



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

As we heard this past week on Ash Wednesday, "Have you ever seen in your lifetime so much attention given to Jesus? Have you ever heard so many people talking about Jesus in the press, in the supermarket, in the restaurant, in the church? Everywhere you look people are wrestling with the personal question, "What do you do with Jesus?"

I am old enough to remember some forty years ago or so when a major magazine had the headline, "Is God dead?" Now everyone seems to be talking about Jesus

Much of that interest, of course, has come from the movie "the Passion of the Christ." Huge numbers of people have flocked to see the film, including several theaters full from Lutheran Church of Hope. Many more people are planning on seeing the movie over the weekend. For all of us who have been in attendance we would tend to agree that while difficult to watch, it is one of the most profound movies ever made. It is very hard to be detached or unmoved by this experience, rather most people have been very personally engaged with Jesus.

Many perceptive and enlightening reviews of the movie have been written (as well as many which have seemed to miss the entire point). One of the best that I have found was written by Ken Woodward, a well-known religion writer who has graced the pages of Newsweek magazine for many years. I found the article in an unlikely place, the editorial pages of the New York Times, which for the most part has been harshly critical of the movie.

Woodward writes, "Watching the Passion of the Christ, Mel Gibson's new movie, I kept thinking the following: it is Christians, not Jews, who should be shocked by this film. Mr. Gibson's raw images invade our religious comfort zone, which has long since been cleansed of the Gospels' harder edges."

"Most Americans worship in churches where the bloodied body of Jesus is absent from sanctuary crosses or else styled in ways so abstract that there is no hint of suffering. In sermons, too, the emphasis is all too often on the smoothly therapeutic; what Jesus can do for me.

More than 60 years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr summarized the creed of an easygoing American Christianity that has in our time triumphantly come to pass:

'A God without wrath brought me without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.' Despite its muscular excess, Mr. Gibson's symbol-laden film is a welcome repudiation of all that. The Passion of the Christ is violent, no question. Although Mel Gibson the believer identifies with a traditionalist movement that rejects Vatican Council , Mel Gibson the artist here displays a thoroughly Catholic sensibility, one that since the Middle Ages has emphasized Jesus as the suffering savior crowned with thorns. Martin Luther, too, would have recognized in this film his own theology of the cross."

Woodward has a powerful conclusion in the article as well:

"Jesus is a Jewish prophet rejected by the leaders of his own people, and abandoned by his handpicked disciples. Besides taking an awful beating, he is cruelly tempted by a Satan whom millions of church-going Christians no longer believe in, and dies in obedience to a heavenly Father who, by today's standards, would stand convicted of child abuse. In short, this Jesus carries a cross that no many Christians are ready to share.

"It's easy, of course, to contrast third-millennium Christian mores with the story of Christ's Passion. Like other Americans, Christians want desperately to know they are loved, in the words of the old Protestant hymn, "just as I am." But the love of God, as Dorothy Day liked to put it, 'is a harsh and dangerous love' that requires real transformation. It is not the sort imagined by today's spiritual seekers who are "into" Asian religions."

"Significantly the Passion and death of Jesus is the chief element in the Gospel story that other religions cannot accept. In Islam, Jesus does not die on the cross because such a fate is considered unfitting for a prophet of Allah. By Hindus and Buddhists, Jesus is often regarded as a spiritual master, but the story of his suffering and death are considered unbecoming of an enlightened sage. Like the Buddha, the truly liberated transcend suffering and death. But Jesus submits to it, willingly,

Christians believe, for the sins of all.”

“Were we a nation of Bible readers, not just Bible owners, I don’t think a film like Mr. Gibson’s would cause much fuss. While I do not think that the Passion of the Christ is anti-Semitic, I do think it presents Christians with a “teaching moment.” But the lessons have more to do with forgotten Christian basics than with who killed Jesus.”

Pastor Mike amplified some of these themes, “ I think we’re missing the point when we turn the Passion of Jesus Christ into a debate over who is to blame for his death. The far bigger point, in fact the central point of Christianity and the entire Bible, is that Jesus died, and was raised from the dead to win a victory over sin, death and the devil for all who believe in him. This gift of new and eternal life is offered freely by God for all the people, Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics and atheists. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, so all of us bear responsibility for his death.

“Jesus insists that his followers (Christians) love all people. Therefore, it is not Christian to see a movie like this and respond with anything but love. Only bigoted, hate-filled people could twist it into an excuse for denigrating someone’s religion. All Christians must stand together with our Jewish friends in strict opposition to any person or group who might use this story to fuel the fire of hatred and prejudice.”

The Passion of the Christ is a story about God’s supreme love for the whole world, and it demonstrates just how far God will go to assure us of this love. It is a story of hope that our hurting world desperately needs to experience, perhaps more than we are willing to admit, because it forces us to acknowledge that truth of our need for a Savior. The secular media’s collective chin drop over the attention and popularity of this movie points to a very hopeful fact: the church, a sleeping giant, is waking up and the world that does not yet know Jesus and his life is not quite sure how to handle that. They need not be concerned. A fully awakened church is driven by love, not power.”

Pastor Mike concludes, “I believe that God has his hand of blessing on this movie, and it will have a very powerful and positive impact on our world. Like another wildly popular movie, “The Lord of the Rings,” The Passion tells a fascinating and inspirational story. The difference in the two movies is that this story is true.”

PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE

I read somewhere that Rick Warren’s book “Purpose Driven Life” has sold 13 million copies. It is hard to imagine, a Christian, hard-bound book selling that many books. But apparently there is a huge outpouring of people who want to grow in their faith and want to find some kind of Christ-centered purpose in life.

At Lutheran Church of Hope, the response has been nothing short of phenomenal. I remember some months ago Pastor Mike suggested a goal of having a thousand people involved in PDL, a wildly optimistic goal. Today there are more than 1400 people who have signed up to be a part of this adventure, with many more who are participating in already existing small groups. In addition Immersion will follow PDL as well, and the children in Kingdom Quest are participating in a children’s version.

By way of a reminder, PDL has three components. The first is centered in worship. At each of the weekend services the sermon will respond to the PDL themes for the week. Be sure to worship each week to get the full impact of the study, of it you are out of town on a weekend you can secure a tape of the sermon.

The second part of the experience is reading the book Purpose Driven Life. Copies are available at much reduced prices at the church, just covering our costs. The book is divided into forty chapters, following very cleanly the forty days of Lent. We are asking that each person commit during their quiet time over the next six weeks to read the chapters during his or her quiet time.

And then the third component will be in the evenings, namely Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. On each of these evenings a short presentation will be made by either Pastor Mike or Caroline Boehnke-Becker, followed by a small group experience. So far over 125 small groups are being formed, with 250 new hosts who are going through leadership training. All of the existing groups who are participating can secure a DVD of Pastor Mike’s talk and study questions. Contact Barb Crist for more information.

Nothing like this has happened before in this place, where so many people are going deeper together in their faith, studying together, growing together, experiencing God’s grace and love together. Want an opportunity! Don’t miss it!