

“The Return of the King(s) and *The Rise of Skywalker*”

Epiphany A (January 5, 2020)

Scriptures: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12

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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

This time last month the pop culture and film worlds were all buzzing with a single question: will the final Star Wars film, *The Rise of Skywalker*, end well? David Itzkoff of *The New York Times* put it more bluntly when he asked, “Will ‘Star Wars’ Stick the Landing?”¹ *The Rise of Skywalker* is the finale of a nine-film series that began before I was born in the late ‘70s - my parents, Star Wars fans both, actually schlepped me, a toddler at the time, into the theatre back in 1980 to see *Empire Strikes Back*. Star Wars has been a Kaden family staple for four decades.

The Rise of Skywalker was released in the U.S. on December 20th - an early Christmas present for galactic fans. Anticipation before the film’s release was thick enough to cut with a knife as teaser-trailers circulated on social media and speculation mounted about how the various 40-year-old plot-lines, like loose threads, would get tied together. And when December 20 arrived, the reviews poured in. The audience Tomatometer on the review site Rotten Tomatoes rated the film an 8.6 out of 10. But film critics were more mixed.² Their Tomatometer gave the film a mere 6 out of 10. Some critics called the film “a relentless thrill ride,” “slickly produced and massively entertaining.” But A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* wrote that “the struggle of good against evil [in the film] fel[t] less like a cosmic battle [and more like] a longstanding sports rivalry between teams whose glory days are receding.”³ Other critics were just haters. One wrote that the film was “nonsensical and convoluted.” “I just couldn’t care” about this film, wrote Richard Trenholm, it is “just rearranging the deck chairs on the Death Star.” Gabriel Sama likened the film to too much food: I wanted the film to be “dessert,” she wrote, instead it was like a “Las Vegas buffet.” “I felt stuffed, but I didn’t feel satisfied.” And Mark Serrels went further still, writing that he “hated [the film] with every fiber of [his] being.” Haters. My perspective on Star Wars films is that they’re like pizza: is there such a thing as bad pizza? I preferred Bob Mandello’s review for NPR. Playing it more or less down the middle, in good NPR fashion, Mandello said, the film didn’t “do anything new or even terribly distinctive, but maybe it didn’t have to. It just had to be good enough to stick the landing, and it [did] that.”⁴

In his book *The Gospel According to Star Wars*, theologian John McDowell of the University of Edinburgh, draws all sorts of connections between Star Wars and the Christian religion - themes like friendship, courage, redemption, love, self-sacrifice, the Force as a model for God, and the hope that good will ultimately triumph over evil. And as with other fantasies like Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, writes McDowell, Star Wars teaches that evil is not a thing.⁵ Evil is presented in each of these films and stories, he says, in the way ancient theologians like St. Augustine described evil. Evil as privation - *privatio boni* in Latin - the

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/movies/star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-ij-abrams.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

² Some of what follows is drawn from one site that collated reviews:

<https://www.cnet.com/news/star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-global-review-best-and-worst/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/18/movies/star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-review.html>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/21/790492541/movie-review-star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker>

⁵ John C. McDowell, *The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 58-61.

absence of good. Good and evil, said Augustine, are like day and night: as darkness is the absence of sun, so evil is the absence of good. Evil “cannot *create*,” he said, it “can only destroy.” Evil advances inside of us and in the world only when we let the good that *is* our nature as God’s creatures recede - an insight illustrated in the Star Wars films when the person of Anakin Skywalker receded, and the hate-filled half-machine of Darth Vader took over. Evil as privation - *privatio boni*.

The power and beauty of epic stories - whether on screen or in books, fairy tales or myths, literary art or biblical literature - the power of great stories, as theologian G. K. Chesterton once put it, is that they can teach us to believe that malicious giants can be toppled, that redemption is always possible, that good is stronger than evil, love stronger than hate, and that the flame of hope can never be completely extinguished.⁶ Stories expand the imagination, says Chesterton, like the stories about the “tremendous figure [that] fills the gospels,” whose “diction,” says Chesterton, was “gigantesque ... , full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea.”⁷ Epic stories. Like today’s story about the magi visiting the young Christ-child.

