

At the Movies
The Adjustment Bureau
February 10, 2013

PRELUDE – “Happy Day”
Worship – “Rise”
Feature – “Let Me Be Myself”

Good morning, everyone. It's great to see you today.

I think that song is probably a good way to describe the longing of the main character in the movie which we're going to be looking at today as we continue our series, "At the Movies." The movie is called *The Adjustment Bureau*. How many of you have seen it? I've seen it a few times, and I have to tell you that I like it so *much* more than

the movie we looked at last week, *The Hunger Games*.

By the way, as I thought about that movie a little bit more this week, I felt like I should explain again why I chose to use it; why I felt it was important to this series even though it was shocking, appalling, grievous, depressing, etc, etc. And I also thought I should explain why the message – and, actually, the whole service – was so bad ... but I don't mean "bad" from a production point of view. I actually thought the music was great and the message had a good pace and flow to it. I think everyone could follow and relate to what I was saying.

What I mean by "bad" is that, by the

end of the service, we all *felt* bad. "Icky" was the word I used to describe it. Honestly, I was a bit worried this week that you all might not come back today because last Sunday was *not* an uplifting experience in church.

But here's what I want you to know: *all of that was by design. It was intentional.* Even the song the band did to close the service (and some people complained about it) was loud and in your face ... on purpose. "We were meant to live for so much more, but we lost ourselves." You don't sing that kind of thing softly and tenderly. I wanted you to feel bad last week. I wanted you to feel "icky."

And I know some of you are thinking

“Wow, what is wrong with this guy? Why would you want anyone to feel bad and icky when they come to church?”

It's because what I am trying to describe in this series – using these five movies – is *the journey of faith*. I want you to be aware of the stages most people pass through as they go from the experience of “living life without God” to “a deep experience of a mutual friendship with God.” That's a long road ... and it has a starting point: *the realization that, without God, we are truly lost*; that, without God, this whole world is truly lost – and that is an icky condition to be in; it's a bad place to be.

If you want to put a label on that

condition you might it “the total depravity of man” – a classic biblical doctrine which tells us that because of the curse of sin on this world (and our own guilt in propagating that curse by our own sin at whatever level we contribute to it) we are doomed. And there’s not a single thing we can do about it ... unless God intervenes.

And that’s why *The Hunger Games* was so good even though it was so bad. It vividly portrayed what the Bible tells us about the hopelessness of every single human being apart from God. In a way, it served the same purpose as John the Baptist. If you know your biblical history, you remember that he’s the guy who went around announcing *the good news* that Messiah was about to show

up.

But here's how he started his message:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Luke 3:7 (NIV)

In other words, "you came looking for the Messiah because you have this sense that you're in bad shape, but let me tell you brothers and sisters, you have no idea how bad it really is!"

Now, why would John take this approach? Why would we take that kind of approach?

It's pretty simple. It's because ...

We will never truly understand, value, and experience the good news of what God has done until we have truly understood, valued and experienced the bad news of where we are.

If you don't understand, value and experience the bad news, God will never become more than just a nice little add-on to your life. He'll be like a life preserver. The thing about a life preserver is that until a person realizes they are drowning, they have no real desire for it. It's just a good thing to have around. Without an appreciation for the "bad news," God will never be more than a nice add-on to your life.

And your journey of faith will be cut

short. You'll never go down the road. You'll never develop the deep mutual friendship with God that could be yours. And you will miss out on so much because friendship with God *is meant to turn your life upside down* in a good way.

And that's actually what we'll be talking about next Sunday when we look at the movie *Moneyball* ... which I will tell you now is *my favorite* movie of all five because I love baseball. In particular – and you can call me crazy – I love Kansas City Royals baseball. And we're gonna be good this year. (I know, I say that every year ... but this year, we really are!)

Anyway, that's next week's movie ... and last week's movie. Let's talk about *this week's movie* ... *The Adjustment Bureau*.

The reason I chose it is because it raises some of the most significant questions that most people wrestle with on the journey of faith. Once we have the "Hunger Games realization" of "wow, this is my true condition. This is the true condition of the world, and there's nothing I can do about it, I need help," the natural inclination is to turn to God. Maybe God can and will help.

But who is God? And what does it mean that God is all powerful? What does it mean that God is in control of the universe? More importantly, is God truly

good, because if He's in control we sure hope He's good? Does He truly have our best interest at heart?

