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Hope Floats

I love movies. I love religion. But there are times when the two mix as well as oil and water and there are times where they go together like peanut butter and chocolate. Every time a movie comes out with a religious theme I feel hope rise in my chest and dread in my gut. I hope that this film will somehow add something to the spiritual life of people our ministries are not reaching. But I dread the reality that for every powerful contribution, such as “The Passion of the Christ,” there are dozens of movies that dilute, distort and even damage the reputation and message of our religious communities, such as the “DaVinci Code.”

Where does “Evan Almighty,” a modern-day Noah and the Flood story, land? Is it “all wet” or does it offer us something more than that guy from “The Office” dressed up in a robe? Like many religious themed movies it cuts out the spice and smoothes out the texture until we are left with something limp and boring and palatable, like transforming a Cajun gumbo into Campbell’s chicken noodle soup. The basic story, one of the epic myths found in the early chapters of Genesis, is hardly changed. God approaches a decent man, tells him to build an ark and fill it with animals, so that when he sends a flood over the world they can start over again. The man believes, obeys, and is rewarded when the flood does come. But while the story of the flood has been preserved for thousands of years, expect to find “Evan Almighty” on the “2 for \$20” rack soon at Blockbuster.

There were some good moments. I liked God, played by Morgan Freeman, who, like George Burns in “Oh, God!” has a sense of humor as well as mystery. While there is a risk showing God to be so, well, human, for many people it just might make prayer a little easier if they imagine “Al Mighty” this way. Evan, played by Steve Carell, doesn’t appear to be the last righteous man on earth but by the time he has accepted his fate he does show a kind of commitment we can admire. To equate the sin-wrecked world of Noah’s day with the evils of suburban sprawl seemed to be a silly stretch. And limiting the devastation of the flood to a tony neighborhood really dulls the knife edge of the ancient fable.

Remember that the original shows God as being so disgusted with the way his beloved humans have behaved that he decides to wipe the slate clean. For all those who think of cute animals and a boat, don’t forget that God destroys all but a mere handful of the living beings on the earth through this flood. God is not nice. But God is good. God saves enough for a new beginning, the beginning from which the rest of us now spring. It is a new beginning filled with blessings and hope. God’s rainbow is a sign to us that the God who can (and probably should) flood the world with water today would rather flood it with compassion. God’s turn toward mercy is a lucky thing for Noah, who gets out of the ark, gets drunk, and passes out naked!

So Hollywood giveth and Hollywood taketh away. But I have to admit that I found two scenes memorable and worthy of added reflection. The first is when Evan is interrogated

about his reason for building the ark. Despite displaying a long beard grown in a few days and being surrounded by a zoo worth of animals, people only seem startled when he tells them, "God told me." Isn't it sad that the only conclusion we have when someone says "God told me to do it," is that they are crazy? The other scene is when the "flood" comes and the ark saves the animals and former doubters. For that moment, at least, riding high about the destructive waters, the world has a few more believers. I guess "hope floats" after all.