

2019 03 17 – A Star is Born

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Today is the second Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the second Sunday of this year's Lenten movie series. This pilgrimage through popular cinema is an opportunity to theologically and spiritually explore some of the movies that were nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. Last week our guest preacher, Rev. Ray Friesen, introduced the series with the movie, "*Vice*." This week we will be using some of the words and images from "A Star is Born." I know that at least some of you have already watched the film, because we had 13 people at our matinee showing on Friday.

"A Star is Born" is about a famous musician named Jackson Maine who discovers and falls in love with a struggling young artist named Ally. Ally has just about given up on her dream to make it big as a singer until Jackson coaxes her into the spotlight. Their relationship grows and about half way through the movie they are married in an impromptu ceremony with a ring made out of a twisted guitar string. But not everything in their relationship was easy. Those who watched can tell you that are scenes filled with Ally and Jackson swearing at each other. This movie is a romantic musical that takes us on the emotional rollercoaster that is Ally and Jackson's marriage.

Relationships are not easy, but they are at the core of who we are as human beings. A relationship can be blood (familial), romantic, business, casual or all-consuming. They can give us comfort, stability, love, companionship, an

income, a purpose, friendship and joy. They can also bring pain, sorrow, anger, disappointment and heartache.

Jackson and Ally's relationship is like an emotional rollercoaster for several reasons: first, Ally's career is taking off at the same time that Jackson's is declining so he is struggling with jealousy and professional insecurity; second, Ally's manager is trying to convince her to change her style of music and Jackson is concerned that she will lose her true self in the process and, finally, Jackson has been fighting an addiction to both drugs and alcohol for his entire adult life and he's starting to lose the battle. It's not clear whether their love will be strong enough to overcome these obstacles.

Similarly, in today's scripture passage Abram is struggling with a key relationship: his relationship with YHWH, with God. Sometime before, YHWH had promised Abram that he and his wife Sarai would have many descendants and that this multitude would live in a rich and bountiful land. Abram had done everything that YHWH had asked. He had travelled a long distance into a foreign land. He had dealt with famine and even war. And still Abram and Sarai were childless. So Abram complained to YHWH saying, "Sarai and I will die in disgrace... Since you have given me no offspring, an attendant in my house will be my heir."

YHWH reassured Abram saying, "This person will not be your heir. Your heir will be of your own flesh and blood." Then God took Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can! As many as that, you will have for descendants." The scripture tells us Abram believed that YHWH would

somehow provide him an heir. But when God promised him land he wasn't so sure, he said, "how will I know that I will possess it?" In other words, "How do I know that you are going to live up to your side of this relationship?" How can I trust you?

Every relationship we enter into has rules or agreements that go with it.

Sometimes these rules are cultural and therefore unspoken (e.g. yes, it's OK to look me in the eyes when we first meet, or no, it's not). Sometimes they can be agreed to verbally (e.g. let's get together every Tuesday, for lunch). Sometimes a written contract is required. And sometimes these rules need to be demonstrated through ritual or action. These rules of engagement, this relationship agreement that we make with each other is called a covenant.

In Hebrew, the word "covenant" is derived from the verb "to cut." In Abram's time people would often form important relationships by together taking a knife and cutting a sacrificial animal in half. Through this ritual they were basically saying, "May this happen to me if I violate our agreement."

This was the ritual that YHWH used to satisfy Abram's concern. Abram cut the animals in half and fire moved between the carcasses. Just as we use the Christ candle to represent the presence of the Spirit, the Hebrew people recognized YHWH's presence in the smoking pot and the flaming torch. Through this ritual Abram knew that God was trustworthy and would keep God's side of the covenant.

Jackson and Ally also made a covenant with God and with each other. They stood in front of a minister in a church and they made vows to each other, vows of love, trust, fidelity, and care. Even though this marriage happened quickly, possibly even on a whim, it was also very real for both of them. They truly wanted their relationship to work. I think “Shallow,” one of the songs that they sing together in the movie describes this commitment. In it they sing:

I'm off the deep end. Watch as I dive in.

I never meet the ground.

Crash through the surface,

where they can't hurt us.

We're far from the shallow now.

Their love and commitment is real and deep. Together Jackson and Ally are swimming in the deepest part of the pool of life. Together they are hoping to live lives of truth, freedom and love. I'm not going to tell you the end of the movie. All I'm going to say is that even with that love and that commitment there are no guarantees. All we can do is strive to be the best acquaintance, friend, employee, boss, partner or spouse that we can be.

In ‘Celebrate God’s Presence,’ the United Church’s book of worship services, the introduction to the section on marriage includes these words:

For Christians, our relationship with God and with each other is rooted in our understanding of covenant. We know God as faithful,

loving, compassionate and just. We are called to embody this in our own relationships with each other. (Celebrate God's Presence, page 376)

We are called to be faithful, loving, compassionate and just while knowing that we are also human and therefore we will make mistakes, we will disappoint, and we will, at times, fail horribly. Despite our best intentions, sometimes our relationships will end in disaster.

The good news is that no matter what happens in our lives and in our relationships we are not alone. The one promise, the one covenant that will never be broken is the unconditional and everlasting love of YHWH, of God, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being.

In fact some scholars would argue that even though Abram prepares the sacrifice, it was YHWH alone that ratified the covenant by passing between the pieces. Therefore, God's covenant with Abram, was actually unconditional and unilateral, just like God's covenant with us. (The Inclusive Bible, page 12)

No matter how far we stray, no matter how alone we feel, our relationship with the Holy Mystery can never be severed. We will always be the beloved children of God; YHWH will never let us go.