

## 2020 03 08 – JoJo Rabbit

### John 3:1-17

Today is the second Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the second Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." During this season of self-reflection, we are using popular cinema to explore issues of spirituality and justice. All the movies that we are considering were nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. This week's film is *JoJo Rabbit*.

*JoJo Rabbit* is the story of 10-year old boy named Johannes, or JoJo, living in Nazi Germany during the latter stages of World War II. JoJo lives with his mother, Rosie. His father is away at war and his older sister, Inge, recently died of influenza. Like so many young Germans of his day, JoJo is a Nazi fanatic. He wants desperately to be a part of Hitler's Youth, a Nazi-led group for young boys where they are taught the skills needed in war. In fact, this lonely little boy is so enamoured with the leader of the Nazi regime that Adolph Hitler is JoJo's imaginary friend. Of course, JoJo's version of Hitler comes from a child's mind and his Fuhrer is both supportive and comical in nature

JoJo has also bought into all the lies that the Nazi Party has told about those who are different. I think some of us like to believe that "Fake News" is a recent development. But propaganda has been with us for centuries. People, especially those in power, have always found reasons to manipulate others by appealing to their base instincts, particularly fear and anger. In World War II,

fake news was rampant, especially stories about Jews. JoJo believes that Jewish people have horns, scales, and are basically devils in disguise.

I imagine that 2000 years ago there were similar stories about Jesus. In today's reading, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. We know that Jesus was seen as a heretic, a trouble-maker by the Jewish leaders of his day. So Nicodemus is probably scared that others will see him talking to this rogue rabbi and wonder about his loyalties. So he visits Jesus in the safety of the shadows.

JoJo also meets someone in the dark. One afternoon he arrives home before his mother and discovers a teenage girl hiding behind a wall in his dead sister's room. At first he thinks she is a ghost, but it doesn't take him long to realize that Elsa is a Jew. His first instinct is to run and tell the Nazi's about this demonic intruder. But, he can't, because then his mother will be implicated. He's already seen people hanging with nooses around their necks in the town square. JoJo knows what happens to members of the Resistance when they are apprehended by the state police, the Gestapo. So, JoJo decides that his best option is to try and keep Elsa's hiding place a secret.

In fact, he realizes that this is the perfect opportunity for him to understand more about these horrible creatures, the Jews. So JoJo begins to ask Elsa about her people and she obliges with fantastical stories of horns and forked tails and caves, stories that seem ridiculous to the movie-goer but gospel-truth to a wide-eyed little boy. He soaks it all in and even writes it down to share with others.

While they are together in the dark, Jesus and Nicodemus also begin talking. Their topic is the kingdom of God. As we know, when Jesus talks about the kingdom (or kingdom) of God, he is talking about life here on earth. He is talking about a time when love and justice will reign supreme. He is talking about a time without greed or hate or tyranny or war. In this encounter, Jesus is trying to explain what is required for someone to see or to enter God's kingdom. He says:

the truth of the matter is,  
unless one is born from above,  
one cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus gets really confused and asks, "How can an adult be born a second time?" So Jesus explains that he's talking about a spiritual rebirth, not a physical one. He says:

What is born of the flesh is flesh;  
what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.  
So don't be surprised when I tell you that  
you must be born from above.

And then Jesus uses the wind as an image for the Spirit and explains that this spiritual rebirth comes in strange and unexpected ways:

The wind blows where it will.  
You hear the sound it makes;  
but you don't know where it comes from  
or where it goes.

For JoJo the wind comes in the form of a teenage Jewish girl. As they spend time together, JoJo starts to see Elsa's humanity. Through their conversations we see JoJo gradually opening his heart and his mind to new possibilities, new understandings. He begins to realize that what he has been told about the Jewish people is wrong. He begins to comprehend that just because someone is from a different culture or a different religion, this does not make them bad or evil.

JoJo's transformation, his rebirth, is beautiful to watch. Early in the movie, his mother says to him, "love is the strongest thing in the world, " and JoJo replies, "I think you'll find that metal is the strongest thing in the world, followed closely by dynamite, and then muscles." But, by the end of the movie, JoJo experiences. for himself, the incredible strength and the transformative power of love.

This is the love that Jesus is describing to Nicodemus during their nighttime encounter. It is the love that is central to one of the most famous verses in the Bible:

Yes, God so loved the world  
as to give the Only Begotten One,  
that whoever believes may not die.  
but have eternal life.

This version of John 3:16 may be slightly different than the one you memorized in Sunday School, but it contains an important truth: God so loved the world, that he sent Jesus to teach us about the power of the Spirit of Love and the possibility of

new life. Jesus came to tell us about a God of Love, a Holy Mystery that is the Essence of Love, a love that is unconditional and everlasting.

And yet this verse has been used for centuries as a reason for exclusion. Many Christians have interpreted it to mean that if you are not a follower of Jesus, if you are not a “born again” Christian, then you are going to end up in hell. They have used it as an excuse to see others – those in other Christian denominations, those in other religions, those in other cultures – as inferior, and even less than human. But Jesus is saying the exact opposite. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and us, that we can’t put a box around God’s love. The Spirit of Love is like the wind and it moves in ways we cannot understand.

Yesterday afternoon, we had some unexpected visitors here at First United Church. Nauman Ahmad, the Secretary of the Outreach Committee at the new Ahmadiyya mosque in Regina was here with three of his colleagues to bring greetings and to spread a message of love and peace to their Christian neighbours. They gave me a book with letters that their spiritual leader sent to the political leaders of this world. The letter that was sent to our prime minister says, “My request to you, and indeed to all world leaders, is that instead of using force to suppress other nations, use diplomacy, dialogue and wisdom.

The Spirit of Love is like the wind and it moves in ways we cannot understand. It is strong enough to transform even the hardest of hearts. It is stronger than metal and explosives and muscle.