And *The Adjustment Bureau* raises these questions in a way that's rarely seen in movies these days. It's deep and it's interesting all at the same time ... kind of like church at North Heartland. (Sorry, just had to throw that in there).

Cast of Characters

So, let's start out by getting familiar with the cast of characters.ⁱ

The lead character, played by Matt Damon (who, by the way is also in the

movie we'll look at two weeks from today, *True Grit*), is ...

David Norris ...

... who is an up-and-coming politician, the clear favorite to win the New York race for the U.S. Senate. But his campaign implodes at the last minute. While crafting his concession speech in a convention hall men's room, David is startled to discover that he has been overheard by a woman ...

Elise Sellas ...

... who is hiding out from security in one of the stalls because she crashed a wedding.

They talk. They kiss. She leaves. And he's kind of wondering what happened.

But this brief encounter inspires David and transforms him. It changes his speech from a stock "congratulations to my opponent" speech into a heartfelt talk filled with honesty and passion, and it just propels his campaign for the next time forward. He then tries to pursue Elise, but is blocked at every turn by a shadowy group of men in long coats and fedoras, who are ...

... agents of The Adjustment Bureau

...

... supernatural "case workers" – angels, more or less – whose job is to make sure that everyone follows "the

plan” designed by their unseen boss, “The Chairman” (in other words, God – though they never call him that).

The leader of the group assigned to oversee David Norris is ...

... Agent Richardson ...

... a sharp-talking guy who has a lot of experience but little compassion.

Of this group, David interacts most with ...

... Harry Mitchell ...

... the agent who has been following him for many years and watching over him. And he has compassion for David

because David *has* suffered a lot in his life – his father and brother both died when he was young and his mother not long afterwards, and Harry has serious doubts about the plan and especially the way the other agents are interpreting “the plan” for David’s life.

One more major character, who we do not meet until the middle of the movie, is ...

... agent Thompson ...

... who has been nicknamed “the Hammer” because of his ability to get people to comply with the wishes of The Adjustment Bureau.

Behind the Curtain

Now, with all that in mind, what I want to do is to walk through the basic plotline of the movie and pause every so often to examine some of those “God questions” that it raises.

And let’s begin with the scene that creates the underlying tension of the movie. It’s a few weeks after the lost election and the stirring concession speech, and The Adjustment Bureau knows where David Norris is going to be and where Elise Sellas is going to be ... and that’s a problem, so they need to do something about it.

Let’s watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1 >

VIDEO Clip - BLOWN ASSIGNMENT (1.8 min)

B: agent walking

E: Harry running after bus

And because Harry fails to keep David and Elise from meeting, it requires the team to take even more drastic action by “recalibrating” David’s friend, Charlie – a painless reprogramming of his mind.

Unfortunately, David winds up in the wrong place at the wrong time and actually sees what they’re doing to Charlie, so they have to take care of him as well. They knock him out, gently of course because they’re angels, and drag him into a “spiritual holding tank” ... which looks a lot like a parking

garage.

Watch what happens when David wakes up and demands to know who they are and what's going on.

VIDEO Clip - "SOMETIMES IT'S US" (1.7 min)

B: Richardson: "We are the people who make sure things happen ..."

E: Richardson: "They change your mind for you"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

I like this scene a lot because the Bible teaches us that there really *is* something going on "behind the curtain." Some things *do* happen by chance, but some things happen because God is at work. And

sometimes, God's work is accomplished through angels.

Of course, it's important to remember that angels have their limits (like the agents in the movie). Angels are supernatural, but they are not mini-gods and are not meant to be worshipped.

The Bible tells us that ...

Angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation. Hebrews 1:13 (NLT)

More importantly, unless the curtain is drawn back (and sometimes it is), it's hard to know if a particular event in

your life happened because of chance ... or because an angel was at work ... or because the Spirit of God Himself was acting. And, quite frankly, as I've explained on several occasions, knowing which of those it is really doesn't help us very much.

But this movie – and this message – really isn't about trying to figure out what the cause is for any given event. So let's move on.

Agent Richardson goes on to tell David that he's seen something that very few humans ever see and that if he ever tells anyone, they will reset him – wipe his brain clean of everything – and

everyone who knows him will think he's crazy.

