

The Force Awakens

Luke 3:7-18

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2015]

I

"Long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ..."

These are the words that appear on the screen at the beginning of every *Star Wars* movie.

They signify that we are about to enter a story that transcends time and space.

Those words first appeared on Memorial Day weekend 1977, when the original *Star Wars* film hit the silver screen.

Those of you of a certain age will remember what it was like to see *Star Wars* for the first time—

the buzz of excitement,
the packed theaters,
the stirring musical score by John Williams,
the audience breaking into cheers when the Death Star exploded.

And it was not a movie you saw just once, but over and over and over.

There were reports of people seeing *Star Wars* as many as ten, twenty, even thirty times (For you young folks, this was long before DVDs and Netflix.).

I saw *Star Wars* five times, and the fifth time was at the world-famous Chinese Theater in Hollywood—quite a place to see a movie.

Star Wars fans eagerly awaited the next two films in the series—
The Empire Strikes Back in 1980,
and *Return of the Jedi* in 1983.

In 1999, a trio of prequels was launched—

The Phantom Menace,
Attack of the Clones,
and *Revenge of the Sith.*

Now, after a ten year wait, the first of three more films is to be released this Friday:

The Force Awakens.

It promises to be the monster film of the Christmas season.

Advance ticket sales have already exceeded \$50 million dollars and could reach over \$100 million. It could turn out to be the highest grossing film of all time.

Set 30 years after the events of *Return of the Jedi*, the movie features some new characters alongside the heroes of previous *Star Wars* installments—

Luke Skywalker,
Han Solo,
and Princess Leia.

You'll see Stormtroopers, X-wing fighters, the 'droids R2-D2 and C3-PO, light sabers, the Millennium Falcon, Chewbacca—
they're all back.

And, of course, you'll experience "the Force."

Defined by Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi as...

"...an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together."

The Force has a light side and a dark side,
and can be used for good or evil.

"The Force is strong in my family," says Luke Skywalker in the new film.
"My father has it. I have it. My sister has it. You have that power, too."

II

The Force of *Star Wars* is powerful, but in Luke 3 John the Baptist proclaims the awakening of an even stronger Force.

John preaches to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him in the River Jordan.

He calls on the people to repent—
to change their ways,
to get ready for the coming of the Messiah.

"You brood of vipers!" he shouts. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7).

The only way for people to avoid judgment is to change their behavior and "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (v. 8).

John wants the people to focus on the light side of the Force and use it for good instead of evil.

John's message fits the world of *Star Wars* because it reminds us that *the greatest evil is the evil that comes from within,*
not the evil that attacks us from the outside.

As one *Star Wars* fan (Bill Reidway) puts it...

"Any one of us—even the best of us—can give in to fear, anger and hatred if we're not vigilant; those are powerful emotions that can blur our senses and cause us to lose sight of what true goodness is."

It reminds me of that famous quote of Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

The crowds that came to be baptized by John found their security in having Abraham as their ancestor.

But John reminds them that God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones that line the river bed. (v. 8).

Goodness doesn't come from being a branch on Abraham's family tree.

Instead, goodness comes from doing good.

John challenges the people to be like trees that bear good fruit (v. 9).

He wants them to avoid the fate of Darth Vader, who fell from grace because he forgot that goodness is expressed only through our love for others.

Vader wasn't always this way.

As you recall, he started out as Anakin Skywalker—
a precocious little boy, so powerful in the Force that many thought he was
"The Chosen One" who would bring balance to the Force.

It was Anakin who said to his mother, *"Mom, you said the biggest problem in the universe is no one helps each other."*

Early in life, Anakin was devoted to helping others.

He used the Force to do good,
protect the innocent,
and fight for peace and justice.

But then Anakin lost his way.

Seduced by the Dark Side, he became so obsessed with his own passions and fears that they ended up taking over what made him truly human—
his empathy and concern for others.

