

At the Movies 2018
“When Evil Comes to Call”
Murder on the Orient Express
July 29, 2018

**Worship Song – This Is Amazing Grace
Feature – “Long Black Train”**

Good morning everyone.

I have to say that I’m thrilled that Bill was able to channel his inner Josh Turner and do that song today because not only do I love country music, it’s also a great way to kick off today’s “At the Movies” message about ... a long black train – the Orient Express – and the murder which takes place upon said train.

I'm curious ...

- How many have seen the most recent version of this movie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (the one we're looking at today)?
- How many have seen the 1974 version or the 2001 version or the 2010 version?ⁱ
- Has anyone read the Agatha Christie book on which all of those movies are based?

I'll confess that I did *not* read the book, although I'm sure that some English teacher at some point assigned it. But I was not very disciplined as a student in my younger days.

I've also not seen any of the earlier movies.

Furthermore, despite the incredible production that went into this most recent rendition, as well as its incredible star-studded cast, I have to say that I would probably *not* list it among the best movies I've ever seen.

However, I must also say that rarely have I been *as impacted by a movie* and what it so vividly illustrates about “the human condition” – what it means for you and me to be living in a fallen world where evil is present and can strike any of us at any time ...

... which, you know, if you've been here for either of the past two Sundays, is

actually the theme of this year's movie series: *When Evil Comes to Call*.

So far we've seen two kinds of evil illustrated.

There's *random evil* (which we looked at in our first movie, *A Quiet Place*). Random evil is the bad stuff that happens – often because we're just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And then there's *self-inflicted evil*: the bad things we bring on ourselves because of our own foolish or sinful actions (which was portrayed so well in last week's movie, *Dr. Strange*).

In the next two weeks, we're going to look at ...

Systemic evil which we suffer from unjust human systems and institutions (that's the focus of next week's movie, *Black Panther*)

Then *interpersonal (or relational) evil* which

comes from people close to us who unintentionally (and sometimes intentionally) hurt us (which we'll see in the movie *Passengers*).

But today we're going to look at the most sinister evil of all.

Malevolent evil which comes at the hands of those ...

- Who are deliberately cruel and malicious ...
- Who, with malice and forethought, choose to rob, abuse, rape or murder another human being ...
- Who, for whatever reason, knowingly inflict pain and suffering – be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or social – on those who have been made in the image of God

and created to reflect His glory.

We don't have to look very far to see malevolent people and malevolent evil at work in our world. Maybe it's happened to us personally or to someone we know. If not that, then we've certainly seen it reported in the media on a daily basis.

And always, always, always whenever we see it or experience it, our reaction is the same: "*this is evil*. And whoever did this ought to be made to pay for it and (if the act is egregious enough) maybe with their own life" ...

... which, as you know if you're familiar with the story, is exactly what happens in today's movie, *Murder on the Orient Express*.

So, let's get into it.

Characters & Plot

And let's begin by introducing several of the main characters and setting up the plot, which is actually pretty simple.

The first character is the famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot.

It's 1934 and Poirot is in Jerusalem investigating a case of theft which has befuddled the local officials. Of course, he solves it with all of the pomp and circumstance befitting a man of his reputation and, quite frankly, ego.

As he's ready to board a ship bound for Istanbul (in hopes of taking a break from his work), one of the officers (who

is clearly in awe of Poirot's skill) comes to escort him on board. As they strike up a very brief conversation we discover much about Poirot's character and mindset.

Let's watch.

Video Clip - 01 NOTHING IN BETWEEN (0.9 min)

(Begin) Poirot: "You are staring."

(End) Poirot: "That is perfect."

By the way, if you're not used to it, Poirot's accent is a little difficult to decipher so some of the clips will have subtitles.

Anyway ... Poirot is incredibly attuned to detail and he is driven by balance which is why he sees the moral world in

terms of black and white – a viewpoint which soon will be challenged by what happens to our second main character ...

... who goes by the name of Edward Ratchett.

When Poirot arrives in Istanbul, instead of getting to relax, he is immediately called to take on a new case in London, which is how he ends up on that long black train – the Orient Express – with Ratchett *as well as* a very diverse group of men and women from all over the world and all stations in life; everything from a princess and a countess to a car salesman and a valet.

We'll get to all of *them* in a bit ...

But, first, Ratchett is running a racket – he is selling very expensive fake

paintings and rugs to his clients and things are happening (such as threatening notes and letters) that lead him to believe they are after him; possibly even on the train with him.