The arrival of the magi is only told in Matthew’s gospel; and like *The Rise of Skywalker* it is for us the final installment of a series of stories - Christmas stories - Christmas stories that only appear in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Mark and John don’t narrate the birth of Christ). Christmas stories that are filled with epic themes: angelic visitations and heavenly choirs, miraculous dreams, tyrannical villains like Caesar Augustus and King Herod, and stories about common folks becoming heroes: common shepherds as the first witnesses of Christmas; a common carpenter choosing to stick with his pregnant betrothed instead of sending her away quietly; and a common young woman giving birth - a common young woman who also used gigantesque diction when she sang of the proud being toppled and the lowly being lifted up, the hungry being fed with good things and the powerful being cast down from their thrones. And when the angels receded and the shepherds returned to their fields and the songs ended, she enjoyed one of those tender, human moments that are part of all great epics when she sat in meditative silence and “pondered all of these things in her heart.”

It’s after most of the characters of the Christmas cast have moved off-stage that a new set of characters enter the spotlight - the magi. Packed into today’s gospel story - a mere 12 verses long - are more themes than any single sermon could possibly address. A sermon *could* focus on the magi themselves and their boundary-breaking arrival. Matthew never tells us how many magi there were - there were three gifts, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there were *only* three magi. In his masterful commentary on the infancy stories about Jesus, New Testament scholar Raymond Brown traces the history of magi in the ancient world from the descriptions of them found in Greek historians like Herodotus to Roman historians like Tacitus and Suetonius to Jewish historians and philosophers like Josephus and Philo.⁸ The magi were “astronomers” from the Persian east not kings, writes Brown. They arrive in the story to symbolize God’s boundary-breaking celebration of difference and diversity - acceptance of all nations and peoples, as the end of Matthew’s gospel makes so clear when Jesus sends his disciples into all the nations. Yes, a sermon could focus on the magi. A

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Snowball Classics, 2015), 28. I have elaborated on Chesterton’s words here.

⁷ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 108 and 97.

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993 [1977]), 167-168.

different sermon could focus on the theme of gift-giving, so prevalent at this time of year. Gold to symbolize kingship. Frankincense to symbolize deity. And myrrh, an embalming oil, to symbolize and foreshadow Christ's death on the cross. A sermon could be preached on that old theological term "providence," as in God's providential hand protecting the Christ-child from tyranny and guiding the magi to the place of his birth. The Force has a will and the power to guide as Star Wars makes clear. A sermon could be preached on the biblical precedent of this magi story. Matthew tells this story using the exodus story as a template - an ancient story about another child (Moses) being preserved from a tyrannical king (Pharaoh). Such a sermon could move beyond the confines of this story into the stories that follow to describe baby Jesus as a tiny refugee fleeing political persecution in the arms of his parents - fleeing to escape Herod's fanatical decree that all babies two-years-old and younger in Bethlehem should be killed. Such a sermon might draw an analogy to the babies in cages at our southern border. So many themes that one *could* address in a sermon about the magi. A mark of great epic literature is that it can open many avenues of exploration and reflection.

But there's another theme in this story that's worthy of our attention. The theme of wonder. The wonder of the magi as they followed the star. Their wonder as they paid homage and opened their gifts. The wonder of Mary and Joseph as they watched all of this happen. Wonder, as one clergy friend of mine once put it, is the pathway to faith. Wonder opens up the possibility that there is more to this life than simply a crude materialism with no substance, no anchor, no moral compass. For those of you who are Star Wars fans, I *wonder* if it's wonder that Han Solo experienced as his character evolved in the films from skeptic to believer. The 1977 Han Solo in *Star Wars: A New Hope* was a skeptic, calling The Force a "hokey religio[n]." "I've flown from one side of this galaxy to the other," said Han, "I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe there's one all-powerful force controlling everything. There's no mystical energy field that controls my destiny," he says. But the 2015 Han Solo in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is more reflective, pensive, believing. "I used to wonder about [the force] myself," he says. "Thought it was a bunch of mumo-jumbo Crazy thing is," he goes on, "it's true . . . all of it. It's all true." Wonder. Wonder as a pathway to faith.

