

March 19, 2017 – Arrival

John 4:5-30

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the third Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." Each week we are exploring a theological or spiritual theme that arises from an Oscar-nominated film. Today we will be talking about Arrival, a movie that was nominated for eight Academy awards, including Best Picture. It is interesting to note that this American Science Fiction film was directed by a French Canadian named Denis Villeneuve and much of the principal photography was done in Montreal.

Arrival is a film about aliens from outer space landing on earth. They arrive in gigantic spaceships that touchdown in twelve locations around the world. One of those spaceships lands in Montana, in the middle of nowhere.

The American army chooses specialists to come and help them find out why these aliens have travelled to earth. One of these specialists is a linguistics professor named Louise Banks. It is her job to try and communicate with these visitors from another world. When Louise and the other specialists enter the alien spaceship they find two squid-like beings each with seven limbs. They quickly determine that they have no language in common, so they will be starting from scratch as they attempt to communicate with these extra-terrestrial beings.

Meanwhile, the nations of the world are in an uproar. There are all kinds of theories about why these alien beings have arrived. Most of the theorists assume that the aliens are going to attempt to take over the world. Many voices are asking why the aliens have not been immediately destroyed or at least attacked. This movie gives us a perfect example of xenophobia - the fear and hatred of anything or anyone that is strange or foreign.

It's uncanny how this film speaks to the current state of politics in the United States and in the world. We have a White House that continues to spread this type of fear and hatred through twitter, through campaign-style gatherings and especially through their immigration policy. We have politicians in many countries in the world, including Canada, who are running on platforms of fear and hatred. Political divisions are growing even wider and one of the main weapons being used is language.

Divisions between different cultures & different religions have existed for thousands of years, so it is no surprise that they existed while Jesus was on earth. In today's scripture passage Jesus and his disciples are travelling north from Judea to Galilee, and Jesus has chosen to take the most direct route - through Samaria. Samaritans are Israelites, descendants of Jacob just like the Jews, but at some point a schism has occurred, and now they are treated as outsiders. Their main religious difference is that the Jewish people see the temple in Jerusalem as their holiest place, while the Samaritans choose to

worship God on Mount Gerizim. These differences have resulted in hostility and fear.

It is noon hour and Jesus is tired as he stops by a well near the town of Sychar. His disciples head downtown for food and Jesus takes a moment to rest. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well and Jesus asks her for a drink. She replies, "You're a Jew. How can you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?" In fact, she could have also asked him why he was speaking to a woman since that was taboo in their middle-eastern culture. It is obvious that Jesus and the woman both speak the same language and yet, because of their cultural and religious divides, they have difficult barriers to overcome in order to communicate.

In Arrival, scientists in each country where the aliens have landed make initial attempts to communicate using various methods such as mathematics, sounds and even games. Louise quickly decides that she is going to use written language in order to connect with the aliens who have landed on American soil. And when she does we are introduced to the beautiful, circular script of the alien language. This script is complicated, each image having many parts and, initially, their full meaning is beyond her comprehension.

Fully understanding this language is a critical component in determining the alien's mission on earth. In fact, Louise was chosen for this job because she

understands the key role that language plays in society and she has a nuanced understanding of how language shapes and is shaped by culture.

This is the same role that translators of our scriptures have undertaken each time they go back to the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. They work with anthropologists and other cultural experts to try to understand how language was used and interpreted thousands of years ago and then they attempt to choose the best possible words for our understanding. And they don't always agree. This is why we have so many English translations of the Bible.

In this particular passage there is one phrase that is the same in every translation that I could find. When Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman, he says, "If only you recognized God's gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him for a drink instead, and he would have given you living water." "Living water" – this phrase is the same in every translation. Jesus, referring to the well, says, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never be thirsty." Jesus is, of course, using this image of water to tell this foreign woman about the Holy Spirit, the Essence of Love, the Ground of our Being. He is explaining that when we drink of God's love we are filled with a love, a source of life, that never ends.

In an attempt to communicate across culture and religion, Jesus uses an image that is part of this woman's everyday life. The Samaritan woman lived in a desert-like climate where water was often scarce and therefore a precious

commodity. Every day she had to walk to the well, fill her jar with water and carry this life-giving liquid back to her family. This image of living water became a bridge in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman.

Like the alien language, the image that Jesus uses is rich and complex. Think of all the ways that we can imagine God just with this one image of water: the source of life, a flowing river, a deep pool, a massive ocean, rain falling to earth, clouds in the sky, an unending spring or fountain. Think of how getting wet in the rain can be cold and uncomfortable OR refreshing and even exhilarating, just as the presence of the Spirit can impact us in many different ways.

Language can quickly create a bond of understanding between people. But, as our current political situation illustrates, it can just as easily be used to divide us. The movie, *Arrival*, reminds us that language is the cornerstone of every culture and that we need to be patient, to listen and use language as a means for peace and understanding. As we move through this Lenten season let us follow Jesus' example and search for words and images that will connect us with each other and with the love of the Holy Spirit. And may we continue to be refreshed in the river of living water.