

At the Movies 2017

Arrival

February 19, 2017

**PRELUDE – Whom Shall I Fear
Worship – Whom Shall I Fear
Announcements – Shannon**

Feature – “Time After Time” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

That song, I think, is an appropriate launching point for this message because one of the major themes of today’s movie, *Arrival*, is time.

I’m curious:

- How many of you have seen it?
- How many of you liked it?

- How many shed a tear or two along the way? (I did).

Actually, I thought *Arrival* was one of the best movies I've ever seen. (Although I've heard from some of you that it was the worst you've ever seen. Of course, I heard that about last Sunday's movie, *The Revenant*, and also next Sunday's movie).

But for me, not only was *Arrival* so well done, it was such a great blend of head and heart. It was emotional and cerebral all at the same time. After I watched it, I told Jetta I could probably do this whole series – all four Sundays – on this one movie. There was so much in it; so many biblical themes and spiritual analogies that we could just go on and on about. Obviously, I've chosen *not* to do that, and to limit myself to only *one*

message on this movie.

But, with that said, just a brief reminder ... that that's what we're doing in this series. We're taking wonderfully-produced stories that aren't at all about God and using those stories to illustrate something about God and how we relate to Him ... which is exactly what *Jesus* did when He told parables – analogies that revealed the truth about the Ultimate Reality in a new and fresh way.

And I think that's what *Arrival* does. So, let's get into it.

On the Surface

And let's begin by looking at what seems to be, on the surface of things, what this story is about – at least from all the promotional

posters and the trailer.

<pic> Alien spaceships have come to Earth – 12 of them in various parts of the world are hovering just above the surface – but no one seems to know why.

In spite of the fact that everyone is terrified (every major government scrambles its military in self-defense), the aliens don't appear to be aggressive. In fact, it seems like they just want to communicate because every eighteen hours, the door on the bottom of each ship opens to give humans access.

So, all across the world, teams of experts go up into the ships to try and communicate ... which presents a problem because *their* language is unlike any *human* language ...

<pic> ... which is where the protagonist of the story, Louise Banks, comes in.

Louise is single. She's a linguist – an expert in languages. And so she is recruited ...

<pic> ... by Colonel Weber to be part of the team that's investigating the ship parked over Montana.

Now, if you saw the movie, you know the way it starts out is by giving us a little insight into who Louise is. In the very first scene (which is stunning because it just rips your heart out), we learn about her relationship with her daughter, Hannah.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 01 Beginnings & Endings (2.3 min)

(Begin) Louise: “I used to think this was the beginning of your story.”

(End) Louise crying on Hannah

<SLIDE SET 2>

Wow, what a way to start a movie.

In the very next scene that follows, we see a reserved – almost somber – Louise going to teach a class at her university when the whole world seems to stop. The aliens have appeared and that’s when she is recruited by Col. Weber.

<pic> Weber also recruits a theoretical physicist by the name of Ian Donnelly

...

... because one of the odd things about this setup is the physical environment of the ship. It’s very different from anything

anyone has ever seen. It features a zero-gravity portal and a transparent barrier that separates two aliens – who we never clearly see – from the humans.

After the first few efforts to communicate don't go so well because of the fear factor, Louise decides it's time for a more radical – and potentially dangerous – approach.

Check it out.

Video Clip – 02 A Proper Introduction (2.0 min)

(Begin) Louise takes off helmet

(End) Louise: “Now that’s a proper introduction.”

And that openness Louise displays towards the two aliens (who she and Ian label “Abbott” and “Costello”), will turn out to be

very important as the story goes along.

But the task at hand remains: to understand their unique language and to be able to communicate – with the ultimate goal being to determine why they are here.

And one point, Ian files this report of their progress.

Video Clip – 03 What We Don't Know (2.3 min)

(Begin) Ian's voiceover: "Here are some of the many things we don't know about the heptapods."

(End) Shot of ship hovering.

Even though it will take another month to develop the vocabulary to communicate accurately about "The Big Question" (why are you here?), they don't have that kind of

time. The “alien crisis” has gone on for months with little progress, and fear is escalating worldwide. Governments in each of the 12 locations are getting more and more nervous about what they think the heptapods are up to.

