

*Psalm 118:1, 21-24 (NRSV)*

- <sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!
- <sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.
- <sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.
- <sup>23</sup> This is the LORD's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- <sup>24</sup> This is the day that the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*Jeremiah 29:10-14 (NRSV)*

<sup>10</sup>For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

*Isaiah 46:3-4 (NRSV)*

- <sup>3</sup> Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb;
- <sup>4</sup> even to your old age I am he,  
even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save.

*Seen a good movie lately? We've got six of them for you! Our first is an animated film about a man who has experienced great love and great loss.*

*Will he learn again what he once knew?*

Every Saturday night across America, millions upon millions of people gather around a pulpit. Some are looking for a few moments when they can rise out of their daily humdrum. Others strive to find some meaning or purpose in their lives. Others hope to confront some hard realities about these lives we lead. The pulpits often deliver these messages masterfully to packed pews.

Where are these churches you ask?

Well, I never said "churches," only "pulpits." I'm talking about movie theaters. The screens bring us film after film, some outstanding, some simply awful. Some are "message" movies, some are not. Yet they all have a story to tell, a story that the moviemakers hope we tap into, a story in which we can find something of ourselves.

My wife, Patti, and I very much enjoy going to the movies. And, of course, we view them through the eyes of believers. Sometimes we see biblical or Christian themes pretty easily, other times it is more difficult. But we've gotten better at viewing film through the lens of Scripture. Indeed, as followers of Jesus, we couldn't help but do so. This series is about getting some practice in seeing biblical themes in movies and other art forms as well.

Here are a few thoughts on theology and film from Kaleo church in San Diego:

Film may be the reigning art form of the twenty-first century. Not only the most accessible, it embodies a collaborative creation, employing a variety of occupations: actors, writers, composers, costume designers, sound technicians and construction workers. The list (as film credits attest) is nearly endless. A movie is the result of a diverse community coming together in the attempt to create something beautiful. As man's desire to create via narrative springs from being made in God's image, these cinematic explorations inevitably express truths related to the One True Narrative: whether it's the nature of the divine, the consequences of sin, or another issue, filmmakers-- directly or indirectly-- often touch on these themes. As people flock to their local cineplex or rent a DVD, soaking up dramatized life lessons and morals, believers should engage this art form also-- speaking to it and through it-- bringing to light where it rings true and where it rings false. What does the movie say about human existence, the supernatural, the cycle of life and afterlife, or our need for redemption? If you look closely, many films are saying a lot more than you may realize...

We are going to look at the following films during this six week series:

Sept 12	UP
Sept 19	Les Miserables
Sept 26	About a Boy
October 3	The Dark Knight
October 10	Toy Story 3
October 17	Shawshank Redemption

You'll notice that none of these are explicitly "Christian" or even "religious." There is no *The Passion of the Christ* or *Ben-Hur*. This is purposeful. We hope to learn better how to see all film through lens of the Scripture.

#### *Through the lens of Scripture?*

When we talk about viewing movies through the lens of Scripture, all we mean is learning to see in them the exploration of biblical themes and stories. That doesn't mean the movie makers have the Bible in mind, but simply that the great stories and themes of humankind are also the great themes and stories of the Bible. We are all made in the image of God.

Loss, alienation, hope, redemption, adultery, warfare, pride, prejudice, obsession, conspiracy, salvation . . . the list is virtually endless. Such are the themes of all great art and even the not-so-great. As we become more conversant in the biblical stories and themes, as we connect more dots, we begin to see the world more clearly. We become realists.

Coppolla's *The Godfather* becomes more than an entertaining gangster movie. It becomes a terrifying exploration of a good man, a war hero, seduced by good intentions and a desire for revenge, who is transformed into a cold-blooded murderer, killing even while his own child is baptized. It is a story about the seductive nature of sin.

So let's begin by taking a look at the Best Picture nominee from 2009, *UP*. A synopsis of the movie can be found on page 4 of this study, though I hope that you will try to see each film before we talk about it. *UP* is replete with themes and moments we could talk about, some more obvious than others. Here are a few.

#### *Marriage*

The love and the marriage of Ellie and Carl are foundational to the movie. The nearly ten minute tale of their love and life together at the beginning of the movie is about as touching a tribute to marriage as you'll find. Together from childhood, their love sustains them through the disappointment of childlessness and the deferral of long-cherished dreams. When Ellie dies of illness, it is as if part of Carl, perhaps the best part, has died with her.

This elevation of the wonders of marriage should be familiar to Christians, as it is to most people. Even when we manage to wreck a marriage, we still recognize that a strong, loving marriage is something to be cherished and appreciated. It is one of God's gifts to humanity.

