

**At the Movies**  
***The Revenant***  
**February 12, 2017**

Well, that might be oversimplifying *just a bit* but, if you've seen today's movie, you know that *is* pretty much the story:

- A man goes through a terrible ordeal
- And he ought to be dead (and more than once)
- But he survives.

Of course, the *ordeal* and *how* he survives and *what he does after he survives* is what makes it *interesting* ... and, from the point of view of this series, worth talking about.

As Shannon said, today is the beginning of

our annual *At the Movies* series – although “annual” may be a bit of an exaggeration as we’ve been in existence for 23 years and this is the 11<sup>th</sup> time that we’ve done it. So it’s not *quite* annual. But, we’ve done it every year since 2013 which makes it five in a row, so it’s now something of a tradition.<sup>i</sup>

And it’s *become* a tradition because every time we have done this series, two very cool things have happened:

1. First of all, more than a few folks who were not actively involved in church came to North Heartland out of curiosity (I mean, what kind of a church uses movies for sermons?) and they discovered that being part of the movement and the community that

Jesus started makes a difference in everyday life. And they stayed.

So, as excited as I am about the movies we're going to look at over the next five weeks, I am equally excited because some of you who are here for the first time – things are going to “click” for you in a way they haven't before. And your life is going to change. You'll become part of this church *or* maybe you'll go back to “that other church” or the denomination you grew up in. And that will be cool, too.

2. The second thing that happens when we do a movie series is that we get to follow closely in the footsteps of our leader, Jesus of Nazareth, who was well-known for the unique way in which He would

teach people. Very rarely in the New Testament do we read of Him taking out the scroll of Hebrew Scripture and teaching from it verse-by-verse.

More often, He'd take the common everyday things that were already familiar to his listeners and use them to illustrate a greater reality. He'd tell stories that didn't have anything to do with God directly and then he'd say "Your Heavenly Father is like that" or "that's what it's like to be part of the Kingdom where He rules."

And I think if Jesus walked the earth today, he'd do the same kind of thing. I think it's highly possible that He might even say, "Did you see that movie, *The Revenant*? That illustrated something

very important about Your Heavenly Father.” And then He’d explain it ... which is what I would like to do this morning.

## **Cast of Characters**

So let’s get into it. I’m curious:

- How many of you saw this movie when it first came out in theaters?
- How many of you saw it recently because of this series? Great. I appreciate you making the effort!

Now, in order to understand the story (at a deeper level than the “summary” we saw a few minutes ago), I think it might help to introduce the main characters.

**First of all, there's the protagonist, Hugh Glass, a veteran woodsman who serves as a guide for a team of fur trappers.**

By the way, there really *was* an historical person by the name of Hugh Glass who went through an ordeal similar to what the movie portrays. However, as Hollywood tends to do, they spiced it up a bit by giving him a wife and a son in this telling of the story.

**His wife, who is never named, is a Native American from the Pawnee tribe**

...

... though she never appears “alive” in the movie – only in memories and visions that Glass has from time-to-time.

**Together, they have a son, Hawk, who works with his father as a guide.**

And, as we'll see, he plays very prominently in the story because what happens *to him* becomes a motive for Glass surviving what happens *to him*.

In the opening scene of the movie, we get a sense of the emotional connection between these characters. Glass is remembering how his wife died when their village was attacked by soldiers. As we watch, pay close attention to what he whispers to a much younger Hawk.

### **Video Clip**

“Don’t give up. As long as you have breath, you keep fighting.”

That guiding principle will come to

characterize Glass' character throughout the story.

**Now, the other character who figures in the story just as prominently as Glass is John Fitzgerald, played by Tom Hardy ...**

... who, coincidentally, was the star of the first movie in *last year's* series, *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

Fitzgerald is one of the trappers. And, as you know if you watched the movie, he is a very rough and profane man. His guiding principle is very different from that of Hugh Glass which we quickly discover as the movie transitions from Glass' memory to the present day.

The group of trappers is attacked by a



band of Arikara Indians (also known as the “Ree”) who mistakenly believe they have kidnapped the daughter of their chief.

**In the process, three quarters of the team are killed ...**

... while the remnant barely escape to a boat and cross the river with some of the fur they have acquired.

At that point, it’s decided that the safest plan is to jettison the boat and travel over land some 250 miles to the fort ... which means leaving the valuable pelts behind until they can be retrieved at a later time.

