more clearly to the heirs of the promise that his purpose was unchangeable, and so he intervened with an oath, so that we who have found refuge in him may find strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us through two unchangeable things, since it is impossible for God to lie. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, sure and steadfast, which reaches inside behind the curtain, where Jesus our forerunner entered on our behalf, since he became ***a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.***

Observation: In Rogue One, retrieving the Death Star plans and transmitting them to rebel headquarters cost Jyn and Cassian their lives. It was a high price indeed, but it gave the rebels hope. Jesus' apparent defeat in fact defeated evil, and gave all of God's people an eternal hope. The writer of Hebrews knew we don't become deeply committed followers of God by chance. The letter called its readers (including us) to make sure we grasp that hope and weave it into our way of life. The Message version of the Bible puts verse 11 this way: “I want each of you to extend that same intensity toward a fullbodied hope, and keep at it till the finish.”

Application: The Hebrews understood the Most Holy Place (or Holy of Holies) in their sanctuary, and then the Temple, as the place where God's presence dwelt. A heavy, ornate curtain covered the entrance, and only the High Priest could enter there, once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The letter to the Hebrews said that Jesus had gone into God's presence for us, that our hope is the true High Priest who is in God's presence continually, not just once a year. That is the hope we must make sure until the end, the hope we must grasp and hold fast. What are the things you pursue most intensely right now? How can you translate, and even magnify, that intensity and focus into your spiritual life?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, forgive me for the times when I am apathetic to your presence in my life. Teach me to hear your voice more clearly, and to have a gritty, engaged will to grasp your gift of hope. Amen.