So Louise decides that “ready or not” it’s time to find out. Let’s watch as she poses the question with what she knows of their language and gets back a very disturbing reply.

Video Clip – 04 The Big Question (1.5 min)

(Begin) Louise mumbles: “Heptapod purpose. Earth – what is your purpose?”

(End) Louise: “How is it more complicated than that?”

It’s more complicated because Russia and

China have received the same image which they have interpreted to mean as “use weapon” (instead of “offer weapon”) and they, thinking they’re going to be attacked, mobilize to retaliate ...

... which means that the situation is now becoming dire; so dire, in fact, that several renegade soldiers at Ian and Louise’s base decide to secretly plant explosives up near the top of the tunnel. They’re going to bring an end to the Abbott and Costello show.

So, when Louise and Ian do go back in seeking clarification of “offer weapon”, they don’t realize they’re in danger *not from the aliens but from their own people*. And while they are there, Abbott invites Louise to write on the barrier and then three incredible things happen ... which will bring

us to the deeper point of the story.

Check it out.

Video Clip – 05 Turning Point (2.2 min)

(Begin) Louise hands on barrier as “ink” shoots out.

(End) Louise and Ian floating in zero-gravity
<SLIDE SET 3>

So, what three things happened in that scene?

- First of all, while writing in Heptapodese (which is what the researchers call the language), Louise “sees” her daughter.
- Second (and this isn’t revealed until a bit later), Abbott is killed in the

explosion. Actually, Costello tells Louise, “Abbott is death process” – which is an odd way to put it.

- Finally, just before the explosion, Abbott communicates a much bigger picture concerning the Heptapod mission.

<pic> Literally. That picture.

And after Louise and Ian are rescued from the tunnel, Ian goes to work on it and discovers that it’s actually just one piece of a much larger image.

What he and Louise have been given is exactly *one twelfth* of the whole which means that the other 11 pieces are in the other locations ... which means that, in order to figure it out, everyone will need to *relax* and

work together ... which will be a huge challenge.

Looking Deeper

Now, let's push pause for a few minutes and talk about what we're seeing or, more accurately, what we're *not* seeing.

And by the way, there's a huge hint early on that "seeing" and *accurately interpreting what we see* is a core theme of this movie.

<pic> Take a look at this picture of one of the 12 ships.

If you didn't know that was an alien spacecraft what would you say it looks like?

It looks like a lens! Contact lens, camera lens, eyeball lens. The director is telling us

right up front that this movie is about seeing and correctly understanding ... which, by the way, also happens to be a huge biblical theme.

For example, one of the most well-known sayings of Jesus – and we talk about it a lot around here – is from the Sermon on the Mount ...

... when He says:

“How can you think of saying, ‘Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.”
Luke 6:42 (NLT)

And one of the most interesting stories

about Jesus is when he heals a blind man by the name of Bartimaeus.

**When Jesus asks him what he sees,
Bart says:**

“I see people, but I can’t see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around.” Mark 8:24
(NLT)

Now, if I had to describe the “aliens” in this movie, I would use those exact words: “you can’t see them very clearly but they look like trees walking around.”

So, is that a hint from the director about a biblical connection he’s trying to make? If it is, he’s not saying (at least in the interviews I read), but it sure does seem awfully “coincidental.”

Of course, the greatest biblical theme having to do with seeing and understanding has to do with our limited ability, as humans, to see and understand God. Only when God takes the initiative to reveal Himself does that happen.

We talked about that a bit last week when we looked at *The Revenant*; how it illustrated that, in a world filled with predictably bad things (like illness, death, conflict and war), God is constantly dropping little pieces of grace everywhere – unexpectedly, undeservedly good and wonderful things (like a sunshiny 70-degree week in mid-February). Those kinds of things happen, we learned – “the heavens reveal the glory of God” – because God chooses to reveal Himself through the beauty of nature.

That's one way we begin to perceive His reality and his presence but that only takes us so far. Once we sense that there must be a God behind all of this, the obvious question becomes "who is this God? What is this God like?"

