

Perhaps the most difficult of these "once is enough" films is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. The film portrays the brutality of Jesus' crucifixion with so much blood and pain that critic Roger Ebert, who might have seen more movies than any person ever, called it the most violent film he had ever watched. *Slate* critic David Edelstein reviewed it as "The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre." It's arguably one of the most difficult films to watch in the history of cinema, and yet, not only did it gross more than \$370 million during its theater run, it also sold 4.1 million copies of the DVD on its release date. No doubt many, if not most, of those who purchased those DVDs were Christians who, on the surface, would seem to be gluttons for cinematic punishment.

Yet, here we are on Good Friday, revisiting one of the most gruesome execution scenes in history and literature. And every year, we revisit this story again. Year after year we return to this scene of horrific injustice, the slaughter of an innocent. Clearly, once is not enough for us.

Now suppose you could find a movie theater in ancient Rome or Israel. The idea of a movie about a crucifixion would have been strange at best and, at worst, sadistic. Crucifixions were reserved for the most violent and rebellious brigands; people in polite society never talked about what happened to them. Travelers on the roads into a city where crucifixions often took place would see the crosses, but only look briefly and turn away horrified, much like we do when passing a car crash. No one wanted to witness that once, and certainly not revisit those images again and again.

But the early Christians talked a lot about the cross, even though they rarely displayed the symbol publicly during the first two centuries after Jesus' death. The cross was a horrific symbol of punishment, torture and death. Early Christians did, however, revisit the story of the cross in their preaching and teaching, and they reenacted it every time they shared the Lord's Supper together.

The pain and brutality of crucifixion was a horror to most people, Roman or Jewish, and thus the followers of Christ were seen as somewhat more than strange. As Paul put it, the cross is *a stumbling block to Jews and*

foolishness to Gentiles, yet knowing what Christ had done for them and for the world caused these early Christians to see the cross as something to revisit regularly, even daily (1 Cor. 1:23). To outsiders it was the equivalent of running a combination of *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* on a continuous loop; to Christians, it was the best drama they had ever seen. What caused them to review it so positively?

The answer goes back to an even older drama: the story of Israel. God's people had already seen plenty of scenes of suffering as a result of their sins. When they were in exile in Babylon, they looked to prophets like Isaiah to give them hope. They may have wanted a dashing matinee idol to swoop in on a white horse and lead them to military victory over their enemies and a "happily-ever-after," but what Isaiah offered them was *an image of a Suffering Servant*.

Our text reveals the servant as Israel herself - a people ground down by violence and brokenness - but the prophet's portrayal also reads like a script in which a single actor takes on the sins of his people as their representative. When those first Jewish disciples remembered and reflected on Jesus' road to the cross, they saw Israel's suffering servant personified in him. Their redemption and the redemption of the whole world would be accomplished, not through power and might, but through suffering.

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high, says God through Isaiah (v. 13). Even though he bore the marks of suffering and his appearance was *beyond human semblance*, he would *startle many nations* because his scars would actually become signs of God's victory, and begin the return of God's people from the exile of sin and death. This plain and humble servant, *despised and rejected by others* who looked the other way from his suffering, was actually the one who, despite his gory wounds, would become the redemption of us all (vv. 3-6).

The script that's played out on Good Friday is all there in chapter 53. As Jesus began his march to the cross, he was silent in the face of suffering

(v. 7), the victim of a *perversion of justice* who was buried in a rich man's tomb. Movies where the hero dies in the end are rarely popular, but this story is one where the death of the *righteous one ... shall make many righteous* (v. 11).

We want to watch the story of the cross, to read it and experience it again and again, not because we revel in the violence, but because we remember it was all done for us and for our salvation. It's a movie about which we can never be dispassionate observers; it's the story that touches every one of us. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way*, roll the credits. *And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (v. 6).

Of course, another reason we can bear to revisit this story is because we know how it ends. The one who suffered so horribly on the cross is now alive, bearing the wounds of his torture, but vindicated by beating death and sin along with it. It's the empty tomb that enables us to do repeat viewings of the cross on Good Friday, knowing that this is the way that death itself - the final villain according to Paul (1 Cor. 15:26) - meets its ultimate end.

Those movies that get revisited often are usually the ones with memorable quotes. One of the best from *The Shawshank Redemption* is this: "Hope is a good thing, maybe even the best of things; and no good thing ever dies."

Even in the midst of his pain on that Friday, Jesus had hope and faith that his death would lead to life. *Through him, the will of the Lord shall prosper*, said Isaiah of the servant to come (v. 10).

Hope is a good thing, and it's the hope of Good Friday that leads to the joy of Easter. That's one story we can never remember enough!

Once is (Not) Enough

Good Friday, April 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

If you have cable TV, you know that on any given day that you flip through the myriad channels you're going to find another rerun of *The Shawshank Redemption* on a movie channel somewhere. It feels like that movie is on ALL the time, which according to *The Wall Street Journal*, is an accurate assumption. *The Shawshank Redemption* accounted for 151 hours of cable airtime in 2013, which means you had a pretty good chance of landing on this brutal but uplifting story about an innocent man beating the cruelty and evil of a mid-20th-century prison and escaping to freedom anytime you turned on the television.

And any time you find *The Shawshank Redemption* airing you're likely to watch a few minutes, even mid-story. Why? "Mere exposure effect." This is the scientific expression that explains why we watch again and again and again as Tim Robbins' character Andy Dufresne burst through that disgusting sewer pipe during his escape from the prison. It's the theory that we like something simply because we've been previously exposed to it. Familiarity may breed contempt, as the old saying goes, but it can also turn any film into a cult classic.

On the flip side of this, however, are the films that are really, really good but so difficult to watch that most of us will only want to see them once. The brutal first sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* with its realistic portrayal of the D-Day landings, or the constant inhumanity of *Schindler's List*, for example, are hard to watch once, let alone multiple times. The viewer doesn't want to go through that emotional pain again, even if both of these films are cinematic masterpieces. We tend to see *Saving Private Ryan* on TV only during Memorial and Veterans days and *Schindler's List* rarely because programmers seem to realize that they are difficult to revisit.