

## **2024 02 25 – *Past Lives***

**Scripture: Mark 8:31-38** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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. We are going on this pilgrimage through popular cinema in order 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 *Past Lives*. A few of you watched this movie on Friday afternoon here at the church. Some of you may have seen it online or even in a cinema. How many of you have had a chance to see this film?

*Past Lives* is a beautiful film, a love story, made with incredible thought and sensitivity. The main character in the story is a young woman named Nora. The story begins when Nora is 12 years old. She lives in South Korea with her parents and her younger sister. At this time in her life, her name is Na Young. Na Young and Hae Sung are classmates who develop feelings for one another and go on a date set up by their mothers. But a short time later, Na Young's family immigrates to Toronto and the two children lose contact. It is then that Na Young changes her name to Nora.

Twelve years later, Hae Sung has finished his required military service and 24-year old Nora has moved to New York City to fulfill her dream of becoming a famous writer. One day, Nora is searching online and discovers that Hae Sung has been looking for Na Young, unaware of her name change. They reconnect

through video calls but are unable to visit each other, as their busy lives take them in different directions. Eventually, Nora tells Hae Sung they should stop video-chatting for a while, as she wants to focus on her writing and her life in New York.

*Past Lives* is a movie about making choices. When she was twelve, Nora's parents made the choice to immigrate to North America. Nora made the choice to move to New York, then to look up Hae Sung, and finally to end their on-line relationship so she could focus on her life in North America. Hae Sung made the choice to stay in Korea and pursue his goal of becoming an engineer.

Today's scripture reading is also about making choices. Jesus is asking his disciples to make difficult choices in order to follow him. First, he explains to them that he expects to suffer and to be rejected by the Jewish authorities and even put to death. Peter, knowing that Jesus is the Messiah, takes issue with this teaching. He cannot understand how the one who has come to set them free can possibly also be subject to suffering and even death. Isn't he supposed to be a strong, powerful leader like the famous, King David?

With Peter's outburst, Jesus realizes that he has some teaching to do. He tells Peter that God's standards are different than those of humanity. Success, power, and freedom look different from the point of view of a God of love and compassion. Jesus goes on to say, "If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps. If you would save your life, you'll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you'll save it."

So what is Jesus talking about in this passage? What does it mean to “deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps.” Well first I want to share with you what it doesn’t mean. I’m going to do that with a quote from Nadia Bolz-Weber:

This saying of Jesus that we are to deny the self and lose our life to gain it has been abused and perverted. Perverted into messages like “If you want to be a follower of Jesus you must deny your Queerness, pick up your cross of heterosexuality and follow him.” Or “deny your dignity and pick up your cross of continued domestic abuse and follow him.” Or “deny your experience and pick up your cross of trusting religious authorities to tell you what to believe.” <https://revlisad.com/2013/10/04/quotes-deny-yourself/>

That is certainly not what Jesus is trying to say. Another wonderful writer and teacher, Henri Nouwen wrote:

following Jesus means to give our own unique form, our own unique incarnation, to God’s love. To follow Jesus means to live our lives as authentically as he lived his. It means to give away our ego and follow the God of love as Jesus shows us how to do it.

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Following Jesus, making the choices that Jesus would want us to make, is about finding our real, our true, our authentic selves and letting go of all the false selves, the lies, the masks that we think we need, but we really don’t. When I made the choice to go into ministry one of the identities that I had to let go of was

that of “an IBM’er.” I had to let go of the title, the pay cheque, the security that went along with that particular career. It wasn’t easy, but it was necessary.

In *Past Lives*, Nora attends a writer’s retreat, where she meets Arthur and they fall in love. Hae Sung also meets a woman, whom he begins to date. Another twelve years pass. In their mid-thirties, Arthur and Nora are now married and still living in New York. Hae Sung, no longer with his girlfriend, decides to travel to the United States to see his old friend. And we watch as Nora and Hae Sung, together in person for the first time in 24 years, explore their still obvious attraction for one another. We watch as they talk about the choices that they made. We watch as they wonder about what might have been, what could have been, what could still be.

And we wonder with them. Were the choices that they made truly life-giving? Were they making choices out of fear, guilt or pride or were they choices that led them to find their own true, authentic selves? What should their next choice be? Why did Hae Sung travel all the way to New York at this time in their lives? What is Nora and Arthur’s marriage built on? What must be denied, what cross must they carry, in order to create the lives that they are meant to live?

Watching this movie, we can’t help but ask ourselves the same questions. It is good to live an examined life, a life where we ask ourselves the why’s and what-if’s. But we must also remind ourselves that we live in the present. The choices that we make now are the ones that will impact the rest of our lives. No matter what has happened in the past we still have life-giving choices to make.

Nadia Bolz-Weber made a few suggestions about what we should be denying in order to live our real selves. She wrote:

when Jesus says deny yourself, that maybe it's really

- denying the self that wants to see itself as separate from God and others.
- Deny the self that believes that spirituality is a suffering avoidance program.
- Deny the self that does not feel worthy of God's love.
- Deny the self that thinks it is more worthy of God's love than its enemy is.
- Deny the self that thinks it can do it itself.

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So I'm going to take Nadia's words a little further and suggest that when we deny those selves, then we are making the choice to take up the crosses like:

- remembering that we are connected to all of God's creation;
- realizing that suffering is a part of the healing process;
- knowing that we are God's beloved children;
- loving our neighbour as ourselves; and
- living with humility and grace.

Nora, Arthur and Hae Sung were making choices based on love. We are also called to make choices based on love: love of God, love of neighbour and love of self. The choices that we make will impact not only ourselves, but also our families, the institutions of which we are a part and the communities in which we

live. May we make those choices with the goal of following in the footsteps of Jesus. May we make those choices knowing that suffering and loss are a part of life. May we make those choices remembering that God is with us, that we are not alone.

May it be so. Amen.