The opening chapters of Genesis are foundational to all that follows. In them we learn that God created everything and created humans in his image. We learn that he created the humans in two genders, male and female, so that each might not be alone, but have a partner. And we learn that God created them husband and wife, to be joined in sexual union, to be of one flesh. This is before Jesus, before Moses, before Abraham, before the flood. Even sin had not yet entered the picture. This is the Garden of Eden, a world in which all is right.

The union of one man and one woman, which we call marriage, is part of God's created order. It is more than a convenience or a means of managing finances. Marriage is God's gift to us. Marriage is God's grace at work. And it is God's gift to all people. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God's Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity. It is a gift even to those who do not know God.

Do we all get married? Of course not. Do we all stay married? Hardly. Jesus did not marry. The apostle Paul understood his own singleness to be a gift from God, enabling Paul to devote all his energies to the service of Christ. Marriage does not complete us as persons, yet all of us have a stake in marriage.

About 750BC, the Israelites had turned away from God yet again, as they had so many times before. This time, God brought forward a prophet named Hosea, who would use the most startling language and word-pictures to describe the relationship between God and his people. In a nutshell, by chasing after other gods, the people were committing adultery against the LORD God. The covenantal relationship between God and God's people is cast as a marriage. God is the spouse who is being cheated on! God is angry. God is hurt. The Hebrew in the book of Hosea is R-rated at times. Yet God does not abandon the covenant. Instead, God says, "And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her out to the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15, from *The Message* paraphrase). Could there be a more strikingly personal image of the relationship between God and his people?

There are a few keys here: (1) marriage is the union of a man and a woman, (2) marriage is a gift created and given by God, and (3) God uses our marriages as a metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with his people – with you and with me. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the church has always held marriage to be sacramental, covenantal, and bound up with our discipleship.

In *UP*, promise-making and promise-keeping play a big part in the plot. Carl and Ellie not only entered into and lived out the covenant of marriage, Carl promised that he would take her to Paradise Falls. He sealed the promise by crossing his heart. It was a promise neither lightly made nor easily broken. Even after Ellie's death, Carl was determined to be faithful to that promise.

### *Growing Old*

We would all like to grow old. Odd then that our culture seems to glorify youth and diminish the elderly. I read much these days about the rationing of health care, including those who argue that health care must, for the good of society, go to those who are most "productive," defined as those most able to work hard and work well. . . . Really? Is that who we are to be? Is that what God hopes for us and from us? Are to assess the worth of the elderly by their effect on GNP?

In *UP*, Carl is just plain old. Even a bit of a curmudgeon. There is no sign that he is “productive” any more. Indeed, he is seen by some as impeding progress. To Russell, pudgy wilderness scout extraordinaire, Carl is, at first, only the means to a merit badge. But by the end of the story, Carl is the grandfather extraordinaire to Russell, which to my mind is much closer to God’s definition of “productive.”

The Law of Moses urges us to ascribe to the elderly their full worth. “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God, I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:32; the chapter in which we are told to love our neighbor and love the stranger). And God promises to look after the elderly also: “. . . even to your old age I am he [your God], and even when you turn gray I will carry you.” God’s commandment to love extends to all persons, including those at the very beginning of life and those approaching its end.

*“It’s the boring stuff you remember the most”*

One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that parents and children tend to remember different moments. So many of my best childhood memories are of relatively mundane moments or afternoons, none of which my Mom would ever recall.

At one poignant moment in *UP*, Russell is confiding in Carl about his not-very-present father. Russell says to Carl, “It’s the boring stuff that you remember the most.”

I take that as a reminder that I ought to embrace the moments of every day, even the most mundane and ordinary. As the psalmist put it, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24). This day, every day, not just the “big days.”

*Moving on*

After Ellie’s death, Carl seems trapped, unable to move on, to embrace life in any real way. Even his grand adventure seems more like an obsession than anything else. The house itself almost becomes Ellie for him; he even starts calling the house “Ellie”. And all the while, right next to him stands Russell, this little kid, ready to love and be loved. Carl and Ellie experienced a lot of pain over their inability to have children. And now, a child is right there . . . and it is almost as if Carl can’t see him.

Somehow, we can easily fall into the trap of seeing “moving on” as a process of ignoring or diminishing a loved one who has died. But it need not be that at all. Even in the grief of profound loss, God is helping us to make new plans. Death is not our end; all eternity lies on the other side. For Carl, it took an accidental turn of the pages in Ellie’s adventure scrapbook to see that she had never mourned endlessly over the loss of her “great adventure.” Instead, her life had been one new moment to love Carl after another. Their love and the memories they had created were enough, more than enough, more than many people ever get.

God’s people could have given up hope and drowned in their tears over the exile to Babylon. But Jeremiah brought them a word from God, that even in the bleakest times, God is busy moving them to a new hope, a new future. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11) These were people who believed that the horrors of exile had come upon them because of their own failings, their own sins. Yet, God brought them new light and a new future.

