



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, living in Southern California for as long as I did, it wasn't hard to brush up against the entertainment industry. It's a bit like the car business out here. And once a friend or two lands a job in Hollywood, it's not hard to start to entertain your own aspirations about how you might break in. And for me, and I've never told anyone this, but I had a brief flirtation with the idea of quitting my law practice and becoming a scriptwriter. Someone had gave me some scriptwriting software. I read some how-to books. I even managed to finish a short teleplay, but it really didn't go anywhere. I had lunch with someone from Universal. I scored a couple of set visits, but that was as far as it ever went.

But along the way I did learn a little about story structure and plot. And I came across something that is kind of a mantra in Hollywood, which is the idea that just about all stories, all movies can be boiled down to seven basic plots. Seven storylines that are so deeply woven into our DNA that it's almost subliminal. And if you've ever been sitting in the theater and you're saying to yourself, you know, it feels like I've seen this movie before, you know what I'm talking about.

The first one is called Overcoming the Monster. This is where our reluctant hero sets out to defeat a terrible threat, right? Jaws, Star Wars. Then there's rag to riches where the goodhearted, but lowly, down-on-their-luck hero rises to wealth and success. Cinderella, anyone? In fact, the movies in this genre are called Cinderella Stories. Rocky, Karate Kid. Yeah? The next one, The Quest. That's where the hero has to set off on a journey, seeking a special object or a magical MacGuffin as they're called. Lord of the Rings, pretty much any Indiana Jones movie.

But my favorite is the last one, number seven. It's what's called Rebirth Stories, because they are the ones where the hero starts off as really not much of a hero at all. In the rebirth stories, the protagonist is usually pretty flawed. They can be self-centered, egotistical, judgmental, petty, controlling, insecure. In other words, they can look a lot like us. In fact, in rebirth stories, the hero can even start off looking a bit like one of the villains from the other stories. That is, until something unexpected happens, something that changes their perspective, changes their reality, and turns their life completely around. Any examples come to mind?

Christmas Carol, a classic, The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, It's A Wonderful Life. A lot of Christmas movies in this genre. One of my favorites is Groundhog Day. You remember that one with Bill Murray playing a kind of completely self-absorbed TV weatherman who has to live and relive the same day over and over and over until he has his rebirth?

I will admit I am an absolute sucker for these stories. If I'm channel surfing and I come across one, no matter how many times I've seen it, I get locked in and I'm in tears by the end. In fact, it was these kinds of stories that I wanted to tell if I'd ever become a script writer, because ultimately these are stories of hope. They're stories of redemption. They remind us that no matter how lost we might become in life, no matter how bad our choices, no matter how far we might fall, no matter how many people we might have disappointed along the way, we are never, never beyond God's reach, beyond God's saving grace.

And so these rebirth stories to me, they're not just classic plot lines. They are God's universal story for all of us. Because they point to the hope that God has for every one of us that we too, we too would be free. Free of our fears, free of our doubts, free of our judgments, free to let the image of God that lies within all of our hearts shine through. This is what Jesus is talking about when He says, we must lose our life if we are to save it. We need to lose the part of ourselves that holds us back, that keeps us closed off from God's love.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Keating, famously referred to this part of ourselves as our false self. It's the part of us that is driven by pride and ego, that seeks fulfillment and attachments and approval, security, and control. And it's not bad, necessarily. In fact, it starts off as a kind of necessary part of our childhood development. It helps us navigate social norms. It regulates our impulses. It helps us meet expectations of parents and teachers. But over time, we can start to mistake what is essentially a survival mechanism with who we really are. We can get so caught up in forever trying to fit in that we lose sight of the person God made us to be.

And so without realizing it, without planning it, without even asking for it, we can find ourselves living a life obsessed with image and accomplishments. Wearing the right brands, driving the right cars, living in the right zip codes, you know the drill. Boasting about our accomplishments, forever bragging on social media, arguing over crowd sizes because it craves that kind of outside validation. It has an unquenchable need to prove itself worthy to be the best, to win the approval of others, but it's never enough. The feelings of inadequacy always return, leaving us more rigid, more controlling, more self-righteous, more frustrated and more alone.

