

2021 02 21 – Mank

Mark 1:9-15 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the first Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." This pilgrimage through popular cinema is an opportunity for us to theologically and spiritually explore some of the movies that were nominated for awards this year. You'll notice I didn't say Academy Awards. You see, COVID-19 has impacted the movie industry too. So much so, that some of the movies going up for awards this year haven't even been released, the Academy Awards have been postponed to April, and the list of Oscar nominations has not yet been published. When I was choosing the movies for our series this year, I felt like I was working in the dark. But I'm happy to say that our first movie, *Mank*, has been nominated for a Golden Globe.

Mank is a biographical film about screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz and his development of the screenplay for the movie, *Citizen Kane*. So basically, it's a movie about a writer, writing a movie. But not just any movie. *Citizen Kane*, was released in 1941, and many in the industry call it, "the greatest film ever made." In fact, in 1942, *Citizen Kane* won the Oscar for best screenwriting and that award was shared by Mankiewicz and Orson Welles, the young actor who produced, directed and starred in the film. Neither of them were there to accept the award, but in the movie, when Mankiewicz was handed the Oscar outside his home, he said, "I am very happy to accept this award in the manner in which the screenplay was written. Which is to say, in the absence of Orson Welles." One of the main themes explored in *Mank* is the question of who actually wrote the script for "the greatest film ever made." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizen_Kane

But, controversial as that be, it's not the theme that I want to talk about today. Instead, I want us to consider the namesake of the film, Herman J. Mankiewicz. So what do we know about this man? Mank, like many people in the film industry in those days, is the son of German Jewish immigrants. He is brilliant, has a quick wit and is recognized as one of the best screenwriters in the business. In fact, at the beginning of the sound era he was one of the highest-paid writers in the world. Mank is also a beloved husband and the father of three children.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_J._Mankiewicz

Throughout the film we also learn that Mank has a sense of justice and compassion. We find out that, in the 1930's, he used his substantial wealth to bring a whole village of Jewish exiles to safety in North America. He is sympathetic to the plight of the poor and he recognizes the danger of focussing solely on wealth and power. In fact, the movie that he is writing, *Citizen Kane*, is the haunting tale of a narcissistic, wealthy tycoon who, after spending his whole life trying to buy love and happiness, dies alone in his private mansion.

There is much to like and admire about Herman J. Mankiewicz. But Mank is also famous for being a heavy drinker and an out-of-control gambler. In the movie we watch him make a drunken fool of himself on several occasions. At one point he gambles away a fortune on what is, obviously, a lost cause. And his addictions have a devastating effect on his career. A recent article in *The New Yorker* said Mank "got fired from every job he didn't quit."

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/herman-mankiewicz-pauline-kael-and-the-battle-over-citizen-kane>

In fact, when Orson Welles approached him in 1939 to ask him to write the screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, Mank was unemployed. He was not only unemployed, but also in the hospital with a broken leg. You could argue that, at this point, Herman J. Mankiewicz was physically, emotionally and mentally, a broken man. But Welles recognized his brilliance, ignored his tarnished reputation, and, according to the movie, set him up in a ranch house in the desert and gave him sixty days to come up with the first draft. Like Jesus, in today's scripture reading, Mank was trapped in a desert or wilderness.

During our lives we encounter many different kinds of wilderness experiences. Some are due to circumstances beyond our control: an accident, physical or mental illness, a financial recession, or even a global pandemic. Others are ones that we bring on ourselves. They are often created through our own uncontrolled passions such as greed, pride, lust and deceit.

Throughout the film it is obvious that Mank is a troubled man and much of his pain does seem to be self-inflicted. But it is only at the end that we get a glimpse into his internal wilderness. And then only through words that he confides to a friend. He says:

I seem to have become more and more a rat in a trap of my own construction, a trap I regularly repair whenever there seems to be danger of an opening that will enable me to escape.

Mank understood and wrote about many different kinds of traps such as the pursuit of fame, wealth and power. But I believe that his personal trap was one that Henri Nouwen described when he said:

The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-trap-of-self-rejection/>

Mank is unable to love himself and therefore is unable to fully accept and reciprocate the love of others. He calls his wife, “poor Sara,” because she has him for a husband and repeatedly asks her, “Why do you put up with me?” His addictions seem to stem from this place of self-rejection and possibly even self-loathing. Despite a brilliant mind and early success, Mank is never truly happy and he continually sabotages every opportunity that comes along.

When Jesus is led into the wilderness, he goes with the knowledge that he is loved. Jesus enters the wilderness only after he has been baptized by John, only after God has named him “My Beloved.” Jesus embraces that gift of love and knows that he is worthy, that he is enough just as he is. God’s unconditional love enables Jesus to avoid the temptations of Satan, to live in harmony with the wild beasts and to accept the help of the angels in the wilderness.

If Mank had been able to hear God’s voice calling to him, telling him that he was loved and worthy, imagine how his life could have been different. Maybe he wouldn’t have died from the effects of alcoholism at the age of 55.

We are all beloved children of God. We are all loved just as we are. We are all worthy of love: Divine Love, the love of our family and friends, the love of ourselves. When we accept that love and take it into our hearts, then we are able to live our lives knowing that we are enough and that what we have is enough. When we accept that love and take it into our hearts, then, like Jesus, we are able to hear God's call and follow the true path for our lives. When we accept that love and take it into our hearts, then we are able to build and to share the good news of God's kingdom of peace and justice on earth.

So be it. Amen.