"Oh, one more thing," Richardson adds. "Stay away from that woman you met on the bus this morning. You weren't ever meant to see her again." And they take the paper on which David has written Elise's phone number and they burn it.

About "Free Will"

But, in spite of the warning, David goes on a search for her. For three years, he's unsuccessful – he only knows her first name and there are thousands of Elises in New York City.

But one day, he's riding the bus and he sees her walking. He stops the bus and runs after her. He catches up to her and tells her that he is so sorry that he never called her and that he had lost her phone number because he was mugged (which was true). At first, she doesn't believe him, but she's very attracted to him and they wind up having lunch together, which puts those agents into a bit of a panic.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

VIDEO Clip - "NOTHING WILL COME BETWEEN US" (2.1 min)

B: Agents walking in

E: David walks away

Now, despite David's assertion that nothing will ever come between them,

the agents have a different idea in mind. And in the scenes that follow, they do everything they can to stop David from meeting up with her again.

But this time David decides to challenge them. Watch what happens, and pay particular attention to what Richardson tells him about "the plan."

Video Clip - IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW YOU FEEL (1.0 min)

B: Agents facing street corner as David comes around it

E: Agent: "who is this guy?"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Did you catch what he said? He said, "It doesn't matter how you feel. What matters is what's in black and white."

And I have to say that there's a lot of truth to this. You can't determine God's will solely according to how you feel. In fact, the very first pages of the Bible tell the story of a couple of people who made a decision based on what they felt instead of on what God had said. It says ...

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom [i.e. "I feel like this would be such a good thing"], she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her [and he said, "I think you might be right,

honey, I feel like this might be the right thing even though God has said don't eat that"] *and he ate it.*
Genesis 3:6 (NLT)

There are a lot of people in this world today who make the same mistake. "It *feels* right so it *must* be right" – even though what feels right directly contradicts what God has said in the scripture. And the result of that thinking and those actions ... well, that's how we get into the mess illustrated by "The Hunger Games." It's death.

So, I think it's important to point out that whenever God says to us, "don't do that," he's not trying to be a control freak, he's not trying to be a killjoy. He's doing it for our own good and our

own benefit. He's not trying to squash us. He's trying to protect us.

Now, this movie, if you've seen it you know that it really does try to make an issue out of the "feelings" vs. "what's in black and white in this plan." In fact, the romanticism of it leads you to root against the plan, and that's not a good thing. And, as important as it is to negate that kind of thinking, again, that's really not what this message is about ... so let's move on.

David finds Elise and after spending a little time together, there's no question – they are falling in love.

But the agents have an ace in the hole. David is tricked into entering the "parking garage" and meets up with "The Hammer" ... agent Thompson. Pay particular attention to what he says about free will and also, why they are trying to keep David and Elise apart.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

Video Clip - WHATEVER HAPPENED TO FREE WILL? (3.3 min)

B: David seated

E: David: "stop talking, it's not working."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

Wow, there's a lot going on in that scene, isn't there? Finally, we understand *why* David is not supposed to be with Elise. She's not, according to Thompson, a good influence on him ...

and the Presidency can't be occupied by a person who is "a loose cannon."

But the real issue here – at least for our purposes – is Thompson's statement: *"You don't have free will. You have the appearance of free will."* You can choose your toothpaste or the color of your tie but not much beyond that. The Chairman is in control. You're just a puppet.

And this is a very important issue because one of the things that human beings value – and, I believe, are created to value – is freedom. Kind of like the song said, "let me be myself. Let me be who I'm supposed to be." And if we're going to go on a spiritual journey whose destination is a

friendship with God, we need to know, what does it mean for God to be in control of our lives? What does it mean for God to have a plan for our lives? Does it mean we are about to become puppets?

Let me quickly give you four biblically-based statements as a framework that I think will be helpful in answering those questions.

1. At the macro level, God *does* have a plan for this world.

Big picture – God has a plan. This world is going somewhere. I’ve talked about it many times before and I call it “the three R’s” ... God wants to renew, restore and regenerate everything

about this world. This world is cursed by sin. We've talked about it many times and we saw it last week. But, God is saying that there's a day coming when He is going to intervene and set all things right. When Christ returns, everything is going to be renewed, restored, and regenerated and made to be what it was meant to be in the beginning. That's the macro level.