The Christian faith contends that those are tough questions to answer because, as the Apostle Paul tells us in one of his letters to the first-century church at Corinth, as long as we are on this earth we will only perceive God and God's activity as if looking in a dull mirror or through a foggy glass.ⁱ There's a barrier between the physical world we inhabit and the spiritual world which God inhabits.

... which, again, is what we've seen with Louise and Ian and the aliens. There's a

literal barrier and, on the other side of it, the Heptapods are enshrouded in fog!

And the Bible tells us that until God does something to break through and clarify reality for us, we're going to be looking into that fog and misunderstanding ... which, as it turns out, *is exactly what's been happening to this point in the story both to Louise and to those who are observing her* – the audience, i.e., you and me! We're seeing but we're not understanding.

For example, after a very long day of studying the Heptapod language, we see *this* happen to Louise.

Video Clip – 06 Initial Vision (1.5 min)

(Begin) Louise pondering.

(End) Louise: “Yeah. I’m fine.”

Now, as someone seeing this movie for the very first time (before you see the ending and figure it out or someone explains it to you), what do you think is happening in that moment?

Well, obviously, Louise is having a bit of a breakdown where she's remembering an interaction with her deceased daughter ... because that's only natural, right? When you're as stressed as she is and you've suffered the kind of loss she has – that's what happens.

That's what we think is going on. That's what we “see” because of the opening scene of the movie.

But, in reality, for Louise, this is a

completely different experience from *that*. She is seeing *something else entirely*. And the *meaning* of what she is seeing is finally revealed to her – and to us – in the climax of the story.

After Ian figures out that everyone needs to share their imagery with everyone else ... and it's clear that isn't going to happen because everyone is ready to go to war with everyone else and the aliens, and all communications have ceased ... at that point, Louise realizes that her only hope is to go back in and ask “Costello” for help.

And she gets a very confusing – and shocking – response. Check it out.

Video Clip – 07 “Louise Sees Future” (2.2 min)

(Begin) Louise: “I need you to send a

message”

(End) Louise: “Wait!”

So, what’s *really* been going on in the first 90 minutes of this movie is that Louise hasn’t been *remembering her past ...* which is how we have interpreted her story to this point. And we thought that because we assume that seeing something first in the telling of story means that it happens before everything else. But in this case it doesn’t.

Instead, what’s really been happening is that, as Louise has become more fluent in Heptapodese, she has also begun to see “visions” that confuse her; visions of a child *she doesn’t even know*. The big reveal is that, at this point in time, Louise hasn’t *lost* a child because she hasn’t yet *had* a child.

And Costello explains what's going on: "Louise sees future" – just like, as it turns out, the Heptapods do. They know that 3,000 years in the future they will need humanity's help, so they have come to give humans not a *weapon* but a tool and a technology.

And the solution to the impending worldwide nuclear disaster, Costello tells her, is "Louise use weapon" (which, again, is the word he conflates with "tool.") "*Use weapon*" since "*weapon opens time.*"

In other words, the weapon or tool – which is actually the Heptapod language she's incorporated into her brain – allows you to step outside of the dimension of time; to see and experience all events of your life at once.

And so she does. Louise “sees” – she literally experiences – something that happens in the future: a conversation with the senior Chinese general in which he not only thanks her for talking him out of starting the final war, but also reminds her of how she contacted him and exactly what she said.

And then that’s what she does in the present. She contacts him, says those words and – to bring the surface story to a quick close – they all live happily ever after.

So What?

Of course, here in the real world where you and I live, the question is “so what?” What does all of this mean to us?

Well, as I said at the beginning of this message, I could take four weeks to talk about all the symbolism and implications. As for symbolism, it's hard not to associate the aliens with God.

First of all, they come not as an enemy but as a friend bringing a message that will unite and lead to peace if only people will listen and accept it which is the promise of the Gospel. (And some have pointed out that they come in twelve ships which represents the twelve apostles who were given the commission to take the Gospel into all the world. Maybe, maybe not.)

