

2019 03 24 – Black Panther

Isaiah 55:1-9

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the third Sunday of this year's Lenten movie series. One of the things that I love about doing this series is that it forces me to watch movies that I would normally avoid. This week's movie is a good example. I don't usually watch films based on Marvel Comics and this type of action movie is not normally nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. But on Friday, I sat in the Burnham Room, as did seventeen other people in this congregation, and I watched "Black Panther."

"Black Panther" is not only the name of a movie; it is also the name of a superhero. This particular superhero, like all other superheroes, has an alter ego. The Black Panther's alter ego is not a mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper or a billionaire playboy, or a photographer or even a nurse. He is T'Challa the King of the Wakanda nation in East Africa.

Wakanda is different than all the other nations in Africa and even in the world because of a special mineral named vibranium that was deposited in their mountains by a meteorite thousands of years before. Over many centuries, the people of Wakanda have used vibranium to develop advanced technologies and have created their own version of paradise. They have also used the powers of vibranium to isolate themselves from the world – to literally hide their wealth, their knowledge and their modern cities under the guise of a third world country. The

Wakandans have basically covered the core of their nation in an impenetrable bubble.

But soon we realize that there are problems in paradise. The nation has a practice of sending undercover agents into other countries in the world and these agents have had their eyes opened to the racism, poverty, and violence experienced by people like them who live outside of Wakanda. When I say people like them I mean people whose skin is black or brown, or any colour other than white. These undercover agents are starting to question Wakanda's policy of turning a blind-eye to what is happening in the world around them.

In fact, in 1992, T'Challa's uncle, N'Jobu, while working in a black ghetto in California, decided that if his nation was not willing to help, he would take matters into his own hands. So N'Jobu helped a black-market arms dealer steal vibranium from Wakanda. He believed that the best way to help his black brothers and sisters was to give them the military power to defeat their oppressors. N'Jobu was killed, but now, 25 years later, his son is working with that same arms dealer to steal even more vibranium so he can start a world-wide revolution.

The Black Panther knows that he needs to stop this revolution from happening. So he, and his friends go after the villains in this story. Much of the movie is filled with the kind of action scenes familiar to anyone who enjoys reading or watching Marvel Comics. They are scenes that demonstrate the amazing powers of the

superheroes and they include hand-to-hand combat, dramatic car and airplane chases, weapons and explosions.

But the Black Panther, T'Challa, also knows that violence is not the best way to deal with the oppression that people of colour are experiencing all over the world. Despite their advanced technology, Wakanda has had a practice of using military power only when no other option is available. T'Challa understands why his nation's centuries-old policy of protection and secrecy was put in place, but he is beginning to question its purpose in today's world. He is asking himself, "What is the king of a rich and prosperous nation, surrounded by a world filled with pain and suffering, supposed to do?"

I wonder what the prophet Isaiah would have said to T'Challa? Isaiah was a spiritual leader of a nation in exile. The Israelites were a people without a homeland, a people with little wealth, a people just struggling to survive. A people who remembered a better time, a time when King David led the Hebrew people and theirs was a nation of prosperity and wealth. In today's scripture passage God speaks through Isaiah describing God's version of paradise: God's kingdom, God's reign of love, God's kingdom of peace and justice.

Isaiah, speaking for his God, YHWH, describes a place of prosperity, a place where everyone has what they need, a place where food and drink are available even to those without money, a place filled with all the blessings promised to King David. But this kingdom is different from the nation of Wakanda because this is a place that will be a witness to the world. Isaiah said, "See, you will

summon nations you never knew, and nations that never knew you will come hurrying to you.” This kingdom of God will be a place where all nations will come for wisdom, for guidance, and for assistance. This kingdom will not be surrounded by walls or covered in an impenetrable bubble.

But what do the Hebrew people need to do to create this reign of God, this kingdom of peace and justice? In the scripture we read, “Let the corrupt abandon their ways, the evil their thoughts. Let them return to YHWH, and I will have mercy on them; return to God, for I will freely pardon.” According to Isaiah’s prophecy, they need to turn to God. They need to turn to YHWH, to the Essence of Love, to the Holy Mystery. They need to let go of their self-centred, greedy ways and to live lives of compassion and generosity and faith. By turning to God, they will begin the building of God’s kingdom.

That’s exactly what Isaiah would have said to T’Challa, the Black Panther. Isaiah would have told him about the God of love, about the need for generosity and truth and faith. Isaiah would have told T’Challa that they didn’t need to keep their paradise under a bubble anymore. He would have told him just what T’Challa eventually figured out for himself when he said:

“Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than divides us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.”

- T’Challa in Black Panther