2. At the micro level, God also has a plan for every person who says "yes" to Him.

And it's the same plan, the same three "R"s ... God wants to renew, restore and regenerate you from the inside out right now. When Christ comes to live in your life, when the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you, he is going to walk

you down a path, that over time, will make you more and more like Jesus. And then the day is going to come when Jesus returns. And if you are one of his followers, he is going to allow you to participate in the renewal, restoration and regeneration of the whole world.

However, saying that, we also need to say that ...

3. God's "will" or plan for us is not deterministic. He's not giving a blueprint like we've seen in this movie. God's plan for you is more like a game plan.

What God says is here are the boundaries. Here's the backyard. Play in the backyard. Don't go outside the

fence but stay in this yard. Here are the commandments. Keep these commandments. Do these things, don't do these things. Here's my goal for your life: you are to be a steward; I've given you dominion over your family, over your talents and your gifts. You are to be a steward and take that, build that up and make more out of it. That's my will for you. It's a game plan and not a blueprint.

However, having said that, and this is the final part of this framework:

4. Some people *are* called to a particular role in God's plan for the world.

God sometimes does reach down and pick out certain people and says, "I

have a special role for you in this plan.” And we kind of saw that in this movie with David Norris because apparently God says, “you are going to be the president.”

I don't know if God is saying that to any of us, but God sometimes looks at us and says, “I want you to do something special for me,” and God calls us to a special role. And it takes a lot of discernment to figure that out. But that's part of the plan, as well.

Now, as important – and helpful – as it is to understand these things, I have to say that this is *not* the most significant thing I want you to see in this movie. So, let's move on.

Seeking “The Chairman”

After the conversation with Thompson (and another one where Thompson tells him that not only will Elise ruin his dream, he will ruin hers) David literally walks away from Elise without telling her goodbye.

But about a year later, in the middle of an extremely successful campaign, he hears that she’s getting married. And at that point, there’s another “divine intervention,” this time by Harry.

Pay attention to Harry’s *slightly different take* on “the plan” for David’s life ... because this is going to move us towards the most important thing I want

us to see.

<END SLIDE SET 4>

Video Clip - NOT THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS (1.7 min)

B: Harry walking in

E: David: "I don't even notice it now."

Did you catch that? He said, "There is a plan – you're supposed to be the president one day – but that's not the only thing that matters." Hang on to that thought because we'll come back to that ... let's get to the end of the story.

Encouraged by this conversation, David asks Harry to help him win back Elise. Harry agrees. He tells David that whenever the agents are wearing their hat, doors become "magical" and they

can jump from place to place very quickly. (I know that sounds really goofy but, remember, it's a movie!)

He gives David his hat and David outruns the other agents through the maze of the doors and he winds up at the courthouse where Elise is about to be married. And in a twist of fate, he finds her in the ladies room ... and she is not happy to see him.

Video Clip - FIND THE WRITER (2.5 min)

B: David: "I know it seems terrible ..."

E: David: "What if I can find who wrote it?"

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 5>

Wow, what a thought! "What if I can find the person who wrote the plan?"

That reminds me of a fascinating passage in the Book of Job. Job has suffered greatly and he knows that God is in control and God has allowed this to happen to him. And at one point he says (this is in chapter 23):

If only I knew where to find God, I would go to his court. I would lay out my case and present my arguments. Then I would listen to his reply and understand what he says to me. Would he use his great power to argue with me [to put me down, to make me feel small]? No, he would give me a fair hearing. Job 23:3-6 (NLT)

So, the question for you and for me is: is it possible for us to find the person who is writing the plan for this world and for our lives? The Bible says "yes, absolutely."

You, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you. Psalm 9:10 ESV

*The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.
Lamentations 3:25
ESV*

Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very

*thought of doing wrong.
Let them turn to the Lord
that he may have mercy
on them. Yes, turn to our
God, for he will forgive
generously. Isaiah
55:6-7*

God himself says "yes" to that question.

*"I love those who love me,
and those who seek me
diligently find me."
Proverbs 8:17 ESV*

*"You will seek me and find
me, when you seek me
with all your heart."
Jeremiah 29:13 ESV*

*"Ask, and it will be given
to you; seek, and you will
find; knock, and it will be*

opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." Matthew 7:7-8 ESV

And the point I want you to see this morning, the *most important thing* of this morning is this:

Seeking and finding *God* is more important than seeking and finding *God's plan*.

