

At the Movies
The Hunger Games
February 3, 2013

PRELUDE – Before the Throne

**Worship Songs – Great God Who Saves /
Jesus Paid It All**

Video – “At the Movies” trailer

CLIPS = 16.7 min Talk = 21.3

Word count target= 3600

Good morning everyone. It's good to see you today. Today, we are beginning a brand new series called "At the Movies." Over the next five weeks, we're going to go on a spiritual journey together using five recent films to guide

us.

Of course, a good question before we begin is ... *why*? Why use movies for this kind of thing? I mean, this *is* a church, isn't it? Why not just use the Bible?

So I want to be clear – especially for those who are joining us for the first time today – that we *do* use the Bible here at NHCC. *A lot*. And, we'll use it today, and throughout the rest of this series as well.

But, occasionally, we think it's a good idea to directly engage and address our culture – and there are few things that express the heart and soul of this culture like movies.

After all, engaging the culture is what Jesus did in his ministry. Very rarely in the Gospels do we read of Jesus taking out the scroll of the Hebrew Scripture and teaching from it verse-by-verse.

Sometime he did that but more often, Jesus would take things that people were already familiar with in first century Hebrew culture and say things like,

- “The Kingdom of God is like a father who had two grown sons ...” and then he’d go on and tell a story.
- “The Kingdom of God is like a

mustard seed ...” and he’d make a point about how mustard seeds grow.

- “The Kingdom of God is like a groom who shows up at midnight to whisk away his bride ...”
- Or, “A businessman who entrusted his property to three servants before leaving on a long journey.”

And I think if Jesus walked the earth today, he’d occasionally use movies to make His point. I think he’d say, “Hey, did you see *The Hunger Games*? Let me tell you how that illustrates a spiritual reality.”

So, that’s what we want to do today and

over the next five weeks.

And I'll make you a promise. If you stick with us – if you'll show up for all five movies (or listen online through our website if you can't be here) – I promise that, by the end, *you will understand more clearly what the Bible says about the journey of faith ...* because that's what these five movies together illustrate. One after the other, they each illustrate a key part of the journey of faith.

And today we begin that journey with "The Hunger Games." But let's pray together before we do.

Jesus, thanks for the example you gave us of how we can sense the

Spirit's working through everyday things if we have ears to hear and eyes to see. I pray that you will use this movie and our time this morning. Help us in our journey of faith so that we can know You better, regardless of where we might be starting.

Amen.

Video Clip - INTRO TO THE HUNGER GAMES (1.8 min)

B: Effie to microphone

E: Effie –“I just love that”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1 >

Welcome to *The Hunger Games*. How

many of you have seen this movie? How many of you have read at least one of the books in the trilogy?

For those who don't know, this movie is actually an adaptation of the first of three books by author Suzanne Collins.

And I have to confess that of the five movies we're going to look at in this series, *The Hunger Games* is by far my least favorite. In fact, I resisted watching this movie for a long time, and the only reason I finally broke down and watched it is because so many people suggested it as potential for this series! I resisted because what I had heard about the movie and the books led me to believe I would not enjoy it.

And I was right – I did not enjoy this movie. In fact, I didn't enjoy the message I gave at 8:15 and 9:30. I'll warn you right now, it's probably the worst message you'll ever hear. I hope you enjoyed the music because it's all downhill from here.

The first time I watched *The Hunger Games* I was shocked, appalled, dumbfounded, flabbergasted and any other similar adjective you can think of. I'm not exaggerating when I say that *The Hunger Games* was probably the most disturbing movie I've ever seen.

The second time I watched it – which was for the purpose of analysis and choosing the clips I would show this morning – I was still shocked, but more

than that I was saddened. I was grieved. I felt a sense of despair and just overall "yuck." And I kind of feel that way after going over it this morning.

Take it from me: *this is not a movie you want to watch over and over ... BUT ...* it is a movie worth watching because the truth it communicates needs to be heard and taken seriously.

Cast of Characters

Now, to understand what's happening in this movie and the clips I'm going to show, I think it will help to, first of all, meet the cast of characters.

First up is Katniss Everdeen ...

She is the protagonist – the heroine of the story – who gets into the 74th Annual Hunger Games by volunteering as a replacement when her younger sister's name is drawn out of the lottery right after the scene we just saw.

Next is Peeta Mellark ...

