

## **2024 02 18 – *Oppenheimer***

**Scripture: 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 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 *Oppenheimer*. A few of us watched this movie on Friday afternoon here at the church and it was in the cinemas last summer. How many of you have had a chance to see this film?

*Oppenheimer*, is the true story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, an American theoretical physicist. Oppenheimer has been called the "father of the atomic bomb" for his role as director of the Manhattan Project—the World War II operation that developed the first nuclear weapons.

The movie was filmed to be shown in iMax theatres and has some beautiful and disturbing imagery. There are depictions of the universe emphasizing its incredible size and the unimaginable power that exists within each star. There are similar images of the atom and its components that remind us of the power and the mystery that is hidden in sub-atomic particles. And, of course, there are the images of the first atomic bomb being exploded in the midst of the wilds of New Mexico. These are all images of the power inherent in creation, the power that was unleashed by Oppenheimer and his fellow scientists when they

developed that first bomb. The same type of bomb that, less than a month later, was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Oppenheimer, the film, is both awe-inspiring and disturbing just as Oppenheimer, the man, is both brilliant and flawed. In the movie we watch as the fledgling physicist grows from a troubled university student to the director of the Manhattan Project. We watch as Oppenheimer makes questionable decisions for himself, his family and possibly even his country. We watch as he struggles with those decisions and even begins to question the use of the atomic bomb that he and the other scientists in the Manhattan Project had worked so hard to create.

I hesitate to compare Oppenheimer to Jesus, but both of these men were given great power and ability, both of these men were given great responsibility and both of these men had difficult decisions to make. In our scripture reading today, Jesus is at the very beginning of his ministry and after being baptized by John he is immediately driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. In the Gospel of Mark we are not given any details of Jesus' time in the wilderness; but in Matthew and Luke, Satan offers Jesus incredible power and glory if he will just pay homage to him. But Jesus says, "No," to Satan and thus says, "Yes," to a God that is the Essence of Love.

Of course, Jesus continued to make hard decisions throughout his ministry. He often chose to make choices that were unpopular with those in power (like healing on the Sabbath or eating with prostitutes and tax collectors). He told parables like the Good Samaritan that turned people's ideas of neighbour and

enemy upside down. He even questioned the authority of the Priests and Pharisees knowing that their anger and jealousy could be dangerous. Jesus made decisions based on his own understanding of what was loving, what was true and what was just. He listened not to the voices around him, but rather to that still small voice within. He listened to the Spirit, to Ground of our Being.

Anybody who has watched this movie can tell you that Oppenheimer's motivation for his decisions was not so clear. Despite being married, he chose to have at least one ongoing affair with another woman. This affair not only undermined his marriage but also created doubts about his loyalty to his country. You see, his mistress was a deeply committed communist at a time when communism was seen as a threat to national security. Oppenheimer continued this affair even while director of one of the most secret projects of the Second World War.

Like the rest of us, Oppenheimer was human, with human vices. He was a brilliant man who knew, and demonstrated, just how smart he was. While studying in Europe, he was asked to give a lecture in the Netherlands. In six weeks he learned enough of this new language to be able to give his lecture in Dutch. We can ask ourselves, was he just showing off or did he really think learning another language was necessary for his lecture to be understood? There were other times, later in his life, where Oppenheimer used his intelligence and wit to put down and even humiliate those people who disagreed with him.

Of course, one the biggest choices that Oppenheimer made was to accept the position of director of The Manhattan Project. He knew, going in, that their

objective was the creation of an atomic bomb. No one can know what was going on inside his head as he decided to take that role. What was his motivation? As a theoretical physicist, he was, no doubt, excited about the possibility of seeing his theory put to the test. There was the power and prestige such a position would offer. It was also an incredible opportunity to help his country in their efforts to win the war against Nazi Germany. But, at the same time, Oppenheimer was aware of the destructive power of the bomb that they would create.

In fact, as the work of the Manhattan Project neared completion, the power of nuclear bomb began to wear on his conscience. Once Germany was defeated, many scientists involved with the project signed a petition asking that the bomb not be used. Oppenheimer chose not to sign that petition. Instead he said, "They won't fear it until they understand it, and they won't understand it until they've used it." Knowing the earth-destroying power of the bomb, it was his hope that its use would cause an end to all nuclear warfare and possibly to war itself.

He was partially correct. As we know, nuclear weapons have not been used in the last eighty years. But war is still going on and nuclear weapons now exist in countries all over the world. Bigger and even more destructive bombs have been created and they have even been attached to missiles. The destruction of the world is an imminent as it has ever been.

After we watched this movie on Friday afternoon, Peggy Worrell turned to me and asked me if I had read the Dr. Seuss book based on this story. I hadn't, but when I arrived at the church yesterday morning there it was leaning against the door of my office. It is called, *The Butter Battle Book*. I thought to myself, "That's great. Dr. Seuss always comes up with the perfect ending or moral for his stories. I can't seem to find the right ending for my sermon, maybe Dr. Seuss will help." I quickly opened the book and read the story. When I got to the last page I realized how silly, how naïve, I had been. You see this particular story is still unfolding. We don't have an ending yet. In fact, the last line in the Dr. Seuss book was this, "Be patient," said Grandpa. "We'll see. We will see."

It wasn't clear back in 1945 when those first bombs were dropped. It wasn't clear in 1967 when Oppenheimer died. It wasn't clear in 1984 when Dr. Seuss published his book and it's not clear even now what will happen.

Oppenheimer may have had a big hand in the creation of the atomic bomb, but we and our descendants are the ones who now have the choices to make. We are only human, and yet we have been given powers beyond our understanding. Our government leaders, flawed humans just like us, are even now making decisions about when or how these bombs could be used. So what are we to do?

The good news is that we have faith and practices to sustain and support us. As always, we turn to Jesus and we follow his example. We listen for the still small voice within us. And we do our best to make decisions based on our own understanding of what is loving, what is true and what is just. May it be so. Amen.