In fact, living out of your false self really isn't much fun at all. It's a lot of work. It's a real burden having to keep track of what everyone's thinking about you. Having

to keep up with the gossip, the latest trends. Constantly looking over your shoulder, trying to make sure you're staying ahead. It's exhausting. Meanwhile, Jesus says, my burden is light. My burden is easy, my yoke is light. Living your false self, it's the exact opposite of that. And again, it serves a purpose, you know, at least for the first part of life, it's just that you don't want to end there because none of it's real and none of it ultimately matters. The goal is to transcend it, to lose it, as Jesus says. And if we don't, if we never get beyond it, if it's all we ever have in our future, our future may look very much like the one that those ghosts are trying to warn Scrooge about: bleak and lonely, wasted.

And if that seems a bit theatrical, talk to a hospice worker sometime and they will tell you over and over that the two biggest regrets that people have in their final days are not spending enough time with those they loved and not living true to themselves. Spending their whole life trying to fit into some mold, trying to meet someone else's expectations. We all know that one, don't we? LGBT folks, can I get an amen? But it's a story and it's a lesson for all of us. And so Jesus, in all of the four gospels, urges His disciples, don't wait. Die to all of that before you die because if we don't, we can never be free. We can never be free to be our true self, the one that we don't need to create because it's been there all along. The one we don't have to maintain because we no longer have to pretend. The one that we no longer need to prove itself worthy because it always has been

And I get it. I know from my own experience, this isn't easy. You know, old habits are hard to break. Our egos, hard to transcend. Our programs for happiness, our carefully crafted identities, hard to put down, which is why the question that Jesus asks us today, I think, is so important. Who do you say I am? Notice in all the rebirth stories, there's some kind of supernatural, unexplainable event, a force, something that opens the eyes of our heroes and helps them to experience this truth for themselves.

Is Jesus that force in your life? Who do you say I am? You see, Jesus isn't interested in us getting His title right. He really doesn't care about getting our Trinitarian theology all worked out. In fact, if you happen to guess it correctly as Peter apparently does, He wants you to just keep it to yourself. Because what He's really interested in is whether we are ready to put our trust in Him, whether we are ready to follow Him. Are we ready to begin each day, taking some kind of step in His direction, a step along His path, and away from our own?

And with each tentative halting step that we take, every time we catch ourselves and refuse to judge, every time we put aside our fear and try to make a connection with someone who seems so different, every time we put down our busyness, our agenda, our plans, and make time for someone else. Every time that we let the Holy Spirit take over our life, even for a few fleeting moments, the Christ within us is reborn again and again a bit more each time until the day comes when the anxiety, the stress, the fear and doubts, the endless burden of

trying to juggle it all, all that stuff, all that stuff that we thought was just normal life starts to just fall away. And in its place we find an inner peace, one that's been waiting for us all along. A peace that passes all understanding, that defies all explanation, a peace that can never run out. It can never be taken away because it comes from within. And it's a peace that when we experience it, when we get a taste of it, we can't help but want to share it with the world.

Notice what the characters in these rebirth stories do when they're finally free. They shout it from the hilltops. They're like giddy schoolchildren, unashamed, filled with joy, laughing, singing, running down the street, declaring God's glory to anyone who will listen. That's a pretty good description of Heaven, if you ask me. And the difference is they're living it now. Scrooge can't give away his money fast enough. George Bailey is overwhelmed by the love and support that he always had right under his nose. The Grinch, he gives back everything he stole and he stays for dinner, having discovered that it was never about the stuff, but it was always about opening our heart to God's spirit of love, a spirit that He says is always within our grasp so long as we have hands to clasp.

All of these stories end with our hero discovering two of the greatest paradoxes of the Christian life. We lose it. We lose ourselves to find it. And we keep it, we keep it alive by giving it away until all the world, all the world adores His sacred name.

Amen.