As we watch this scene, pay attention to Fitzgerald’s reaction to the plan and what it reveals about him. By the way, it’s a little hard to make out who is speaking. The first

time you hear Fitzgerald is when he says in the background “this ain’t right.”

Here we go.

### **Video Clip**

“I ain’t got no life. All I got is livin.”

And that guiding principle will come to characterize Fitzgerald’s character throughout the story.

## **Basic Storyline**

Now, with all that as background, the basic storyline from this point is pretty simple.

The next morning, as the group begins the journey back to the fort, Glass goes out

ahead of them since he is the guide.

**Unfortunately, he soon runs into a very protective mamma bear ...**

... who, in an incredible scene that lasts over five minutes, proceeds to maul him to the very edge of death. (I decided not to show you that part. It's a little too gruesome).

Not long after that, the rest of the team finds him. They're horrified and they frantically try to do what little they can to save him.

As we watch, again, pay attention to Fitzgerald and his assessment of the plan.

**Video Clip**

Remarkably, Glass survives the night and, the next morning, they put him on a pallet and begin the long march back to the fort.

**However, after carrying him for several days through the snow and cold and the mountains, the captain decides they can't continue.**

So, he offers \$100 to anyone who will stay behind and give Glass a “Christian burial” when he expires. Two men volunteer and, as the main contingent moves on, Glass, his son Hawk, Jim Bridger ... *and Fitzgerald* – who is keenly interested, as we saw earlier, in the money – remain.

The next morning as Hawk and Bridger are at the river fishing, Fitzgerald, who has already dug a grave – he's obviously still thinking of “the proper thing to do” –

makes an offer to Glass.

Check it out.

### **Video Clip**

At that point, Fitzgerald drags Hawk's body out of sight. Bridger returns from the river and Fitzgerald lies to him about what happened and warns him that the Ree are approaching. They drag Glass – who is still very much alive into the grave – and then take off running.

The next morning, amazingly, miraculously, *this* happens:

### **Video Clip**

And then, for about the next hour of the movie (which turns out to be weeks in the

story), we see Glass slowly coming back to life and making his way back to the fort.

Along the way, his life is continually threatened and miraculously spared, again and again. Two scenes are very important.

This first one comes when he is at the point of starvation. He's sick and about to die when he unexpectedly comes across a Pawnee Indian who shares his meal with him. The next morning ... this happens.

### **Video Clip**

And he does ride with the Pawnee and the Pawnee helps him to heal.

In this next scene, Glass – who is obviously making progress – wakes up surrounded

by the Ree. (This is my favorite part of the movie).

Let's watch.

### **Video Clip**

And, if you saw the movie, you know that what happens next is that he cuts open his horse, disembowels it and climbs inside to survive a blizzard. (I decided not to show you that, either).

Eventually, to the great shock of the captain and the rest of the trappers – especially Fitzgerald who has lied to the captain about fulfilling his promise – Glass is discovered wandering in the woods near the fort.

Of course, at that point, Fitzgerald takes off. And after spending a night recovering and getting a change of clothes, Glass and the captain go after him.

When they finally confront him, Fitzgerald shoots and kills the captain. And, then, at last it's just the two of them, totally exhausted in every way.

- Glass and the man who killed his son.
- Glass and the man who left him for dead and lied about it.

Let's watch.

### **Video Clip**

And that's where we'll leave it for a just a few minutes because I want to talk for a bit



about the deeper meaning that I think is embedded in this story.

## **Deeper Meaning**

If you read any of the reviews that considered this movie at a level beyond the production (and what a monumental effort and achievement it was) and how great DiCaprio was (winning, at last, an Oscar for best actor), you probably heard that the main theme of this movie is *revenge*.

And I would not disagree that it *does* have a lot to do with revenge (and we'll get to that) but as I watched it and pondered it, I saw another theme that I think is just as significant, if not more so.

In fact, what I think this movie is really about at its core is ...

**Two contrasting visions regarding the nature of the world in which we live.**

Let me say that again. *I think this movie is about two contrasting visions as to the nature of our world.*

Here's why I say that. Even though *The Revenant* is based on a real person and real events (Hugh Glass really did survive a vicious bear attack and was left to die by the two men who were charged with staying with him) – even though it's based on a real life story, what we are presented with in this movie is a metaphor for our lives.

