

2023 02 26 – Everything Everywhere All at Once

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11 (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 to theologically and spiritually explore some of the movies that have been nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. Today, we will be exploring a movie called *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. A few of us watched the movie on Friday afternoon at the church. How many of the rest of you have had a chance to see this film?

Of those who saw it, how many of you enjoyed the film? It was not particularly easy to watch was it? I know for some of us it seemed quite long (it was actually 2 hours and 12 minutes). For others it may have been too full of bizarre and crazy events. Some of us may have struggled with the violence or even the sexual imagery. The [New York Times](#) called it "an exuberant swirl of genre anarchy" and [Peter Travers](#), a film critic, described the movie as "a volcano of creative ideas in full eruption." Yes, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* lives up to its title; it is both an exhilarating and an exhausting ride. I expect most of us will want off before the movie is over.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is the story of a Chinese immigrant family named Wang who own a laundromat somewhere in the United States. As the movie begins we soon discover that the mother, Evelyn, is having a very bad day. The laundromat is in the middle of an IRS audit and it's going badly, her

husband, Waymond, is about to ask her for a divorce, her estranged father, Gong Gong, is currently visiting from China, and her teenage daughter, Joy, has arrived with Becky, her female partner, and Evelyn is worried about how Gong Gong will react to their lesbian relationship. As if that wasn't enough, that very evening, Evelyn and Waymond are supposed to be hosting a party to celebrate the Lunar New Year. Evelyn is totally overwhelmed, she is hanging on by a thread and it seems like that thread could break at any moment. Evelyn Wang has entered a wilderness where it seems like everything in her life is in turmoil.

Wilderness experiences happen for lots of reasons. I'm sure all of you have stories of your own that you could tell: a broken relationship, financial difficulties, loss of a job, loss of physical health or ability, or a struggle with mental health, to name a few. These wilderness experiences can be very unsettling and often painful. They can go on for a long time. Sometimes it feels like they will never end.

Today's scripture reading begins with the words, "Then Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit, to be tempted by the Devil." In other versions of the Bible the word desert is actually translated as wilderness. Jesus was in a physical wilderness undergoing not only physical but also spiritual challenges. The scripture tells us that he was there, without food, for forty days and forty nights. Now we know that this phrase is also used in the Hebrew Scriptures like the forty days and nights that it rained during the flood and the forty years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. As it's

used in the Bible, “forty” is not a precise measurement of time but rather describes what we would call “a long time.” Jesus was in the wilderness a long time. It probably seemed to him that his wilderness journey would never end.

In the movie, Evelyn’s wilderness experience takes a very strange turn. Her gentle, soft-spoken husband suddenly turns into Alpha-Waymond, a much more masculine version of himself, a version that comes from the “Alphaverse.” Alpha-Waymond explains to Evelyn that a large number of parallel universes exist because each life choice that we make creates a new alternative path or universe. In the Alphaverse they have developed a technology that enables people to ‘verse-jump.” This means that they can go to another universe and access the skills, memories and bodies of their parallel-universe selves. Alpha-Waymond tells Evelyn that they need her help to fight an all-powerful enemy, named Jobu Tupaki, who is threatening the entire multiverse.

Evelyn, of course, finds all of this hard to believe, but soon she is flipping back and forth between parallel universes and discovering skills and powers that she never knew she had. Her parallel selves include: a famous martial artist, an accomplished singer, and even a chef who flips knives around with amazing dexterity. Evelyn is able to successfully fight the followers of Jobu Tupaki, and she begins to feel a sense of power and control beyond anything that she has ever experienced. She also realizes that in most of these universes she never married Waymond and she begins to wonder how much better her life would have been without him.

It is normal during our wilderness experiences to discover new gifts and find new strength within ourselves. When relationships end, we may discover that we have the ability to live on our own. When our bodies fail us, then we may discover that we have the courage and the patience to endure pain and suffering. Journeying through the wilderness can be a life-giving experience.

But this experience of new life usually doesn't happen right away. The reality is that most times we first have to reach rock bottom, that place where we recognize that we are not in control. We first have to let go of any pretense of our own power and control. We have to let go and let God, in order to discover the gifts that God has given us.

I found it fascinating in this film that, in order to verse-jump, the characters first have to perform some bizarre and often humiliating act. Initially we watch as Waymond takes a pink lip balm out of his fanny pack and then proceeds to bite off and chew a large piece of it before verse-jumping to a different version of himself. Evelyn's first verse-jump is facilitated by switching her shoes to the wrong feet. Later, she is asked to express her love to the unlovable IRS agent and, at one point, to even pee her pants. In the movie, these acts are described as "statistically unlikely" but, for me, they represent humility, the ability to let go and accept that we are not always in control. What better example of truly letting go is there than allowing urine to flow down our leg.

When Jesus was in the wilderness he too was made aware of his own God-given powers. The Devil was there to tempt him to use those powers to feed

himself, to test the Divine and even to worship Satan. But Jesus recognized that power, control, and self-reliance were not what his ministry was going to be about. With true humility, Jesus saw that he could proceed with God's work in the world only if he trusted that God would provide what he needed. He said, "We live not on bread alone but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus' wilderness journey, was all about trusting in God's grace. For Jesus, that love and compassion came in the form of the angels who attended to his needs.

In *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn eventually realizes, despite her new-found powers, that she is unable to stop Jobu Tupaki on her own. In fact, after much absurdity and mayhem, Evelyn discovers that she needs the support and love of her family in order to save the multi-verse. She is even able to recognize the gift that Waymond has been in her life. It is when Evelyn accepts her own limitations and allows her family, her angels, God's angels, into her life, that she is finally able to live out her own true purpose.

When we are able to let go and recognize that we are not in control, it is then that we are able to see God's hand at work in our lives, in the lives of our families and even our institutions. It is then that we are able to recognize the angels that God has sent to attend to us. It is then that we are able to use the gifts that God has given us for our work in the world. May it be so. Amen.