


A Movie Lectionary – Cycle C



LIGHTS CAMERA... FAITH!



A Movie Lover's Guide to Scripture

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Joshua 5:9a, 10–12;
2 Corinthians 5:17–21;
Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

A River Runs Through It

U.S.A., 1992, 128 minutes
Cast: Brad Pitt, Craig Sheffer, Tom Skerritt,
Brenda Blethyn, Emily Lloyd
Writer: Richard Friedenberg
Director: Robert Redford



A River Runs Through It

A Memoir of Two Sons

SYNOPSIS

Norman and Paul are the two sons of a Presbyterian minister and his wife who live in Montana before World War I. Theirs is a devout household. The boys' father introduces them to the art and skill of fly-fishing in the rivers around mountainous Missoula. While Norman is the studious son, Paul is the wild one, though he excels at the art of fishing.

Norman goes East to study while Paul becomes a local journalist. Norman returns home after six years and waits to hear if one of the universities to which he has applied will hire him as a lecturer in literature. The brothers' bonds are still strong, even though Paul is a gambler and in debt to local thugs.

Paul is involved with a Native American woman and this upsets the townspeople. Norman is attracted to Jessie Burns. Her family suggests that he take her brother, Neal, who is home from California, fishing one day. Norman doesn't like Neal, and asks Paul to come along, too. Norman falls afoul of Jessie's family, however, when Neal is severely sunburned while cavorting with a woman instead of fishing.

Father and sons go on an expedition together and Paul catches the fish of his life. Later, he is found dead in the

streets, murdered because of his debts. Years later, Norman, his wife, and children attend a service at his father's church where he preaches on life and his son.

A River Runs Through It is the third movie directed by Robert Redford, who also provides the uncredited voice for Norman's voice-over commentary. Redford has directed five other films so far: his Oscar-winning *Ordinary People*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Quiz Show*, *The Horse Whisperer*, and *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. This movie demonstrates the same sensitivity toward issues such as the environment, the beauty of nature, and family relationships. The screenplay is based on Norman MacLean's 1976 novella about his own experience of growing up in Montana.

Tom Skerrit portrays the Presbyterian minister in a precise yet warmly nuanced performance. Rev. MacLean's love for fly-fishing transforms it into a symbol for talent, skill, art, and the means of showing God's grace.

Craig Sheffer is serious as Norman, while the energy of the movie is in Brad Pitt's performance as the younger brother, Paul. British actress Brenda Blethyn gets the American accent just right and shows her versatility by playing a minister's wife who lives in the background with quiet feeling. The movie hearkens back to a past that was not perfect but had the potential for the possibility that a humane American dream could be fulfilled.

Focus: In today's Gospel, a father had two sons, one who led a dissolute life and the other who did as the father expected. A River Runs Through It is the story of a preacher who had two sons. One worked hard and succeeded in life. The other was a beautiful soul who led a dissipated life.

A River Runs Through It does not parallel the parable of the prodigal son in all its detail, but it offers stimulating comparisons. The devout preacher is a father who loves his sons.

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DIALOGUE WITH THE GOSPEL

He wants a successful life for them with enriching careers. He allows them to make their own choices and is able to let them go their different ways.

The reading from Second Corinthians speaks of homecoming, that is, reconciliation. Paul says that Christ makes God's reconciliation present in the world and "the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." The way the father reveres religion and creation and welcomes his sons home is a model of Christ's presence in the world.

The principal focus of the film is the two sons. Both Norman and Paul are brought up well by their parents, which is symbolized by their father's teaching them the graceful art of fly-fishing. Norman, the older, more serious son, takes after his father. He studies and obtains a degree that will lead to a career as a writer and as a respectable professor of literature. The younger son, Paul, has his strong qualities too, especially loyalty and love. He has a sense of justice that is seen in his response to the racist treatment of his Indian girlfriend. However, Paul goes his own way in life. He takes up journalism, but also wastes his money and energy in constant gambling, falling hopelessly into debt and marking himself as the prodigal.

As the prodigal in the Gospel came back to his father, Paul offers a gesture of love and reconciliation before he dies: he agrees to go fly-fishing with his brother and father and catches the fish of a lifetime, even as he tenaciously clings to the rod and is washed downstream. This becomes a farewell gift of art, achievement, and grace that he gives to his family before he is brutally murdered.

The older son, more gracious and tolerant than the brother of the parable, preserves his younger brother's memory and the lesson of love and reconciliation he left as his legacy.

**KEY SCENES
AND THEMES**

- The boys and their father's fly-fishing; the skills, art, beauty, grace, and sense of achievement in fly-fishing; the life of the preacher and his family, supervising his son's studies, his sermons, his relationship with his wife and boys.
- The relationship between the two boys, their love for one another, comparisons between them, their friends; Paul's taking the boat over the rapids, getting in trouble, Norman helping him and fighting for him; Norman going away to college, his degree, career, and teaching; his parents' pride in him; Norman trying to save Paul; Paul's lifestyle, his writing, gambling, defying the prejudice shown toward his girlfriend.
- The final day's fishing and Paul's success in catching the fish; the bonds between father and sons, the bond between the brothers, the sadness of Paul's violent death; grief and memories.