Peeta is the boy who is drawn out of the pile after Katniss volunteers. He ends up being something of a made-for-TV boyfriend for Katniss.

Coriolanus Snow

... is the paranoid president of Panem (which is the name of the fictional country in which the story takes place).

His is the voice we heard narrating the movie shown to the kids.

Seneca Crane ...

... in addition to possessing the world's best facial hair, is the Head Game Master. He's responsible for making the game seem exciting and interesting to the citizens of the Capitol. More importantly, he's responsible for pulling the strings behind the scenes to make sure the game turns out the way President Snow wants.

He works closely with Caesar Flickerman ...

... who is something of a late night talk show host/sports announcer, interviewing the contestants and

bringing the nation live updates once the game begins.

The final character (or characters) are ...

**The residents of the Capitol,
represented most vividly by Effie
Trinket ...**

... who oversaw the Reaping in District 12 where Katniss and Peeta live and hosts them during the “festivities” leading up to the game.

And I’ll clue you in that all of these names, if you want to do some research online, have symbolic meaning coinciding with the role of their character.

Basic Storyline

But, let's move on and get an overview of the basic storyline which is very simple. I think you can get it in four scenes (counting the one I just showed you).

After Katniss volunteers and Peeta is selected, they're transported from District 12 to the Capitol by Effie.

Once they arrive, they are prepared not for battle – not yet, anyway – but for a grand gala affair: a kickoff parade that demonstrates just what a big deal this event is.

Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1 >

Video Clip - THE PARADE (3.2 min)

B: Shot of Capitol citizens leading up to hall

E: Snow: May the odds be ...

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2 >

For the next two weeks, Katniss and Peeta (along with the other tributes) are trained and prepared for battle. During that time, Flickerman is constantly broadcasting updates and the citizens of the Capitol are placing their bets on who they think is going to win.

And then it's time for the game. And on the next morning when the game begins, each "tribute" is placed onto a pedestal awaiting the starting horn

which, for half of them, sadly, will also be the finishing horn. Let's watch.

Video Clip - THE GAMES BEGIN (1.1 min)

B: countdown in the control room

E: Slashing

Following the advice given to them by their mentor to not get drawn into the initial battle, Katniss and Peeta both escape, but in different directions.

And the rest of the story is basically how the two of them survive, at first individually, and then together. As to why they don't attempt to kill each other ... it's because Seneca, the Game Master, decides that it would be a good TV move to show off "young love" so

there is a rule change in the middle of the game that allows for not just one winner but *two winners*.

Unfortunately, there's a cruel twist when Katniss and Peeta do survive. Let's watch.

Video Clip - VICTORY (2.1 min)

B: announcer: a rule change

E: hugging

By the way, those berries were poisonous, in case you didn't know.

Now, if you've read the books on which this movie is based, you know that there's *more to the story than where the movie ends*. So, I need to say that

my comments from this point on might be out of line with the arc of where the story goes from here because all I'm looking at (and all I know) is where the story is at this point in time.

And if I *am* out of line, please *don't tell me* because after investing so much time in this thing, I will probably decide to watch the second and third movies when they come out ... even though I hate the movie.

And, as I said at the beginning, this movie was disturbing and depressing. As I thought about it I was able to boil it down to a few specific issues that stand out. If you saw it, these may have struck

you as well.

1. Kids killing kids.

I think *that* goes almost without saying and so I won't dwell on it any longer. It's just extremely disturbing if you think about it.

The second thing that sickened me – and made the “killing parts” even worse – was ...

2. The kids believing they had no other option.

Most of them didn't like the situation they were in (although, as the story goes, some of them had actually been raised to kill by their districts so they would win so the district would get food)

but pretty much they all believe they have no choice. And, killing other kids is the only hope they have for survival.

There's a scene on the night before the game begins where Katniss and Peeta wrestle with what's about to happen. Let's watch.

<SLIDE SET 2 ENDS>

Video Clip - DON'T WANT THEM TO CHANGE ME (1.4 min)

B: kids looking at party outside

E: yeah, I know

<SLIDE SET 3 BEGINS>

The next thing on my list wasn't quite as disturbing as the first two. Maybe it would be better to call it just "shocking."

3. The odd physical appearance of the residents of the Capitol.

The way they are dressed and the way they do their makeup and hair is meant to tip us off that there is something very, very wrong with these people. It's a literary device that's meant to communicate "they are not what human beings are meant to be."