And he's scared – scared enough to seek help from the well-known and easily-recognizable Poirot.

Watch what happens.

Video Clip - 02 IT'S PERSONAL (1.4 min)

(Begin) Ratchett: “Here’s what I’d like to do.”

(End) Poirot: “I do not like your face.”

That night, Poirot hears a brief noise coming from the adjacent compartment (which happens to be Ratchett’s) but, because there’s a huge storm *and* he

hears the conductor asking Ratchett if he's OK, followed by a positive response, he thinks nothing of it and goes back to sleep.

However, the next morning, it turns out that not only has the train been stopped by an avalanche, something really was amiss next door. Ratchett has been murdered ...

... which brings us to the next character M. Bouc, who is the director of the Orient Express (the train not the movie).

And because Bouc was sleeping in another car, he is not a suspect, so he soon becomes Poirot's assistant in solving the crime.

Of course, Poirot is on vacation and doesn't want to get involved. But Bouc

makes a very compelling argument which convinces him to solve the case before any other officials get involved.

Let's watch.

Video Clip – 03 BETTER THAN THE BEASTS (2.3 min)

(Begin) Bouc: “If we leave this to the police ...”

(End) Poirot: “The murderer is with us, on the train, now.”

And with that Poirot begins his investigation by examining both Ratchett's body and the scene of the crime.

He first notes that Ratchett has been stabbed 12 times in different places with varying intensity and that he had offered little resistance because he had

been drugged.

He then discovers what he calls a “riot of clues” – meaning that most of them were planted to throw off whoever would investigate – but there is one which he says is genuine: a charred fragment of a note; evidence which the killer may have tried to burn.

Fortunately, the crew that has come to dig the train out of the snow has some equipment that will provide Poirot with the key to the mystery.

Let’s watch.

Video Clip - 04 A SECRET TO TELL (2.1 min)

(Begin) Poirot: “We seek the truth from within not without ...”

(End) Poirot: “Indeed, you did.”

And this *is* the key to the mystery.

Ratchett (or Cassetti) wasn't murdered because he had swindled someone. He was killed because he had kidnapped and then murdered a little girl named Daisy Armstrong, daughter of a world-famous aviator by the name of John Armstrong ... *and had gotten away with it.*

Now, what's fascinating about that scenario is that when Agatha Christie wrote this story back in 1934, there was a very similar case that had received widespread international attention; so much so that noted journalist H.L. Mencken called it "the biggest story since the Resurrection."ⁱⁱ

That case, that story was ...

The 1932 kidnapping and murder of the 20-month-old son of world-famous aviator Charles Lindberg.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like the Armstrong family in Christie's story, Lindberg and his wife paid the \$50,000 ransom for their son but, soon after, he was found dead; buried in a field four miles from their home.

Furthermore, at the time *Murder on the Orient Express* was written, the killer was still at large leading some to speculate that Christie wrote it "to provide a more just ending for a real-life wrong that troubled her deeply."^{iv}

In any case, from this point on, Poirot does exactly what he said he would do when asked to investigate. He questions

each passenger and, as he does, he discovers two things:

1. They are each lying to him about something big or small.
2. Incredibly for such a diverse group, each one has some kind of link to the Armstrong family.

And now, at last, he believes he has figured out who the killer is.

**<pic> It's Mary Debenham, who was
governess when Daisy Armstrong was killed
...**

**<pic> And who also happens to be in a
secret relationship with Doctor Arbuthnot ...**

... secret because she's white, he's black
and it's 1934.

Anyway, let's watch what happens when Poirot accuses her.

Video Clip - 05 FALSE CONFESSION (2.3 min)

(Begin) Poirot: "I could point an easy finger at Countess ..."

(End) Arbuthnot: "I knew he didn't deserve a trial."

So, the doctor did it, right? No.

Turns out *even that* is a lie. Because the doctor was a sharpshooter in the Army, Poirot realizes there is no way he would have missed at such close range unless he intended to do so which leads Poirot to conclude that something much bigger is going on here than what meets the eye.

But he isn't quite sure what it is just yet,

so he gathers everyone in the tunnel to share what he has discovered in his investigation.

Let's watch and listen as he does.

Video Clip – 06 AN AWFULLY CLEVER MAN (2.9 min)

(Begin) Poirot: “We have Doctor Arbuthnot ...”

(End) Hubbard/Arden: “You're an awfully clever man.”