**FOR REFLECTION
AND
CONVERSATION**

1. In Christian asceticism (living a way of life consistent with Christ's example and teaching) and tradition (long-established customs and beliefs), four main "ways" have been identified that characterize a way to respond to God's call or to seek God. These "ways" are subjective and are based on a person's image of God as one, true, good, or beautiful. Which of these "ways" can be found in the film *A River Runs Through It*? What did the minister say about oneness, goodness, and beauty? Was there "truth" in the film? If so, how was it expressed? What was the minister's image of God? What is his image of the human person? Are

these images consistent with each other? What is your image of God and of the person? Which path(s) do you take to find God? Do these ways to God ever converge in the film, in its characters, and in your own life?

2. Water is a dominant theme in the films chosen for our consideration of the gospels and culture (other films are *The Spitfire Grill*, *Titanic*, *The Mighty*, *Angela's Ashes*). Water is mentioned or referred to over six hundred times in the Bible. It symbolizes a cosmic force that only God can control, a source of life and a means of purification. How is each of these three ways of symbolizing water present in *A River Runs Through It*? Why does water haunt Norman?
3. Talk about the kinds of love expressed in the film and what they might mean. Compare the father in the Gospel with the father in the movie and how they each embodied love. The mother is not mentioned in today's Gospel, but the film presents us with a woman who stays in the background, and is so humble she is almost invisible. Was she a person of dignity, or had she given that up? Explain your views. How did she love? Was her love any less real because of her humility? Although the parents worked so diligently to prepare their sons to live the Christian life in the world, the boys went their own ways. How does this film bear witness to parenting, to families, and to growing up in today's world? How does it witness to hope?



Lord, you love all of us as your children. Reach out in love to those who have turned their backs on you and draw them to yourself. Amen.

HOLY THURSDAY

Exodus 12:1–8, 11–14;
1 Corinthians 11:23–26;
John 13:1–15

The Shipping News

U.S.A., 2001, 115 minutes

Cast: Kevin Spacey, Julianne Moore, Judi Dench,
Cate Blanchett, Scott Glenn, Rhys Ifans, Pete Postlethwaite

Writer: Robert Nelson Jacobs

Director: Lasse Hallstrom



The Shipping News

I Am Not a Water Person

SYNOPSIS

Quoyle is a middle-aged man whose life has not amounted to much. He feels worthless because his father taunted him when he was a boy, especially when he could not dog paddle after he was thrown into a swimming pool. While working as an ink setter, he meets the impulsive Petal, marries her, and they have a daughter, Bunny. Petal soon tires of Quoyle. When Bunny is six, Petal leaves home with Bunny and another man. She sells Bunny to some people and she and her lover are then killed in a car accident.

Quoyle receives word that his parents have killed themselves. His father's sister, Quoyle's Aunt Agnis, comes to visit, then stays on to help Quoyle when Bunny returns home. Agnis persuades Quoyle to travel to Newfoundland, where the family originated. They set up house in the old family home, unoccupied for almost fifty years. Jack, the local newspaper owner, hires Quoyle to write the shipping news. Fellow reporters Nuttbeam and Bill Pretty befriend him, but he falls afoul of the fiercely critical Terk Card. Jack is impressed by Quoyle's honesty and offers him a regular column to write that Card tries to sabotage.

Bunny attends a childcare center run by Wavey, whose small son suffered from lack of oxygen to the brain at his birth. Wavey and Quoye become friends, although Quoye is passionately devoted to Petal's memory. When he goes to an island cemetery with Bill Pretty, he learns the bloodthirsty history of his ancestors. He finds out that they were cruel and greedy pirates who looted the ships they caused to founder by shifting the shore lights. Forced out, the earlier Quoye family dragged their house across the ice to its present site overlooking the ocean.

Quoye tries to overcome his fear of water by buying a boat. One day he comes across a headless corpse in the sea. When he panics, the boat sinks. Jack rescues him.

When Quoye taunts Wavey for not telling the truth about her bad marriage, she tells him that her husband left her, so she wrecked his boat to make it look as if he has died. On a stormy night, Quoye goes to Wavey and, as they make love, Quoye's family house is blown away. During the storm, Jack drowns. At his wake, he suddenly spits water and recovers. Bunny is able, at last, to accept her mother's death. Agnis reveals her own sad story and the families are free at last to begin a new life.

Novelist E. Annie Proulx won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Shipping News*, the book on which the film is based. The movie was filmed on the coast of Newfoundland where the story is set.

After his international success with *My Life as a Dog*, Swedish director Lasse Hallstrom moved to the United States, where he made successful films like *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* and *Chocolat*.

