

* * * * *
HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD Michael B. Beough
Genesis 6:9-14; John 14:12-14 June 7, 2009
* * * * *

Good morning. The Lord be with you. And welcome to "God in the Movies." Has God ever spoken to you through a movie? Has a movie ever caused you to think more deeply about your life? Or experience more deeply the reality of God? Or provoke you to change something in your life? This summer we are letting God speak to us through movies and take us to a new place in our relationship with Him and with one another.

Can a somewhat silly movie like *Evan Almighty* be used by God to speak to our hearts and minds? Can it be a conversation topic that helps us share our faith with others? Today I am your film critic, and my answer is "yes."

I have watched this film, *Evan Almighty*, several times, and I must confess that I have never come away thinking it is a great movie. But it is highly entertaining, and I do come away from it cheering for the way the Baxter family comes together and makes a difference as they pursue what they believe to be God's will for them.

The action in this film really takes off when something happens that you just don't usually see in a movie these days. **Each family member prays.** As a result of their prayers, their lives change radically and they end up making a difference. They prove the truth of John 14 where Jesus tells his disciples, "*The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things . . . You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I'll do it.*" You might say this is the premise of the whole film.

Let me set the stage for you. Evan Baxter has just been elected as a Representative to Congress for the state of New York. The movie begins with Evan relocating his family, his wife and three sons, into a huge new house in a Virginia suburb not far from Washington D.C. On the night of their first day in their new house, the wife tells Evan that her boys each said a prayer before going to sleep. She tells Evan that she prayed, too. She says she prayed that their family would become closer. Then she asks Evan what he would pray for. He acts like he isn't interested in praying, but after his wife is asleep, he slips out of bed, gets on his knees, and asks God to help him "change the world."

(Show Film Clip #1 beginning at 5:30.)

What amazes me is how quickly God starts answering Evan's prayer! I have seldom received such quick answer to my prayers, but it can happen.

For Evan, it starts the very next morning with the alarm clock going off at 6:14 a.m. even though he set the clock for 7:00 a.m. The same thing happens the next morning. When he looks at the clock, the Gen of General Electric is illuminated. What he sees is Gen 6:14. Evan thinks the clock is broken. So he unplugs it and puts it in a drawer. Eventually, he realizes that Gen 6:14 refers to a Bible passage.

Then something else happens that you don't usually see in a movie. Evan starts looking for the family Bible. He yells to his wife, "Do we have a Bible around here some place?" He pulls out a box and starts digging. He pulls out the Bible. He opens it to Genesis 6:14 and reads. "*Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.*"

Now, there is no question that the ark could be a metaphor for anything that is a safe haven. We use it that way all the time. Day care centers and preschools use the word 'ark' in their name and we know what they mean. Animal hospitals and veterinary clinics use the word 'ark' in their names and we know what they mean. A care center for adults with mental challenges uses the word 'ark' in its name and we know what it means. It is a metaphor for a safe haven.

However, in Evan's case, it is a literal ark. Evan discovers that God wants him to build a literal ark as described in Genesis 6 - 450' long, 75' wide, and 40' tall. He is to build it in front of his new house. Unless you are ready to suspend what normally passes as reality, you will be put off by the rest of the movie. Evan and his family literally build an ark because God tells him that there will be a flood on September 22. If you are looking for rationality, this is not the movie for you.

On the other hand, the humor, the crisis, and the final resolution become a metaphor about changing the world. Evan wants to change the world, and God has him to build an ark.

In one scene, God, played respectfully by Morgan Freeman, and Evan have a conversation by a pile of lumber God has provided for building the ark. **God reminds Evan that Evan prayed for help in changing the world. God says he is interested in that, too.** As they talk, God reaches down and cleans out a dish that is sitting on the ground. When he puts it down, it miraculously fills with water. The stray dog that Evan has been trying to drive away from his yard walks between them and starts lapping up the water. As the dog drinks, God tells Evan, you change the world by doing one small act of random kindness at a time.

This is where I get a little confused about the intent of this movie. Building the ark is hardly one small act. The ark is huge. And the kind of ridicule Evan gets is hardly insignificant. To clear up my confusion, I decided

to interview someone who might be able to help me. Talk about suspending rationality and realism, **I interviewed the real Noah.**

He's retired, you know. I found him down by the lake, sitting in a lawn chair and looking wistfully out over the water. He especially seemed to focus on birds, often craning his neck as white birds flew by.

I introduced myself and asked if I could ask him some questions about this movie. I started out by telling him how Evan Baxter at first resisted the idea of building an ark, but it says in Genesis 6 that Noah just got to work. I asked Noah why he responded so quickly and without resistance.

