

For the first time in many years, a frugal senior decided to attend a movie. After buying his ticket, he stopped at the concession stand to purchase some popcorn. Handing the attendant \$4.50, he couldn't help but comment, "The last time I came to the movies, popcorn was only 15 cents." "Well, sir," the attendant replied, "You're really going to enjoy yourself. We have sound now." [www.ahajokes.com] Of course this will never happen to me. I only make popcorn after I get home from the movie. When I attend the latest blockbuster, I notice that the theatre has rather more people in its chairs than does the average church service. Curiously the same people who are likely to comment that an hour and a quarter is insufferably long for church, sit enraptured for a three hour feature. I confess that the movie theatre is also like a church in that my mind sometimes wanders. I look across the rows of people, asking myself what brought them to this place with a group of strangers. At one level the reason is entertainment but clearly there is also a quest for meaning in sagas like *Lord of the Rings*, or the *Harry Potter* fantasies or the latest disaster movie. The connection between viewer and story is palpable as people sit, totally transfixed on the screen. In our time and place, people are more likely to look to the big screen than to organized religion, for a message about life. Perhaps they even hope for a moment of transformation. Indeed, mega churches often have a form of worship that imitates the theatre, with electronic music and a live sound track and a giant screen for movie clips. In most United Churches we still tend to be producing worship that would be appropriate for a radio show, and then we wonder why society considers us to be part of a past era.

Not all films transform life but some are at least memorable. One of my favourites is *Baghdad Café*, which focuses on a dilapidated and isolated truck stop in the Mojave desert. In the story there is a strong contrast between the two women characters not unlike that between Elijah and Jesus. Jasmine seems merely to be a harassed German housewife when we first see her. Her beefy, arrogant husband and she argue when they make a rest stop in the Mojave Desert. She takes a suitcase out of their rented car, and he drives away. There is a brief shot of her head with two bright lights on either side of her, giving a halo effect. She trudges along the lonely highway, finally arriving at the rundown Baghdad Café and Motel. Brenda presides over the seedy establishment. Married to a shiftless husband, she tries to keep in tow their two teenagers -- a daughter who prefers to dash around in company with amorous men, and a boy wrapped up in his classical music. None of the three has been of much help, so the overworked Brenda takes out her frustration and rages at them all, trying to run their lives. When Jasmine arrives to check in, Brenda is suspicious of her because the traveler has no car and she tries to dissuade her from staying. Jasmine gently perseveres and Brenda grudgingly assigns her a room. Jasmine sees hanging on its wall a painting of the two lights in the sky that she has seen. Through her gentle ways she befriends the two children, and although Brenda treats her with hostility, continues to reach out to their mother. Eventually even Brenda is tamed, grace flowing in abundance through the kindly, mysterious Jasmine, who is singled out by the heavenly lights as more than just a tourist. Brenda has come close to the Sacred. In the midst of a painful life, she has met that stranger whose presence mediates healing and transformation. We too have the opportunity to come close to the Sacred, if we are open to meeting God's prophets and angels in our midst.

Prophets are a bit out of style just now but in Elijah and Elisha's day, prophets were a force to be reckoned with. They were spiritual critics and teachers. The age of prophecy had ceased by Jesus' time, so it was noteworthy that Jesus seemed to be a kind of prophetic figure in which God was speaking again. In Elijah and Jesus we see the hand of God at work. Each lived in times when it was dangerous to follow the will of God. Elijah was threatened with death and he had to flee. Jesus was at risk in all of his public ministry, sometimes eluding, sometimes confronting his enemies. The contrast and similarity between these two leaders are striking. Both gathered

followers, although Elijah was first a loner prophet. By the end of Elijah's ministry he had attracted a disciple in the person of Elisha. Jesus, from the very start of his ministry, called the twelve disciples and others. Elijah fulfills his calling and then goes directly to God in a heavenly chariot after passing on his mantle (or cloak) signifying authority, to Elisha. Jesus passes on his authority to the apostles, and he goes to God after his death on the Cross, followed by his resurrection.

In the dazzling event of the Transfiguration, the gospel writer Mark shows a connection between Jesus and Elijah, even though they are widely separated in history. Moses, the giver of the Law, stands with Jesus. Beside them is Elijah, one of the chief prophets of the covenant. In Jewish tradition he became associated with the coming of the Messiah, understood as a king sent by God at the end of history, to rule over God's kingdom on earth. Elijah was supposed to appear just before the coming of the Messiah and now he was standing beside Jesus. The symbolism would not be lost on the three disciples – James, John and Peter – who had accompanied Jesus up the mountain. Peter, misreading the scene, wants to hold onto the glory by setting up shrines. Jesus brushes him aside. Peter will have to learn a new definition of glory. Jesus understands that faithful discipleship and proclaiming God's love to outsiders will turn popular sentiment against a prophet. His reward will be a cross not a crown – a central theme of Mark's Gospel.

The Sacred is very much a part of our world, but not much a part of human consciousness. We educate ourselves to understand, to control, to master. These tendencies put ourselves at the centre of reality. But when we open ourselves in the Sacred, we begin to be open to the sort of wholeness and community that leads to a new awareness ... what Jesus called the kingdom of God. As children we are naturally open to this possibility, but our parents and elders usually succeed in snuffing out what they regard as either dangerous or frivolous, within us. Fifteen or so years ago I was at my kitchen window at the manse in Banff, looking out into a corner of the yard that adjoined the church's playschool. One of the play school parents had arrived early with her 3 year old child and they were waiting outside until the teacher arrived for the afternoon session. The little girl ran along the church flowerbed and stopped in front of a large clump of red tulips that had just opened. She was only slightly taller than the flowers. Her face was filled with awe and delight. She tried to reach her arms out and hug the tulips but her tiny limbs were too short. She seemed to realize that if she tried too hard, she would crush the brilliant blooms. She called her mother excitedly and mother hesitated but came to look too. The little girl reverently touched a waxy red tulip and wanted to share this beautiful discovery; her mother smiled politely and looked at her watch, the way I do when I am thinking of my next appointment. But one little girl clearly had an experience of Sacred Awe in the midst of the ordinary. Such an experience breaks through our world and it can transform our awareness, or just become a marginal detail that we block out. We are naturally capable of sacred awe but we are taught by our culture to suppress the impulse and replace it with rational understanding. In contrast, the Sacred is mystery. Said Augustine long ago, "If you understand, it is not God."

Sometimes we look so hard for the mountaintop experience that we miss the sacred moment of the right now. The Transfiguration was a right now moment. Our transfigurations may come at moments we least expect. A wealthy businessman retires and finds meaning in giving his life to development work in Africa or Latin America. A conversation with a street person allows you to see the Christ of faith in the lives of people who are outsiders to your world. A life threatening illness strips away all the distractions that have prevented you from seeing your life as a Sacred gift. A piece of wonderful music carries you away into a space in which you are no longer the centre of all that is, but a part of a divine symphony. We are not carried into the clouds in fiery chariots but we are invited into tomorrow by a God who draws near in one called Jesus the Christ. Such life has Sacred significance. And our life is transformed. Amen.