The versatile Kevin Spacey plays Quoye as a "broken man." In a film with seemingly small roles about seemingly insignificant people, Julianne Moore as Wavey and the Os-

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car-winning actress Judi Dench as Aunt Agnis bring realism and dignity to their characters. Cate Blanchett proves once again that she can play any role with credibility.

Hallstrom uses the symbol of water extensively in the film. We see Quoye almost drowning as a boy; the opening sequence begins with the young Quoye in the pool and the scene is transformed into the adult Quoye working his various jobs but still seen as if he is drowning. Later, a bed is suddenly submerged in water and the rain never seems to stop. Quoye is always floating, marooned at sea. With the harsh history of the Quoye family, it is as if he is possessed by an original sin from which he must be cleansed, as if he has to acknowledge his roots so that the "broken man" can be healed.

DIALOGUE WITH THE GOSPEL

Focus: Jesus uses symbols of water and washing to illustrate his complete service to others and his new commandment of love. Quoye needs the healing of water to overcome fear and grow in love.

While the focus of the celebration tonight is on the Eucharist, the Gospel is that of Jesus' washing his disciples' feet and commanding the disciples to wash one another's feet as he has done. This "mandate" was the meaning behind the old name for today, "Maundy" Thursday ("Maundy" from the English "mandate"). As the presider washes the feet of the community, it is a celebration of water, cleansing, and love.

The reading from Exodus reminds us that the Chosen People were migrants, setting out into the unknown to find a promised land, just as Quoye and Bunny left their home and sorrowful memories for Newfoundland.

The Gospel themes of water and washing will be taken up again during the Easter Vigil and linked with the baptismal themes of regeneration and new life.

The setting for Jesus' symbolic action is his last Passover meal. He loves his own, "and he loved them to the end." At this moment, Jesus' self-emptying love urges him to offer his followers the cleansing touch of water. But for Quoyale, water is not cleansing, healing, or nourishing. Instead, when faced with water, he remembers how he almost drowned as a child. He now experiences his humdrum life as a kind of drowning. In Newfoundland, he finds opportunities to face his fears and the sea even though he claims that he is not "a water person." His accident brings him close to drowning again. Quoyale's uncertainties and self-doubts remind us of Peter the apostle, who at first does not understand the need to be cleansed with water. Later, despite being washed, Peter will further demonstrate his confusion and weakness when he denies Jesus.

Quoyale has to come to terms with his heritage—its violence, its predatory greed, and its sexual abuse. After the Newfoundland waters heal him, he must learn to love. He is blessed because he is able to love Bunny, Agnis, Wavey, and her son Harry. The love that he has learned, he has to give to others—a reminder that this night we celebrate Jesus' new commandment of love: "Love others as I have loved you."

- Quoyale's father pushing him into the pool and his sense of drowning in his life; Quoyale not being "a water person"; themes of the sea, rain and storms, especially on the night he goes to Wavey's house and the family home blows away; his venture on the sea; the discovery of the headless corpse and his own near-drowning.
- Quoyale's relationships with the women in his life, his love for them; Petal, despite her neglect of him; Bunny wishing her mother was alive; Aunt Agnis and Quoyale's

KEY SCENES AND THEMES

shame and compassion for her past; Wavey and their friendship that grew into love.

- Quoye's brokenness, his experience of being humiliated by his father, by Petal, even by Bunny and Terk Card; the difference when he experiences Agnis's support, the friendship of the newspaper staff, Jack's trust, and Wavey's love.

FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. If this evening's readings from Exodus, First Corinthians, and the Gospel are about "remembering," then *The Shipping News* fits the liturgical mood very well. How do each of the principle characters in the film, from Quoye to Nuttbeam, "remember" their lives and their dreams? How do they tell their stories? Do they edit them as they go? When and why do we finally find out the truth? How did remembering help transform these characters? How can remembering the scriptures transform us?
2. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and, depending on pastoral circumstances, the washing of the feet may be part of this evening's liturgy after the homily. Why did Jesus wash the feet of the disciples? Why do you think water is such a powerful and common symbol in Scripture? What does the symbol of water mean in the Bible and what does water mean for Quoye? If you were to list symbols that exemplify your life story, what would they be, and why? If your life story were a movie, what Scripture readings would add meaning to it? Can you identify with any of the characters in the film, their experiences or dilemmas? If so, what does this evening, which remembers the "Last Supper" and celebrates the institution of the Eucharist, mean for your life?

3. This evening's liturgy commemorates the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood and reminds us of Christ's commandment that we love and serve one another. How do the characters in the film do this as individuals and as a community? Do you think the characters are "salvation" for one another? How so? Do you think that fact that Quoye moves "back" to "Newfoundland" is a metaphor for his own personal life? How so?

Prayer

Jesus, you showed your love for your disciples when you washed their feet. Help us to live your commandment of love, serving and loving one another as you first loved us. Amen.