David was supposed to be President, but Harry told him that wasn't the most important thing. *The most important thing was seeking The Chairman.*

And that's what he does – along with

Elise, who agrees to go with him. And, of course, the chase scene continues (remember, this *is* still a movie) until, at last, they are at the place where the Chairman rules. And the Chairman responds to their plight.

As we watch, pay particular attention to Thompson's reaction.

<END SLIDE SET 5>

Video Clip - INSPIRING THE CHAIRMAN
(2.3 min)

B: sun shining on the city

E: Harry walks off

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 6>

And I know some of you are thinking, "now, wait a minute, Rick. You made this big deal about them seeking The

Chairman, and they go to all of this trouble but they don't actually meet The Chairman!"

Yes. And in this life, those of us who seek God don't get to meet *Him* face-to-face, either. But we *can* still know him.

When Harry says, "The Chairman comes in a different form to everybody" there's truth to that in that God uses different experiences and situations to get our attention. But quite frankly, what Harry, means by that is so nebulous as to be useless. "So, you just met God ... but you didn't know it." Not helpful.

But, that's OK because, remember, again – it's a just a movie – whereas *the Bible* is very clear that God has come

only in the form of one person – Jesus of Nazareth.

The first chapter of Hebrews says ...

*Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son ... The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God.
Hebrews 1:1-3 (NLT)*

In other words, if you want to know the Chairman and what he is like – if you want to know God – you can do that through Jesus, for God has revealed himself in him. And you can know about

the life and teaching of Jesus by reading books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament.

But the greatest way Jesus reveals God to us is in what he did for us when he gave his life for us on the cross. Paul writes:

*God showed his great
love for us by sending
Christ to die for us while
we were still sinners!
Romans 5:8 (NLT)*

In other words, while we're still in the Hunger Game reality, Jesus says "I'm coming for you. I'm going to pay the price for you to get out of that. You don't even deserve it and you can't earn it. I love you that much." When you have

questions like, "is God really for me? Does God really love me?" That's the answer. God showed his great love for us by sending Jesus to die for us, and we didn't deserve it and we couldn't earn it." Do you remember Thompson's reaction when he got the news that the plan had been re-written? Remember the shock, like "I don't get this." It reminds me of something the Apostle Peter wrote to followers of Jesus who had also never met Jesus face-to-face. This was years after Jesus had gone back to Heaven

Peter wrote ...

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not

see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV)

Then he adds this amazing statement:

Concerning this salvation ... even angels long to look into these things. 1 Peter 1:10,12 (NIV)

That's amazing. The angels – beings who do get to see the Father and Jesus face-to-face all the time – they long to experience what you and I are invited to experience with God! You are invited to experience the grace and the

redemption that comes through Jesus.

I want us to think about that as we close this morning (and I'm going to ask the band to get in place because they're going to help us with this).

It's kind of like when you see that scene when they get the plan and the plan is like, wiped clean. You can start over. It's a wonderful picture, isn't it, of what God invites us to, in Christ.

The Band is going to do a song as an expression of what it means for God to love us. What it means for Jesus to be the embodiment of God's love for us. I'm going to ask you to listen and let the Spirit speak to you this morning. Let's pray.

God, I want to give this time to you this morning. I know for some of us here this morning, maybe this is new information to us, or maybe it's something we haven't heard in a long time or maybe we haven't understood what it means that you love us so much. God, I pray during this time that we would sense that. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Feature – “The Love of God”

(“Let Me Be Myself” music bed)

Communion

1. Not about what I have done – good

or bad – but about what Jesus has done.

2. Way to remember what Jesus did on the cross.

3. Way to express our need “I am part of why Jesus gave his life” and our trust in his love and grace “this shows how much I am loved”

Here’s what we’re going to do ... if you would like to remember and like to express your need and your trust, you are welcome to come to the table and receive. Dip the bread into the juice. And then you are free to leave and we’ll see you next Sunday. OK?

So, here we go. Feel free to receive

when you are ready.

Communion (“The Love of God”)

Endnotes

ⁱ Helpful character intro and plotline here:

<http://blogs.christianpost.com/movie/more-theological-questions-than-answers-in-the-adjustment-bureau-i-just-as-it-should-be-5140/>