

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent]

March 12, 2023

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Sermon Series (3): Sinful Nature

Romans 5:12, 17

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Last Sunday, I gave the second sermon in a series with the movie, “Noah (2014).” With the theme, “Shining,” we focused on the group of characters, named “The Watchers.” They were fallen angels who had shined with the light and glory of God before. But in order to help human beings on earth, they disobeyed God and came down to earth. And they handed down their knowledge and wisdom to the descendants of Cain. Due to their knowledge and support, Cain’s descendants became stronger and prosperous, but as a result, evilness and wickedness prevailed among them, and they devoured the world. Consequently, The Watchers lost the light and glory of God, became covered by rocks, and remained in the darkness on earth. They regretted what they had done and pleaded with God to take them back to heaven, but God kept silent.

Meanwhile, they came to meet Noah and his family. They had hostility against Noah because they thought Noah was one of the fallen men on earth. And they did not believe Noah saying that God would punish all men on earth with a flood. But they saw God’s miracle of water gushing up from the ground and countless trees growing in the area. Thus, they decided to help Noah and build the ark. When the ark was almost completed and the flood was about to begin, Tubal-Cain and his people rushed to the ark to plunder it. It was impossible for Noah and his three sons to counter their attack. At the moment, The Watchers surrounded the ark to protect Noah, his family, and pairs of all animals. And when they sacrificed themselves for Noah and for God’s plan, the rocks attached to them came apart, shined with the light and glory again, and returned to heaven. Through the story of The Watchers, we are reminded of Isaiah 60:1-3, that we are the bearers of the light and glory of God. However, when we stay away from God, we come to lose the light and glory covered by our own rocks in the form of doubts, fear, struggles, lack of faith, or burdens of life. On the other hand, when we stay in or come closer to God, the light and glory within us will shine brightly.

Today, I want to bring another symbolic scene that causes our doubts or antipathy with a theme that is an all-time agenda among Christians—the Sinful Nature. With this theme, we will approach it with the Apostle Paul’s explanation about sin and its resolution.

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Director Aronofsky starts the movie with a sentence in the subtitles, “In the beginning, there was nothing.” And then, rather than describing the sequence of creation, the movie continues like this (video). A serpent appeared and crawled to the front, and then another sentence in the subtitles follows, “Temptation led to sin.” In the ark after the flood began, Noah and his family sat around, and Noah began to tell his sons how God created the world, how the first man and woman disobeyed God, and what the price of that disobedience was. Again, in his explanation, a serpent appears.

Aronofsky and we are under the same understanding of the serpent representing a symbol of the evil that made Adam and Eve break the covenant with God. But here, Aronofsky added his creativity that is not in the Bible (video). In Noah’s explanation, the serpent molted, and the first man picked up the skin. And he handed it over to his son Seth, Seth to his son, and that son to his son...and so on to Lamech, who was Noah’s father. And the movie continues with a conversation between young Noah and his father Lamech. Please pay attention to Lamech and what he is doing with the serpent skin (video). According to the Jewish tradition, giving a blessing to his son(s) was the father’s great privilege given by God. We remember Noah’s blessings to his sons Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9:18-28), Isaac’s blessing to his son Jacob (27:27-29), Jacob’s blessing to his twelve sons (48:21-22; 49:1-28), Jacob’s blessing to Joseph’s two sons (48:1-21), to name a few. Likewise, as a father, giving a blessing to his children or grandchildren was the privilege that only the father had. But in the beginning of the movie, when Lamech gave a blessing to young Noah, he wrapped the serpent skin on his hand and arm and gave a blessing to Noah with the hand. This is repeated again at the end of the movie (video). On the new land, Noah, just as his father did, wrapped the serpent skin on his hand and arm and gave



blessings to Shem's two babies. We can assume that when the time came, Noah would hand over the serpent skin to his first son Shem, and Shem would do just as his father and his ancestors did to his children or his grandchildren, and hand it over.

The scenes of giving blessings with the serpent skin became another controversy among Christians. Some Christians criticized that it is anti-Christianity because Lamech and Noah gave blessings to the son and the grandchildren with the skin of the evil one, so that they were not blessings but curses. What do you think? How do you interpret the blessing with the serpent skin? Why did the screenwriter and the director use the serpent skin for blessings in the beginning and at the end of the movie?

*Photo from the Movie "Noah"*

We may all agree that the serpent in the Book of Genesis is a metaphor of the evil one that tried to separate the first human beings from God. It tempted Adam and Eve, and they gave in to the temptation. As a result, sin came into the world, so the serpent's skin is the symbol of the trace or evidence of the evil one. Here, Aronofsky focuses on our human being's sinful nature with the serpent skin. In the Garden of Eden, which means in a perfect relationship with God, Adam picked up the skin and then turned his eyes from God to the prohibited tree. Being cast out of Eden, Cain's descendant—Tubal-Cain—killed Lamech and plundered the skin from him. Tubal-Cain might have blessed his people with it. Consequently, they were always faithful to satisfy their physical desires. And the world became cleansed with the flood and began anew with Noah and his family. By wrapping the skin on Noah's hand and arm and blessing the newborn babies with it, the movie ends seemingly pessimistic. Aronofsky may want to show that the sinful nature would never disappear. From his perspective, it seems we cannot be free from our sinful nature for evermore.

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The background of today's Scripture passage is the church in Rome. The membership of the church consisted of the Jewish Christians, who established the church in Rome, and the Gentile Christians, mostly Roman citizens, who converted to Christianity by the Jewish Christians. However, the Gentile Christians, who were accustomed to their own religions, cultures, and philosophies, could not understand and accept the teachings of the Jewish Christians.

The Apostle Paul must have been glad when he heard that a faith community was established in Rome, the center of the world at the time. But he came to hear that there were some problems within the church and tensions between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians. Paul could not wait until he visited Rome, so he wrote a letter to the Roman church including the correct teachings of the gospel. In particular, today's passage covers sin and salvation comparing Adam and Jesus Christ. Paul said, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (v. 12). The one man in the verse refers to Adam. So, through Adam, sin came into the world. If so, what was wrong with Adam? Breaking the covenant with God and eating the fruit that was prohibited? His problem was separation from God. If he repented of his wrongdoing before God, God would forgive him. Why not? But rather than repenting, he tried to separate himself from God. He first hid himself from God. And second, he made an excuse, putting the blame on Eve. He could put everything back in place, but he did not. As a result, his behavior and words made himself separate from God. And his separation from God brought death, and it spread to all transcending time and place. Up to this point, Aronofsky's perspective seems right. No one could escape the sinful nature or separation from God; consequently, we are going to die.

However, we have good news. The gospel does not end with death. Paul said, "If, because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (v. 17). That is, even though we are going to die through separation from God, we are given salvation through Jesus Christ as grace and the righteousness of God. Through the Son of God's crucifixion on the cross, our separated relationship with God became restored, and we come to be reconciled to God. And we come to have new life on earth and after life. This is the decisive difference that Aronofsky doesn't have, but we know it to be true.

Nevertheless, I know because of our sinful nature, we fall again and again. But thanks to Jesus Christ, we can put everything back in place if we stand before God and repent of our wrongdoings. God will forgive us by His endless love and abundant grace. Let us not hide ourselves from God or make excuses, putting the blame on others. Let us remain in God. Amen.