"Anakin stopped caring about individuals. He thought of himself as the wisest, the strongest and the purest; and, finally, he allowed his own ambitions to justify truly terrible actions against others." (Bill Reidway)

Anakin always saw himself as the Good Guy,
but in the end he failed to bear good fruit.

Through his actions he became the evil Darth Vader,
and like branches cut down and cast into the fire,
his life came to a sorrowful end.

III

The crowds coming to hear John preach want to avoid this fate,
so in verse 10 they ask,
"What then should we do?"

That question is as important today as it was in the first century.

What should we do...when terrorist attacks at home and abroad inspire fear and stir up feelings of intolerance and hatred toward "the other?"

What should we do...when presidential candidates call for banning followers of a particular religion from entering our country?

What should we do...in the face of crushing human need here in our community?

Notice what John calls for:

compassion,
respect,
tolerance,
deeds of love and mercy.

**"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none;
and whoever has food must do likewise" (v. 11).**

Tax collectors should collect no more than the proper amount,

and soldiers should resist the temptation to extort money from people. (12-14)

Keep your empathy alive, says John.

Live in ways that are fair, just, and focused on caring for needy individuals.

Being good comes from *doing* good,
not just thinking of yourself as the Good Guy.

When God's Force awakens in each of us,
we are challenged to channel it into concrete actions of justice,
compassion,
and mercy.

At the same time, we recognize that each of us is a sinful, fallible human being,
as susceptible to sin as was Anakin Skywalker on the path to becoming
Darth Vader.

Each of us needs a powerful and godly leader to keep us on the right track, and to
save us when we go astray.

That leader is called "the Messiah" (v. 15).

John knows that he cannot play this role himself, so he says,

**"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is
coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will
baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"** (v. 16).

John points the people toward Jesus the Messiah,
foretelling that Jesus will offer a baptism that includes
the purifying and enlivening force of the Holy Spirit.

Each of us needs to be filled with the Spirit if we are going to follow Jesus and live
out our faith as his disciples in the world.

We cannot consistently bear good fruit through human effort alone,

for we require a Force greater than ourselves.

IV

Now at this point when we hear John say,
 be kind, honest, and fair in your dealings with others,
 some of you are probably tempted to say:

Come on, John. This is pretty much what we learned in kindergarten. Is this really all it takes to avoid judgment and enter into God's kingdom?

Apparently, John's answer is, *Yes!*

And apparently everything—
 from John's warning about judgment to his ethical exhortations—
 looks different in light of Christ's coming.

John implies that the coming of Jesus affects every dimension of our lives,
 including how we regard each other and our ethical obligations to one
 another and the world.

God's kingdom doesn't show up only in grand actions or heroic deeds.

Rather, in the simple acts of sharing what we have,
 treating each other with compassion and respect,
 working hard and being just and fair in all our dealings,
 we are helping to usher in the kingdom
 that Jesus will soon announce.

So one of the primary ways we can witness to God's coming kingdom is to
 actually live as though it's already here,
 like we believe it is really coming and it really matters.

Which means that we have opportunities all around us,
 every single day,
 to be the ordinary saints John calls us to be.

And lest we think our everyday actions of being honest, kind, and compassionate
 don't matter, ask yourself this:

What would it look like if the candidates running for president acted this way?

What about our elected leaders?

Or our business leaders?

Or our law enforcement officers?

I think the whole world would look a whole lot better.

But let's not stop there...let's get even more personal:

What would it look like if today each of us went forth from this worship service looking for opportunities to be honest and kind,
hardworking and compassionate?

What if we determined to seek out such opportunities because we believe that extraordinary acts of grace are within reach of ordinary people?

What if we believed—
and acted on the belief—
that being honest and kind,
respectful and tolerant in a culture that is impatient,
immature, and fearful really does make a difference?

Keep in mind where we are—
half way through Advent,
but living in a nation and a world constantly afraid
that the next terrorist attack or random act of violence
is just around the next corner.

And because of this fear we change how we live,
arm ourselves to the teeth,
and, at times, even forget who and whose we are.

And when we do that, the terrorists have won.