And Poirot *is* an awfully clever man ... but *she* is an awfully clever woman, as we shall soon see.

The Big Reveal

But, before we talk about that and who the true killer is, I need to tell you that I've spent a longer time than I normally

do going thru this story because *I want you to feel the emotional weight of it.*

Specifically, I want you to feel the sickening horror of malevolent evil personified in the character of Ratchett (or Cassetti) – a man who ...

- Took someone's child
- Accepted the ransom
- Then killed her
- And buried her body in a hole in a field.

What kind of a monster does that?

And remember, that part isn't fiction. It really happened. And it continues to happen in countless other ways in our world ...

- Whenever someone is deliberately cruel and malicious.
- Whenever someone, with malice and forethought, chooses to rob, abuse, rape or murder another human being.

And I want you to feel the pain and suffering that all those people on the train have experienced ...

- Whose lives were torn apart in one way or another by the murder of Daisy Armstrong
- Who believe that “Cassetti was a pig”; that “he didn’t deserve a trial; “that he deserved to die.”
- Who believed that justice would

never be served as long as he was free and alive.

And I want you to feel all of those things so that you can understand what *really* happened that fateful night on the Orient Express.

Here we go.

Video Clip – 07 ALL OF YOU TOGETHER (2.7 min)

(Begin) Poirot: “A murder should have one victim but a dozen lives are broken.”

(End) Arden puts hand over her mouth.

I don't know how that scene affected *you* but, the first time I saw this movie, my reaction was “wow, I sure didn't see *that* coming!”

In an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Green, who wrote the screenplay for the movie, made a fascinating comment about that scene.

He said:

“The part of *Murder on the Orient Express* I sought most to unpack was the ugly deformation of the soul required to take up the knife, even to kill a killer.

“Writing the film, internalizing Christie's ingenious structure, working through the math of motive and opportunity for 12 suspects, I had to channel Christie's truth daily: *This is something people do.*”^v

And he's right. When people experience malevolent evil, an equally malevolent act sometimes happens in response.

The big question (at least, as posed by the movie) is whether or not that response is morally justified.

Specifically ...

- Are those who killed Cassetti now *themselves* guilty of murder?
- Should Poirot tell the authorities what they've done ... *or* ... is Cassetti's crime so heinous that he should make-up a story about an intruder who somehow snuck onto the train and did the deed?

Let's watch and see what he decides.

Video Clip – 08 MAY YOU FIND PEACE (0.8 min)

(Begin) Poirot: “Ladies and gentlemen ...”

(End) Poirot: “May we all.”

And, for me, this was yet another “wow” moment because I didn’t see *that* coming, either.

Not from a guy who just days before had said:

- “I *detect* criminals, not *protect* them.”
- “I do not approve of murder.”
- “We do not kill people the world would be better without.”
- “We must be better than the beasts.”
- “There is right, there is wrong and

nothing in between.”

So, what’s going on here? What are we to make of Poirot’s dramatic about-face in thinking and attitude?

Lessons Learned

First of all, I think it illustrates three principles regarding how to live in a world where people both engage in and suffer from malevolent evil – and all three of them are right in line with what Jesus taught; right in line with the way He invites us to live.

Principle #1. Living in a fallen world requires *humility*: to be less sure of our “rightness” (even when we *are* right).

After Linda Arden explains to Poirot how they committed the murder, he

says “There was right, there was wrong and then there was you.”

In other words, things – and people – are almost always more complex than they first appear, so we should proceed with caution and humility because we might be missing something.

Principle #2. Living in a fallen world requires *grace*: to be less judgmental of others who don't meet our standards of “rightness.”

Like Poirot, we have to learn to live with the imbalance; that people don't always do what they should; that sometimes justice doesn't work out like it should.

Principle #3. Living in a fallen world requires *empathy* and *compassion*: to put ourselves emotionally in the place of people who have suffered damage at the soul level ...

... which was obviously a new

experience for Poirot.

Now, those are all great principles and if we had the time, I could give you lots of Bible verses and quotes from Jesus to back them up.

- Of course, if you've been in church for any time at all, you've heard them before.
- And even if you *haven't* been in church very much, you already know these things because our culture has been so influenced by Jesus' teaching (we're just not aware of it).

However ... if you remember way back at the beginning of this message ... I said that rarely have I been as impacted by a

movie and what it so vividly illustrates about “the human condition” – what it means for you and me to be living in a world where sin and *malevolent* evil still prevail.