The final thing on my list – and this one does fit the "disturbing" label – is that ...

4. These residents of the Capitol are so deceived as to approve of and glorify the barbarism of these games.

That's part of what's wrong with them.

Their humanity has become so warped as to willingly embrace the unthinkable.

There's one scene that I think captures this better than any other. During the two week training period, we see a brief glimpse, for lack of a better term, a "betting mall" where people are enjoying themselves while placing bets on which "tribute" they think will win. The scene is very short – only 20 seconds long – and you almost miss what it's communicating if you're not paying close attention.

So, as we watch, focus on the mom. She's kind of in the background, but watch what she gets upset about in the beginning (it's very quick) and what happens in the end (which is also very

quick).

<SLIDE SET 3 ENDS>

Video Clip - FAMILY TIME (0.4 min)

B: Haymitch seated

E: kid "stabs" mother

<SLIDE SET 4 BEGINS>

Did you catch what mom was upset about? It's not that her kids live in a perverted culture where betting on which young person will survive a bloodbath is an occasion for a pleasant family outing – complete with gifts for the children. She's upset that *her kids are running around causing a commotion. They're causing a commotion.*

And did you catch what happens at the

end of the clip when her son comes back? He stabs her with the fake sword.

Good Lessons

I think that's probably a good place to start with the lessons we can learn from this movie – and there are many but I will limit myself to just two that I think are fairly obvious.

Lesson #1. It is possible for “normal people” to have their values totally turned upside down ... and it could happen to you and me.

See, the people who live in this Capitol aren't that different from you and me. They have families. They go for outings. They celebrate. They give their children presents.

And yet, clearly, they are *sick*. They have completely lost touch with what is right and good. They're a perfect example of how Jesus once described a group of people in his day who had lost *their* sense of moral reality.

He said:

You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things ... You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you

swallow a camel!
Matthew 23:23-24
(NLT)

That's what the mom was doing in this scene. She was more concerned about her kids "running" and causing a commotion than the fact that they were celebrating barbarism. She was straining gnats and swallowing camels. That's how far "off" the entire culture had gotten.

And this movie is meant to be a warning that it could happen to us, individually and collectively.

Jennifer Lawrence, the actress who plays the role of Katniss, described *The Hunger Games* as holding up "a

terrible kind of mirror. This," she said, "is what our society could be like if we became desensitized to trauma and to each other's pain."

One reviewer I read took it even further than that.

We like *The Hunger Games* because we want to identify with the [rebels and underdogs].

If we look closely, though, we are often more likely to find ourselves siding with the Capitol. We turn a blind eye to suffering ... we sit in air-conditioned luxury practicing Twitter activism while people around the world (and in our neighborhoods) starve.

Another wrote:

The Hunger Games provides a stunning critique of our society. We live in the Capitol; we exist in a society which relativizes morality for its own convenience.

And when we are presented with it in our face, when the imagery of a film like *The Hunger Games* shows us the very kind of decadence and futility which we so often celebrate, we are repulsed.

And I think that's a good thing. I think that's what the author intends.

So, question for you and for me: in your

own life, are you straining at gnats while swallowing camels? Does it repulse you? It ought to.

I think the second lesson that you just can't miss from this movie is that ...

Lesson #2. Media has an immense (and deceptive) power to shape our values.

By deceptive I mean that when we engage in the media, we tell ourselves that "it's just entertainment" (or information) and "it doesn't really affect me."

But the movie illustrates quite effectively just how much power the media has to

not only shape our values but to control the outcome of events. *The Hunger Games*, as they are conducted in Panem, are simply an extended reality TV show and we get to see what's going on in the control room again and again.

I thought it was interesting what Suzanne Collins said when asked her opinion on reality TV. She said:

“There’s [a] voyeuristic thrill in watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There’s also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn’t have the

impact it should.”

And that’s exactly what we see in the movie, very vividly on the night before the game begins, when each “contestant” is introduced personally on Caesar Flickerman’s show.

As we watch, keep in mind *why* these kids are on the show.

<SLIDE SET 4 ENDS>

Video Clip - THE SHOW (2.4 min)

B: music as show begins

E: Crowd noise as she walks

<SLIDE SET 5 BEGINS>

It’s completely lost on that crowd that the next day these kids are going to go out and brutally murder each other. The

way the media has presented this whole thing has desensitized them to the horror of what is about to happen.