So what might happen if we pledged,
in light of the dangerous world we live in,

to redoubled our efforts to be honest, kind, and compassionate?

What if we truly committed ourselves to showing Christ's love to the people around us,

reaching out to the lonely and the oppressed,
 welcoming refugees desperate for a better life,
 and thereby giving witness to our confidence that Jesus' life,
 death, and resurrection do make a difference?

I think what would happen is that we would not only have a noticeably better world but also a more vibrant church,

one animated by the Force of John's conviction that
"all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

I know all this can seem like small potatoes when the whole world feels at times like it's falling apart.

But I think that's part of the Force of John's message and Jesus' witness—
 that precisely because God has promised to redeem all creation in due time,
 we are free—
 here and now—
 to tend the little corner of the world in which we find ourselves.

There are, according to John and Jesus, no small gestures,
 but rather varied—and contagious!—acts of both random and intentional
 kindness that really do make a difference in the world,
 particularly when caught up in the faith that in Jesus,
 God has drawn near to shower us—
 all of us—
 with the good news of grace,
 mercy,
 and redemption.

V

At the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* (widely regarded as the best film of the franchise) Luke Skywalker experiences a monumental shock to his system—
 he discovers that Darth Vader is his father.

Luke sees that he is cut from the same cloth as his father,

and he struggles with how good and evil can co-exist in the same family.

This is why in the new film he says,

"The Force is strong in my family. My father has it. I have it."

Luke is counseled by his mentors that the only way to defeat Darth Vader is to confront and destroy him.

But what does Luke do?

"Instead of relying on violence to defeat violence, Luke reacts with compassion for Vader—he responds with love. Not an abstract or ceremonial love, but a concrete, self-sacrificial love for the human being that Darth Vader is, even with all his faults." (Bill Reidway)

At this point in the *Star Wars* saga, Luke Skywalker becomes a Christ-figure and the Force becomes a truly Christian power.

Like Jesus, Luke Skywalker cares more about real people than he does about abstract ideals.

Like Jesus, Luke shows sacrificial love for his friends, his sister and finally his father.

Luke's readiness to die for the ones he loves is the key to the defeat of ultimate evil—just like Jesus on the cross.

"There has been an awakening," says a character in *The Force Awakens*.
"Have you felt it? The dark side and the light?"

At Christmas, there's an awakening as well.

God's Force comes into human life and challenges us to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

It offers concrete examples of what it means to act with compassion and justice—

feeding the hungry,
 clothing the naked,
 and welcoming the stranger.

It presents a Messiah who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire,
 offering us cleansing and inspiration so that we
 can behave with sacrificial love.

"Have you felt it? The dark side and the light?"

Each of us is challenged to open ourselves to God's force,
 to receive the help of Jesus the Messiah.

With this Force, we can walk in the light and support efforts to build a world of
 tolerance, love, respect, and compassion for the neediest of our planet.

With this Force, we can warmly welcome refugees from Syria and other places,
 the way the Prime Minister of Canada did this week.

With this Force, we can join with 194 other nations in addressing the climate crisis.

The power of *Star Wars* is that it will reach millions of people and deliver a
 positive message to Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists—
 both in the United States and around the world.

It will draw people together, and remind us that we have more in common than that
 which separates us.

*"When the biggest box office draw for 2015 is a Star Wars movie," says Bill
 Reidway, "it means that the world is experiencing something uplifting and
 hopeful, together."*

VI

And so, my friends, *The Force Awakens* arrives in just five days and just seven
 days after that we celebrate the awakening of God's Force—
 not in a galaxy far, far away,
 but transforming the world in which we live,

making us more caring and compassionate,
more selfless and generous.

This Force is at work today in our homes,
in our schools,
in our church,
and in our community.

This Force awakens most visibly in the person of Jesus,
the Child born in Bethlehem,
who became the Savior of the world.

The Force is strong in him,
and in his Father,
and in all those who follow his example of faithfulness and service.

In the words of Luke Skywalker:
You have that power, too.

Amen.

Sources:

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