Second, they exist in a way that is not bound by time. All events of their life are accessible to them at once, which is how God exists.

As we've talked about on several occasions,

God stands outside of time (which is what it means that He is “eternal”) and therefore, all events of history past, present and future are accessible to Him (though not to us). That explains some very curious scriptures such as when Jesus said “Before Abraham was, I am” ... such as Rev. 13:8 where it says that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb slain from before the foundation of the world.

How can that be? Because God – being eternal – isn’t part of the timeline.

It helps us understand how God can look at those who trust Christ right now and say “you are perfect and holy and righteous” by faith even when we aren’t; that it can say we are “seated with Christ in Heaven” even though we aren’t. But we will be. But to God, there is no future or past or present.

As for implications, there's the most obvious one which we've discussed already: how easy it is to be wrong in our perceptions of others because we're missing an important piece of information. At the risk of being political, in our current climate of judging people because they supported Trump or they're against Trump or don't care, I think if you had to take away just one piece of practical theology from this movie, that would be a good one. It's easy to be wrong in our perceptions of others because we're always missing an important piece of information.

And that's not only in terms of human relationships but also relationships with God. It's significant that the first response of

humans to the Heptapods is fear, assuming the worst when it's not true. That's how many people respond to God, by the way.

Another implication has to do with the tension between free will and predetermination – this movie illustrates how it's possible for both to exist for real at the same time.

And there are many more that could be listed but notice that all of those are “head” implications – intellectual observations – which, to someone like me who is naturally wired that way, is really cool. *But they don't hold a candle to the heart implication that's revealed in the final scene of the movie.* So let's talk about that.

At this point in the story, the immediate

crisis has passed. The aliens, having successfully transmitted their technology, have departed. All the militaries are standing down and everyone is going to work together.

More importantly, Louise knows exactly what's going to happen in her life.

- She knows who she's going to marry.
- She knows she's going to have a child.
- And she knows the terrible pain and heartache that those two choices are eventually going to bring when he leaves her and the child dies.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 08 Where Your Story Begins
(3.8 min)

(Begin) Louise: “So, Hannah, this is where your story begins.”

(End) Blackout

<SLIDE SET 4>

I promise you that next week’s movie, *Hail Caesar!*, is a lot less emotional than this one. So please come back.

But, for just a few minutes, let’s try to pull it together for one more “so what?” this one, obviously, of the heart variety.

I think the reason why that scene is so emotional is that when Louise says “Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it and I welcome every moment of it” she is speaking *holy words*. She is expressing an impulse that is at the pinnacle and the very core of what it means to be

human – the impulse to love *unconditionally*, which is very different from an “oh, you make me so happy, so I love you” kind of love. (That’s the kind of love my dog has for me because I feed him).

Unconditional love – which dogs and animals don’t do – chooses to love even when it knows that choice will bring pain as it does to Louise when she chooses (in the future) to say yes to both Ian and Hannah.

And the reason that’s so holy – the reason that’s so impacting – is that this is what God has done – and does – regarding you and me and the whole human race.

One of the questions that a lot of people ask when they consider the eternal nature of God – that God knows all things before they

happen – is why God, knowing full well that humans would turn their back on Him and sin and bring chaos to the creation, would go through with it.

Have you ever wondered that? Why would God bother knowing that the eventual result would be sin and rebellion which would personally bring Him pain and suffering?

Arrival, this parable from Hollywood, illustrates the answer in Louise’s heartfelt and holy choice. God did it – and does it – for the same reason she did. Love.

Long ago, the Apostle Paul wrote ...

*God demonstrates his own love
for us in this: While we were still
sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8 (NLT)*

God loves you and God loves me so much that even though our sin hurts Him; even though our sin cost him the life of his son (you might say “Jesus is death process”), He chose to embrace us anyway.

And this is the God revealed to us not just in nature but in His son.

And we’ll talk more about that next week as we look at our next movie, Hail Caesar.

Let’s pray.

<very brief prayer>

Feature – Future / Past

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week – Hail Caesar! – a lot less

emotional but a really great parable.

Endnotes

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:12