And just so you'll know, this isn't just the conclusion of Suzanne Collins or this movie. A few years ago a national cultural values study was conducted that compared people's ethical beliefs and behaviors based on the amount of time they spent watching TV. The results were astounding. I wish I had time to present the whole thing to you. I'll post a link up on Facebook on our church page and also on The City later today if you want to read it.¹

Here are just a few highlights:

- The more a person watches

television, the less likely he will be to accept responsibility for his own life and for his obligations to the people around him.

- The more a person watches television, the less committed he/she is to classical virtues such as honesty, reliability, and fairness.
- The more a person watches television, the more permissive attitudes are toward sexual issues like sex outside of marriage, abortion and homosexuality.
- The more a person watches television, the less likely he is to value religious principles and

obedience to God.

Here's the kicker:

- The more a person watches TV, the less likely he is to believe the media are influencing his and the nation's moral values.

Isn't that ironic?

This is why the Apostle Paul in the first century wrote to Christ-followers in Rome ...

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within ... Romans 12:2 (JBP)

That was good advice and a good warning then and it's good advice and a good warning now.

Question: are your values being shaped by the media – TV, music, movies and the internet? Are you being squeezed into the mold of this crazy world?

Looking Deeper

Now, if those two lessons – *“head's up, your values could be compromised and the media is likely to be one of the culprits”* – if those two warnings are all you get out of that movie, then it's been well worth it.

But as I watched it and pondered what I had seen, I was struck by two spiritual truths that are maybe a bit deeper and that are, I think, being communicated through this movie ... and probably unintentionally.

Here's the first one.

1. The Hunger Games paints a vivid portrait of a world without God.

Many reviewers have pointed out that there's no reference whatsoever in the movie (or in the three books, I am told) to God or anything spiritual whatsoever. The statement which we hear over and over "may the odds be ever in your favor," and that's about as

α-theistic as you can get – and by α-theistic I mean that in the literal sense of the world (“without God”). The only chance you have, the only hope you have in this world, are the odds of randomness if you’ve been selected for the game.

And, even that hope isn’t real because the game is rigged ... which we discover in a dialogue between Seneca and President Snow during the training period. Katniss has gotten the best of Seneca and made him look foolish which worries the President.

Let’s watch.

<SLIDE SET 5 ENDS>

Video Clip - WHY DO WE HAVE A

WINNER? (1.0 min)

B: Seneca moves to sit

E: Seneca: "Right"

<SLIDE SET 6 BEGINS>

"Contain it." Translation ... "do *not* allow this girl's spark to turn into a flame. Ensure that there *are* no odds in her favor. *Crush* whatever hope she may have."

But I think there's another way in which the movie illustrates what life is like without God – and that is the total scrambling of values that we talked about earlier. It's actually very reminiscent of the Old Testament Book of Judges in which we read several times ...

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. Judges 17:6, 21:25 (NIV)

Everyone did as he/she thought was right or wrong or could get away with. And what's fascinating (and grievous) is that because there was no recognition in that culture at that time of a transcendent moral authority, the period of the Judges was one of the most barbaric times in all of human history. In fact, if you read the last few chapters of the book of Judges, it's worse than *The Hunger Games* in its brutality; it's barbaric what happens ... although the Bible does record that, eventually, the people living in that time finally realized how bad it had gotten:

Everyone who saw it was saying, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt." Judges 19:30 (NIV)

When you live in a world without God, that's what happens.

And it doesn't take a movie or even the Bible to prove it. History shows it. And I know: so many wars have been caused because of religion ... blah, blah, blah. And there's no denying that misguided leaders had done terrible things in the name of Christ.

But the record is clear – atheistic systems, Marxism, Communism,

Facism in the past 100 years are responsible for more violent murders (often of their own people) than anything else.

A world without God is a dangerous place to be and *The Hunger Games*, intentionally or unintentionally, illustrates that very well.

And it also illustrates something else ...

2. The Hunger Games paints a vivid portrait of the spiritual condition that results from choosing life without God.

It's a portrait of what the reality is when you choose to live in that kind of world, spiritually. The Bible is very clear that we live in a world that has been cursed

by *sin* – which ultimately can be defined as choosing to live life without God; choosing to live as if there was no God, as if we really could do whatever we want to do with no consequence.