Wonder is such a childlike trait. Children wonder at the natural world, pausing to smell flowers and watch bees dart and dance, to gape at the expanse of stars in a night sky and then ask questions - always asking questions: how can birds fly, why does the moon glow at night, why are there high and low tides, how were the mountains formed, where does sand on a seashore come from, how do volcanoes work, what's fog, where does snow come from - whys and hows and whats and wheres, so many wonderful questions. Questions we adults, worn down by life's constant drumbeat of schedules and emails and meetings, always rushing off to the next thing - wonderful questions we adults have long since stopped asking (or, if we do, we grab our phone and ask The Google to give us an instant answer). Perhaps it's because of their capacity for wonder that Jesus once told his adult followers that the kingdom of God belongs to children - children who, in their innocence, still have the capacity to trust, to believe, to love, to be loyal, to be vulnerable. . . . to wonder.

Maybe we get too cynical as adults, our capacity to wonder ground down by, or perhaps mirroring the cynicism we see in our elected officials and in our society - the posturing, the playing on fears, the pretense, the pretend-playing the rolls we think we should be playing as

adults. The word “cynic” comes from a Greek word that means “dog.” Cynicism is for the dogs. Life is so much more fulfilling when we let ourselves be wonderstruck, awe-inspired, open to wonder at the flowers and the bees and the stars, the birds, the moon, the tides, the mountains and the sand, the volcanoes and the fog, and yes even the snow. Wonder as a pathway to faith. And faith and wonder are so much more fulfilling and joy-filled than constantly trying to swim against the rip tide of cynicism. G. K. Chesterton wrote that the most profound quality of the faith-filled Christ was his “mirth.”⁹

Let me close today with a story of wonder, told by writer and poet R. A. Nelson.¹⁰ “I learned to read at a very early age,” she says, “and before that, I was being read to. Thus, Story has always been part of my life I love Story - reading it, watching it, writing it, acting it, singing it, dancing it, living it. I love finding Story in unexpected places and creating Story in fellowship with others. When I try to put into words why I love Story, I keep coming back to the word ‘wonder’. The best stories,” she says, “- the ones that have lingered through the years and keep bearing fruit in my soul - are those that filled me with wonder. I remember,” she continues, “the first time I finished reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I was sitting on the couch in the living room of the house where I grew up, near Atlanta, Georgia. It was the middle of the afternoon, with southern sunshine streaming through the windows. I read the final words of *The Return of the King*, closed the book, and . . . sat. I couldn’t move or speak. I was caught up . . . into a whirl of wonder such as I had not known before. An aching mixture of beauty and loss - that which C. S. Lewis calls ‘joy’ - burst into vibrant bloom in my spirit Perhaps I did not think to call it ‘wonder’ then, but I knew that I wanted to spend my life cultivating that feeling and inspiring it in others. . . . [A]s a writer, I labor every day to open that gate afresh. Sometimes, that means stepping through it myself, seeking and embracing stories that inspire that gorgeously painful sense of love and grief and hope. Sometimes it means revisiting the old tales . . . [from] Middle Earth [and] Narnia - I return there often, and always find my soul refreshed. Sometimes, it means trying to shape words into poems or tales that will provide a key for another reader. That is my current quest, and I can imagine no greater privilege - for I think the world needs *wonder*. I certainly do.”

Amen.

⁹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 108.

¹⁰ <https://ranelsonwriting.com/story-wonder/>