But, quite frankly, *those three principles (good as they are) aren't what makes this movie impactful* because we already know these things – even if we don't live them, right?

What's so impacting about this movie ... what this movie best illustrates about malevolent evil ...

Well, let me put it like this: *the thing we don't know at the end of the story is whether or not all of these poor, sad, damaged souls find peace with what they did.*

Remember, that's what Poirot says he hopes will happen to them. They've killed the killer in hopes ...

- That justice will at last be served
- That what's wrong will be set right
- And that, maybe, they'll be able to find peace and move on.

But we don't know if they do. The movie doesn't tell us ... although the "real life" experience of people who accomplish "revenge" *does* tell us "probably not."

All we know for sure – what the movie makes abundantly clear in that shocking and horrific murder scene – is that all of these nice people (from every continent,

every walk of life, and every position on the socio-economic ladder - meaning they are proxies for all of humanity, including you and me) ...

What we know for sure is that all of these nice people *are completely capable of the same level of cunning and deceit and premeditated brutality as Cassetti!*

And not only are they capable, they actually do it - just like he did.

“But, Rick, they were so wounded by what he did to them that this is just how their pain came out. I mean, didn’t Poirot say ‘there are no killers here - only people who deserve a chance to heal’?”

Yes, he did. But how do we know that

the same thing wasn't also true of Cassetti?

- Maybe he also suffered from some kind of traumatic wounding at some point.
- Maybe he was abused as a child.
- Maybe he became a *perpetrator* of malevolent evil because he was a *victim* of it ... just like they were.

Would that excuse his actions? No.

And it doesn't excuse theirs.

Deep Impact

Now, I know some of you are thinking, "Ok, maybe. But Rick, this is just a

movie. You're getting awfully worked up over it. What's the point of all of this?"

Point is that ...

What this movie best illustrates is the shocking, uncomfortable truth about malevolent evil: that we are *all* capable of it. THAT is "the human condition" (otherwise known as our "sin nature").

And if you want a biblical principle to rock your world, that's it.

And let me give you just one verse (if you need it) though there are many.

James the brother of Jesus puts it like this:

Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then,

*after desire has conceived,
it gives birth to sin; and
sin, when it is full-grown,
gives birth to death. Don't
be deceived, my dear
brothers and sisters.*

James 1:14-16 (NIV)

What James is saying is that we all battle with desires and inclinations that are just not right – regardless of where they come from, even if they come from our woundedness. That's the sin nature with in us. That's just part of being human. That's part of living under the curse of a fallen world.

And James says that if we fan those desires into flame (which is what we saw in this movie – they got together and agonized and began to think “what if”) ...

If we fan those desires into flame, they give birth to sinful actions. And when those actions are allowed to play out to their fullest extent, they will produce death – whether it’s death of our conscience and our principles or literally, the death of another person.

And this is why all of us good, decent, upstanding church-going men and women are, given the right situation, shockingly capable of the worst of evil. I know that’s hard to believe, but it’s in us.

- Have you ever experienced anger at another driver?

Fan it into flame and it can become malevolent evil – road rage that

would take a life.

- Ever thought or said or done something truly hateful that surprised you? It came up in your mind or out of your mouth and you thought “where did *that* come from?”

Fan that into flame and it will lead to actions that are malevolent.

That’s evidence of the sin nature within us.

And we need to deal with that propensity for evil in ourselves before we deal with it in others which is why Jesus once said:

“Why do you look at the

speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Luke 6:41 (NIV)

In other words, “don’t worry about judging or condemning or fixing the evil in *them* until you deal with the evil in *you*.”

And that begins by admitting two hard truths:

1. That you are infected with the disease of sin that will not only destroy your life and others but will also follow you into eternity, leaving you separated from God.
2. You need someone to heal you of that disease. You need someone

outside of yourself who can save you from yourself.

And, friends, the good news is that there is such a person who can do that. His name is Jesus.

“God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us.”

The first step if you have never taken it is to receive what Jesus has already done for you.

Feature – How Can It Be

May the Lord bless you and keep
you

May the Lord make his face to shine
upon you

May you be filled with humility and
grace, empathy and compassion

And may you always trust that the
Cross of Jesus will save you from
the worst of yourself.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://bookriot.com/2017/11/10/onscreen-versions-of-hercule-poirot/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.infoplease.com/lindbergh-kidnapping-remembered>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/inspiration-murder-on-orient-express-6788403>

^{iv} Ibid

^v <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-green-agatha-christie-orient-express-20171201-story.html>