Part of the reason that *The Revenant* is so

long is that the director goes to great lengths to show us that we live in an incredibly beautiful and amazing world. Again and again we see sweeping panoramic shots of mountains and rivers and wildlife, stunning images of the sun and the moon and the stars. It all seems so transcendent.

But part of the reason that *The Revenant* is so *bloody* – to an extreme some might say – is that the director also goes to great lengths to show us that we live in a dangerous place where not only does nature often become our mortal enemy, other humans become a threat to life as well.

**In fact, at one point in the movie, we see a Pawnee who has been hung bearing a sign that says, in French,**

**“on est tous des sauvages” which means “we are all savages.”**

And, at some level, that’s true.

So, what we’re seeing in this movie is a metaphor that says “our world is a wonderful place that has everything we need for life and happiness. But it’s also a harsh and uncaring place where death and destruction (both literally and figuratively; physically and emotionally) is only a moment away.”

- It’s only a diagnosis away.
- An accident away.
- Or a fire or a flood or a storm away
  
- It’s only a savage crime away.
- An addiction away.

- A betrayal away.
- Or a job loss; a market crash; a divorce or a hospital bill away.

The list could go on and on. And some of us know this all too well because, even though we don't live in the harsh wilderness of 19<sup>th</sup> century Montana, *we have tasted* the savagery of life in this world.

And the big question behind all of it is – and I'm speaking of both life *and* the movie (because the movie is a metaphor) – the question is “in light of all that we see – the beauty and the tragedy of our existence – what kind of a world is this?”

- Do we exist in a big cosmic accident that just “somehow happened” where

“all that is” is only what we can see and measure and comprehend?

- Or is there some Transcendent Force behind it all? Some Higher Power that is, at some level, guiding and directing?

Those are two contrasting visions regarding the nature of the world in which we live. And I think those visions are represented and fleshed out in the two main characters of the story.

For example, throughout the story, Glass has repeated encounters with his deceased wife. He “sees” her face and he “hears” her whispers. And, then, at one point, he has this bizarre encounter with Hawk, who as we know, has been

murdered by Fitzgerald.

Let's watch.

### **Video Clip**

Now, what does all that mean? *Heck if I know.*

Some reviewers make a big deal of the fact that it takes place in what obviously used to be a church. And as Hawk approaches his father, you clearly see the image of Jesus on the cross.

But really, I don't think it means anything more than this is a man who acknowledges and experiences the transcendent. That's the vision he represents.

On the other hand, even though Fitzgerald frequently refers to “The Good Lord” you can tell he doesn’t really believe. Instead, what he really believes – and lives – is revealed in a story that he tells about his father.

Let’s watch.

### **Video Clip**

What a line! “Sitting and basking in the glory and sublimity of mercy” – in other words, looking at the beauty and wonder of this world, his father decides, “nah. There is nothing transcendent about it.” So, he mocks the idea of a God as shoots the squirrel and eats it.



And Fitzgerald had followed in his footsteps. Remember earlier in the story when he said, “Life? I ain’t got no life! All I got is livin’.” Same exact philosophy. There’s nothing more going on in this world than “survival of the fittest.” The supreme law is the Law of the Jungle: *get them before they get you.*<sup>ii</sup>

That’s the vision that Fitzgerald represents.

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Now, at this point, I know some of you are thinking, “Dude, this is just a movie. These are just characters in a story. You’re making way too much out of this.”

Maybe.

**But maybe not because the Bible repeatedly says things like:**

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky displays his handiwork. Day after day it speaks out; night after night it reveals his greatness. There is no actual speech or word, nor is its voice literally heard. Yet its voice echoes throughout the earth; its words carry to the distant horizon. Psalm 19:1-4 (NET)*

The beauty of creation whispers to us of the transcendent nature of our world. “There’s something more here than meets the eye.”

**The Apostle Paul writing in the New**

## **Testament says it even more directly.**

*Since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (NET)*

Theologians have a term to describe this testimony of nature. They call it “general revelation.” In other words, the evidence of God’s existence is everywhere – embedded in everything that exists – for anyone who wants to see it.

Yet, for some reason, *some people don't see it* while others do. Fitzgerald (and his

father) do not while Glass does.

Why? What's the difference?