But there is a consequence ... and it's vividly illustrated near the end of the movie just before Katniss and Peeta emerge victorious. There's a battle that takes place between the two of them and one of the guys who had been trained by his district to be a killer ... to win.

Listen to what he says when he realizes that he is not going to win.

<SLIDE SET 6 ENDS>

Video Clip - DEAD ANYWAY (1.4 min)

B: battle

E: eaten by boars

<SLIDE SET 7 BEGINS>

Did you catch what he said? "I'm dead anyway."

That's how it was from the very beginning, actually. When you watch the story, you can see that all along he was led to believe that he was going to win. They kept supplying him with things that other kids were not getting. Turns out he was just another sucker being played by the system.

The Bible says that's where all of us are because sin has a consequence. The Bible says that every human being – the whole world in fact – is spiritually dead

because of it and that we are in bondage to an unseen evil ruler, just like the kids in the game are in bondage.

It says things like ...

... the whole world is under the control of the evil one. 1 John 5:19 (NIV)

Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 2 Corinthians 11:14 (NIV)

And you don't even know that the system is out there. You don't even know you're being played!

It tells us that ...

We do not fight against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:12 [NLT]

That's the reality. And there is no victory against that system; there is no victory over the curse in our own strength. We are powerless in this regard in spite of how it might look ... which is another thing amazingly illustrated in *The Hunger Games*.

Watch what happens at the very end of the movie, when Katniss and Peeta are

seemingly crowned as victors.

<END OF SLIDE SET 7>

Video Clip - WINNERS OR LOSERS (2.0 min)

B: Caesar: Ladies and gentlemen ...

E: Snow walks up stairs

What do you think President Snow has on his mind at that point? Again, I haven't read the books, but I suspect that he's thinking, "you may have won the battle, but there's a war coming." They're not getting away with that.

Conclusion

And the Bible says that neither are we.

And I know that right about now some of you are thinking, "you're right Rick. This is the worst sermon I've ever heard. Why are you dragging us through this misery?"

Because this is where the journey of faith begins. It's not a pleasant place at all because it's a place where we have to open our eyes and admit something is wrong, something is screwed up, not just with this world, not just with the people in the Capitol because, we are the people in the Capitol. Not just them – it's us. The journey of faith begins by saying, "I am lost. I'm powerless. I am falling short. I am in bondage to sin. I am made for so much more than this world has to offer.

And that's hard for some of us because we're just nice enough to be deceived into thinking we're OK. We are masters of self-deception.

But we are up against an even greater deceiver just like those kids were. President *Snow* – get it? He is snowing his people all the time. And we are being snowed, as well, if we do not think we have a problem and that we need help from somewhere else.

The Apostle Paul wrote about this in Romans Chapter 7, he said "I look at my life and I think there are good things that I need to start doing, but I just can't bring myself to do them. And I look at my life and there's this bad stuff that I've been doing and I know I need to

stop it but I find myself falling into this pattern again and again." And he just wrestles with this and he says, "this is the reality. This is who I am. Who will save me from this body of death?" And I can't think of a better way to describe that movie. Who will save them from the death that surrounds them?

Fortunately, there is help. And that's what we'll talk about next week when we look at the next movie in this series ... *The Adjustment Bureau*.

Would you pray with me?

God, I thank you, as I do every week, for your truth. Even though it's hard, even though it's yucky

and it makes me feel miserable, makes us all feel miserable when we have to look at these things, when we have to look at the mess we are and the mess the world is. And to admit that not only is it out there, but it's in here, it's part of us. We are the people of the Capitol and we're a mess.

God, some of us need to admit that we need help, "I need some help from outside." So, God, I pray that this week as we observe our lives and say, "is this true? Is this reality? Is this how it really is?" that we would also be given a sense of hope that we were meant for something else. We were meant for more than this and that you do have an answer. And we thank you

in that answer's name, Jesus. Amen

Feature - Meant to Live

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. By the way, *The Adjustment Bureau* if you haven't seen it is not anything like *The Hunger Games*. It's not disturbing or depressing. I promise it will be better next Sunday. I hope you come back.

2. Thank you all for coming today, especially those of you who are here for the very first time. I want to reiterate what Kitti said earlier – we'd love to have you stick around for the meet and eat (a taste of North Heartland). Just stop into the

café for some treats and an overview and a tour. It's pretty cool. If you have kids in AL make sure you go get them first.

See ya.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.mrc.org/special-reports/media-assault-american-values>