

“This Jesus Will Return”

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Luke 24:44-53 + Acts 1:6-11 = ascension and return

D*eepest Impact* is a movie about redemptive acts under the most frightening circumstances. An asteroid is going to strike the earth. Its provocative theme is “What do you do if the world were coming to an end? What choices would you make?”



In the movie, some engage in selfish and vain acts.



Others commit suicide in the face of destruction. Some marry. Some part company. Some reconcile. Some few perform heroic acts to change the course of the asteroid.

Some perform heroic acts of a different kind. One mother passes her infant son to her daughter. The mother perishes, but her daughter and son are preserved. Another young man gives up his place in a shelter for love.

Despite *Deep Impact* being a tale about the end of the world, we can draw meaning from it. It turns out pretty much the same meaning Jesus gives us right before he is taken from this plane and lifted up like Elijah and Enoch before.



In the critical choices of how we live today, Jesus encourages us with the same message as the movie: “Live each day with purpose.” “Don’t leave important things undone.”



Yet Jesus includes a number of things not in the movie. Jesus restates for us the mandate he has repeated from beginning of his ministry to the end: “Seek first God’s new era dawning and everything else will be taken care of.” Jesus adds incredible promises not heard in the movie: “God will send the Holy Spirit to empower you,” and “Lo, I will be with you always no matter what.”

These are the words Jesus left for us to live out in the now, the times between Jesus' ascension into heaven and Jesus' return. In the now between the past and the future, how do we live out being a follower of Jesus?

Both *Deep Impact* and Jesus suggest we should live with courage born out of faith in the between times ~ the time between empowerment at Pentecost and the return of Jesus in fulfillment ~ between the ascension of Jesus and Jesus' return to complete God's plan ~ between birth and death ~ between baptism and communion ~ between deciding to follow Jesus and the walk of faith.

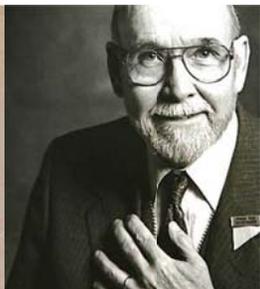
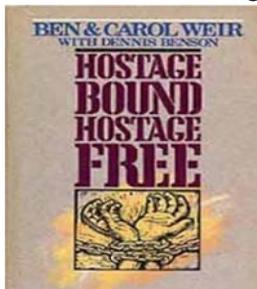


Fortunately we do not live in such troubled times as depicted in *Deep Impact*. Nevertheless, our faith lays the framework for each of us to act in constructive rather than destructive ways, a framework for us to make our choices in life in the between times.

Our abiding belief is that faith does make a difference. Faith does change things, transform things, can work to perfect the world. It is also true that misguided faith can inflict pain and suffering and engender great conflict. That is why it is so critical for us to develop the discernment to tell the difference, and to have a firm foundation in the faith which builds God's community and improves the world.

Faith, sincerely held and profoundly practiced, does make a difference, does transform, does in Hebrew 'tikkun olam,' repair the world.

Benjamin Weir an academic in Beirut, Lebanon was abducted on a city street in 1984 and held captive by Shiite Muslims ~ one of several hostages taken in that period. He was placed in a rancid cell, alone with no



light and only a tattered straw mattress for 16 long months. The first night of his captivity, he remembered praying and singing "*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide*" and "*All praise to thee, my God, this night.*"

Over time, he came to pray with compassion even for his captors. Incredibly his sincerity and steadfast faith did eventually convince them of his and others' innocence. He also convinced them of the foolishness and uselessness of taking them hostage. His captors

gained a respect for Christianity through his life-actions, and out of that newfound respect they eventually did release him and the others without harm.

In recognition of his witness to the love of God under extreme conditions, Benjamin Weir was elected Moderator of the General Assembly. In his moderatorial year, he went on a goodwill tour through Asia which included our university in Indonesia. He spoke before the gathered community about his ordeal and ultimate witness to and forgiveness of his captors.



In the Q&A following, Arief Budiman, one of the university's most prestigious social scientists, a person of no religious convictions, kept pressing Dr. Weir about the impossibility of convincing or forgiving one's captors. Finally in annoyance and disgust Arief Budiman pronounced the whole thing a pure example of the Stockholm Syndrome, where captives come to identify with their captors.

Afterwards and confused, I ask one of my colleagues why Arief could not accept Ben Weir's story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nugroho said, "That's easy. He doesn't believe in God."

F **faith does indeed make a difference**, a real difference in how we view the world, how we respond to people, what we do in the world, how we build relationships even with those who call us enemies, whom we call enemies.



Followers of Jesus know God's awesome power to convict, convince and convert ~ the power to reconcile, to forgive and be forgiven ~ to mold, and make, and restore and rebuild. The power of God to lead us to the truth, the truth which sets us free ~ the amazing consequence of being a follower of Jesus in these between times.

A **t the height of apartheid in South Africa**, the central role of the churches in the Black struggle for freedom meant that pastors were often at risk from both vigilante groups and government agents. So it often happened that before services, parishioners would walk



to the pastor's home and escort him and his family to church, forming a cordon of protection.



While they walked, they sang, exuberantly praising God: "Siyahamba' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos" ~ "We are marching in the light of God. We are marching in the light of God."

Like Paul and Silas singing in prison, like Benjamin Weir singing in captivity, the parishioners surrounding their pastors were so profoundly rooted in their faith, they knew they were safe ~ God's justice would prevail. So confident were those South African believers in Jesus that they were certain the evil spirit of apartheid would be driven out and extinguished.

All of that courageous faith because faith makes a difference, faith changes the world, faith in Jesus' promise at the ascension: "Lo, I am with you always."

Jesus at the ascension repurposes the mission. Jesus empowers his followers to both proclaim and to build God's new community in the world. It looks like the end of the story but it is really only a segue way into the sequel. And the sequel is us, now, living in the 'tween times.



Luckily we are not living in a disaster movie, nor are we likely to be captured by Islamic militants, nor are we marching in the light of God against any great evil such as apartheid. So it should be easier for us to live out faith under more normal circumstances.



In this between time ~ between consummation and fulfilment ~ between initiation and attainment ~ between beginning and end of the story ~ all of that in the 'tween times, where we can chose to participate in God's transforming purpose for everything,

God's great community arriving with Jesus' return, where the lion will lie down with the lamb, swords will be beaten into plowshares and we will study

war no more. And we all enter it in one form or another by deciding to follow Jesus, by engaging in the journey with commitment and courage.

Faith makes the difference.