For Carl, God worked through a rather over-eager scout, a multi-colored giant bird, and a talking dog. Truly, the Lord works in mysterious ways!

On a recent flight, I saw a movie whose name escapes me. Near the end, a young woman who has chosen a career over a love is told by a friend, “I’ve figured that what you ‘do’ is only half of your life. The other half, the more important half, is who you do it with.” Carl once knew that to be true, but had to relearn it after Ellie’s death. As the people of the very relational LORD God, may we never forget what really matters.

## Synopsis of *UP*

This is from a review of the movie by Carolyn Arends in *Christianity Today* magazine.

The film centers on the oddest of couples. Carl Fredricksen (voiced with gruff perfection by Ed Asner) is a 78-year-old retired balloon salesman mourning the recent loss of his wife, Ellie. Grief, age, and unfulfilled dreams have made him more than a little grumpy, and the fact that urban developers are tearing down his neighborhood (and itching to raze his beloved home) is not helping matters.

Russell (Jordan Nagai) is a portly, bespectacled 8-year-old who lives to acquire Wilderness Explorer badges but has never actually been in the wild. If he can only earn his "assist the elderly" badge, he will progress from Junior to Senior Explorer. He knocks on Carl's front door in hopes of helping him cross the street (or yard, or ... anything), but Carl is in no mood to be assisted and sends the boy away badge-less.

When court officials rule Carl must move to a retirement home, he makes a bold decision. In honor of a lifelong dream he and Ellie shared to travel to a South American landmark, he ties thousands of helium balloons to his house and lifts off on a journey to "Paradise Falls." It's not until he is irrevocably on his way that he discovers young Russell on his front porch and realizes he has an unwanted travel partner.

Carl and Russell land near Paradise Falls and make a series of exciting discoveries. They are greeted by dogs who wear high tech collars that translate their thoughts into language, and the audience is treated throughout the movie to the hysterical interior life of canines. ("I have just met you, but I love you.") They also discover a huge, multi-colored, extremely rare bird. She is awkward and delightfully expressive; Russell names her "Kevin."

Eventually, Carl and Russell encounter Carl's boyhood hero, Charles Muntz (voiced with sinister aplomb by Christopher Plummer), a now disgraced explorer (even older than Carl) who is living in the region and villainously obsessed with capturing the bird. Various forms of conflict ensue, including one terrific sequence in which Carl and Charles do battle senior-style, using canes and dentures as weapons.

Along the way, Carl and Russell also make some interior (but no less monumental) discoveries. Despite their seventy-year age difference, they have much more in common than they first realize. Both of them have unfulfilled dreams of adventure, both of them are lonely, and both of them need each other.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has developed the following questions as discussion starters for St. Andrew's Fall Fellowship Groups.

### Read **Psalm 118:24**

Consider the following questions:

1. "This is the day..." How has this day been a blessing to you?
2. The movie "Up" is about big goals. Young Ellie dreamed of going to "Paradise Falls". In the movie, we saw how her life experience caused her priorities to change. Take a moment and share what the big goals for your life have been.
3. Have you achieved them?
4. Have they changed over the years? If so, how?
5. What is the biggest thing you're hoping to achieve in your life right now?
6. How have significant relationships in your life affected your personal goals?

### Read **Jeremiah 29:11**

Consider the following questions:

1. Russell helped Carl move forward into a brand new future. Carl left behind his grief over losing Ellie and stepped into something new.
2. How do you identify with Carl? Is there something you need to leave behind so that you can move into your new future? If so, what do you need to let go of?
3. How do you identify with Russell? How can you or this group help someone or some persons move on and take the next step in their lives?

**Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall**  
**Beginning this Sunday, September 12:**

*The Bible and the Qur'an: Side by Side*

How much do you really know about the Qur'an? For most of us, the answer is not much. In this series, we'll be looking at the treatment of important biblical subjects, such as Adam and Jesus, from the perspective of both the Bible and the Qur'an. We'll begin with a brief introduction to the Qur'an. This promises to be one of our most interesting and timely series in a while.

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Beginning Monday evening, September 20 (6:45-8:30)  
Scott's evening Bible study for the fall Bible Academy

*The Book of Daniel*

Daniel, one of the most misused books in the Bible, asks the question, "Who's in charge here?" The reader is taken on a journey from despair to hope, traveling through some well-known Sunday School stories and imaginative visions of God's triumph. Join us as we examine the handwriting on the wall (one those famous stories) and meet the Son of Man. This eight-week study will challenge your heart, your intellect, and your imagination.

To register go to [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) and click on the Bible Academy registration link or call Kate Huber at 214-291-8021.

Please register. It really helps us to be ready for the first class meeting.

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Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 11:45 - 1:00, Room 127.

Just drop in when you can. Each week stands alone.

We are studying Paul's letter to the Galatians.

**Sermon Notes**

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