Over the years, many theologians have attributed this to what is known as “election”: the idea that God, in His mercy, has sovereignly chosen to open the eyes of some while others are left in the dark. And in certain parts of the scripture, the Bible does give that impression, although others plainly assert that every human being has freedom to make that choice for themselves.

Of course, smarter people than you and me have debated this for centuries, so we're not going to solve that today. *But I don't think we have to* because, practically speaking, I think it's a lot simpler than that.

I think it comes down to how you deal with the harsh and tragic nature of this world when you see it and, more importantly, when it happens to you or those you love.

## **The Example of Job**

There's a fascinating example of this in the Old Testament. You've probably heard it.

A really good guy – a God-fearing man, a family man – a man by the name of Job loses everything in one day. A storm wipes out his home, his livestock, his wealth, his servants, his children. While it's not exactly the same, it sounds a little like what happens to Hugh Glass – at least, as he is presented in this movie.

Anyway ... at that point, Job does what all of us would do in that situation. He tries to figure out “why.”

- Is it something he did that made God angry?
- Or is it that God just doesn't care? Maybe the nature of the world He created really is about luck and chance and survival of the fittest.

If you read the story, you know that's what Job is about to conclude until, one day, God shows up. But instead of explaining why all the terrible things have happened, he asks a question: “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation – when the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?”<sup>iii</sup>

In other words, “Job, let’s be clear. Your perspective on reality is a bit limited.”

But God doesn’t stop there because *this isn’t about Job*. This is about the nature of God and the world God created which can be a harsh, uncaring place where death and destruction (both literally and figuratively; physically and emotionally) is only a moment away ... which Job knew all too well.

“Job, you wonder what kind of a world this is? What kind of a God I am?”

**Think about it:**

*“Who causes it to rain on an uninhabited land, a desert where there are no human beings; rain that satisfies a*

*devastated and desolate  
land; rain that causes it to  
sprout with vegetation?”  
Job 38:26-27 (NET)*

By the way, that this sounds *a lot* like the place Fitzgerald said his father found after tragedy struck and he was at the point of death: “a group of trees out in the middle of nowhere just sticking up in this ocean of scrub.” And in those trees is a squirrel which will provide a meal which will keep him alive.

I doubt that the script writers did that intentionally, but the question is the same as it was for Job. *Why are those trees there?*

- Furthermore, why is a Pawnee in the middle of the wilderness right where he needs to be to save Glass?



- Why is there a tree in just the right spot to break his fall when he goes over the cliff?

And, again, I know this is just a movie but the questions are real. And we need to wrestle with those kinds of questions, lest we conclude what Job was about to conclude.

Specifically: in a world that can be a harsh, uncaring place where death and destruction is only a moment away:

- Why does the body heal itself?
- Why is there medicine that sometimes works when it doesn't heal itself?
- Why is there beauty in a sunset or a flower or a snowfall? It serves no

utilitarian purpose.

- Why is there a desire for both justice *and* mercy?
- Why is there love and compassion and generosity?

**More importantly, “who created a world in which such amazingly good things are possible among all the bad?”**

See what happens to so many of us is that we look at the world and we ask “why do bad things happen?” when, really, the question ought to be “why does anything *good* happen?”

Have you ever thought about that? If you haven't, I encourage you to do so because that's the key to being able to see and perceive that “general revelation” – the

creative *grace* of God, the creative *goodness* of God, and the creative *love* of God that makes those things possible. Those are the whispers of His presence.

And what's amazing about that shift in perspective is that it can change the way we think and the way we act, even in the most trying of circumstances ... which is what we see as the final battle between Glass and Fitzgerald comes to an end.

Let's watch.

## **Video Clip**

## **Conclusion**

There are two contrasting visions as to the nature of our world. Either it's a big cosmic

accident that just “somehow happened” or there is a Transcendent Force, a Higher Power that is guiding and directing.

So my challenge to you this week is to look for the good among the evil instead of the other way around. Listen for the whispers of creation. And then, come back next week and we’ll talk about another way that God reveals himself as we take a look at another great movie, *Arrival*.

Until then, let me pray for you.

Lord, help us listen for the whispers of grace in our life this week. Where is there beauty? Where is there kindness? Why? Thank you. Amen.

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> We've had a movie series in 1999, 00-01, 04-06, 13-17

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/the-revenant-and-the-search-for-a-higher-justice/5053/>

<sup>iii</sup> Job 38:4,7