Noah said, "Because I was already walking with God. I had learned that saying no to God only increases your anxiety."

"Why do you think he chose you?" I asked. "The Bible says it is because you were righteous."

Noah said, "He knew I would say 'yes'. Why wouldn't I go along with the Lord of the universe, blessed be His Name?"

I wasn't sure how he would answer the next question. It's a tough one that I have often puzzled over. I said, "How did it make you feel when God said he was going to destroy all life with a flood, except for you and your family and two of every kind of animal? In the movie, God says he did it out of love, not anger. He says it is a story about people going side by side in twos to make a difference."

Noah looked down at the ground. I thought maybe he had dozed off. He began shaking his head back and forth as he answered, "Believe me, God was plenty angry with people."

"Doesn't this make God seem cruel and hard?" I said.

Noah suddenly looked up and raised his shaggy eyebrows. "Compared to what? Compared to the people who were full of violence and as corrupt as the day was long? I am just glad He promised never to do that again. God repented, you know. Not a bad idea. That's love. And I am glad he finally let me off that boat after a year shut up with my family! That's love, too."

"One more thing," I said. "In the movie, God tells Evan that the way to change the world is by doing one small act of random kindness at a time. You know, A.R.K. What do you think about that?"

Noah looked a long time out over the lake before answering. He suddenly craned his head around as he watched a white bird fly by. Finally, he answered, "**God knew it would take more than small acts of random kindness to change the world.**"

He got up, picked up a rock, and skipped it across the water and then continued. "God tried a flood to clean it up and start over. It didn't work. People were as violent and corrupt afterward as before. He gave the people priests and kings, laws and prophets to keep them on the straight and narrow path. They ignored them. He let foreign powers destroy the beautiful holy city of Jerusalem and take the people away as captives to Babylon. Didn't make a difference. You can read about all this in your Bible."

Noah skipped another rock. "Finally," he said, "God knew He had to do something drastic. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ. He was a nice guy, did lots of acts of random kindness, only they weren't random. They were orchestrated to help people see who he was, the Son of God. He said if you want to change the world, follow him, take up your own cross. But His kind acts didn't convince anyone either. It was not until he was nailed to a cross, dying an agonizing death, and then rising again from the dead that people began to believe, and to change."

Noah paused as though reflecting on the act of God's great sacrifice. "Acts of random kindness are godly and inspirational," he said. "But they don't change the world. **God changes the world by changing our hearts to love Him with all our being and to serve Him only all the days of our lives.**"

I was still not sure what he was saying. "So, can we or can't we change the world by doing acts of random kindness?"

"Oyve!" Noah said as he threw up his hands. "Do you believe? Have you asked his forgiveness? Do you seek his will? Do you say yes when he calls?" Then he said something I am still pondering. **"He has an ark for you to build. Find out what that is and if you build it, God will change the world through you."**

I thanked Noah for his candor and insight. He helped me see both the weakness and the strength of *Evan Almighty* and of my faith.

At the climax of the movie, the ark is finished on September 22. Animals as far as the eye can see beginning streaming into the ark. Evan gets his family on board and then yells at the people who have gathered to heckle him to get on board. He warns them of the flood. A little rain shower gets his hopes up, but no flood. Congressman Long has sent the police and a wrecking crew to arrest Evan and demolish the ark for violation of city codes. The news media is there. All his neighbors gather to heckle him. Evan pleads for them to get on the ark.

Then it happens. A huge dam far up the valley begins to crack. From the deck of the ark, Evan can see it. He frantically yells for the people to get on the boat. The water begins filling the valley, sweeping away houses and

trees in its path. In panic, the people run for their lives up the ramp into the ark. Just as the last one gets on, the ark lifts and begins floating down the valley toward Washington D.C. It is headed straight for the building where Congressman Long is trying to get a bill passed that would allow the development of park lands for more shopping malls and housing developments. Just as Long calls for the vote, the ark crashes into the roadway in front of Long's building. **It seems to be a message that not even the powers of congress can withstand the might of God.**

In the end, Congressman Long is totally discredited as it turns out he siphoned money from the dam project causing it to fail. Evan is the hero. But here is the ending that exemplifies the strength of this movie from a Christian perspective. Evan knows that it all came about because of God. It was God's power at work through him. At the end, we see the fulfillment of the promise God makes to everyone who gives their lives to Him.

(Show Film Clip #2 beginning at 1:25:41)

That's the way I see it. Next week, I will review the film *Simon Birch* about a boy born with a genetic disorder, morquio syndrome, and interview the Apostle Peter.