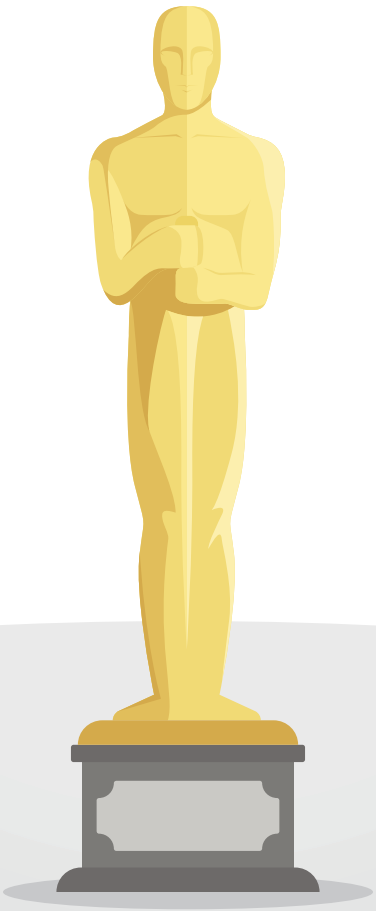
think CHRISTIAN

GOES TO THE OSCARS



This is what Oscar fever looks like at ***Think Christian***. You won't find predictions, odds of winning, or any other prognostications. We won't argue for one film or actor over another. Instead, we'll do what we always do when it comes to the movies: consider how they work, what they mean, and what we should make of them in light of our faith.

In particular, we'll be doing that with each of the nine Best Picture nominees for the 2017 Academy Awards. To help us turn around such a big project so quickly, we leaned on a handful of our film-friendly TC contributors. In the pages that follow, Liz Wann reflects on the notion of God's time as seen in *Arrival*; Xavier Ramey explores *Fences* as a variation on the biblical account of Jacob; Wade Bearden locates the dead-end prosperity gospel in *Hell or High Water*; Kimberly Davis applauds the *imago dei* of the women in *Hidden Figures*; Jonathan Stoner notes the border-less love of *Lion*; and Joel Mayward mourns alongside the deep sadness of *Manchester by the Sea*.

I claimed my two favorite nominees for myself—*La La Land* and *Moonlight*—as a reward for also having to watch and write about Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge*, another Best Picture contender. (I kid … sort of. As you'll read, I think Gibson has a troubling tendency to equate physical suffering with spiritual salvation.)

Well, I guess I did do a bit of arguing for and against in that last paragraph, so why not also offer at least one prediction? While *La La Land* will garner the most wins, I'm guessing *Moonlight* goes home with the Best Picture award. And since both made my list of the top ten films of 2016, that would be just fine with me.

Regardless of who takes the big prize on Feb. 26, here's hoping you enjoy our comprehensive look at the Best Picture category. Happy reading—and viewing.

Josh Larsen,
Think Christian editor

Arrival

The Place of Real Arrival

by LIZ WANN

Good science-fiction consists of more than just alien invasions, body-snatchers, and "Take me to your leader." Done well, sci-fi tells us deep truths about ourselves and our world. The Oscar-nominated film *Arrival* most definitely falls into this type of good sci-fi because of the way it takes the viewer deeper into the emotions of human experience. As film critic Anthony Lane wrote in *The New Yorker*, "What lingers, days after you leave the cinema, is neither the wizardry nor the climax but the zephyr of emotional intensity that blows through the film."

Director Denis Villeneuve is the wizard behind the wizardry of *Arrival*, while Amy Adams plays the main character: a respected linguist named Dr. Louise Banks. The United States Army seeks out Dr. Banks and her top-notch translation skills so she can help them decipher what a group of mysterious, newly arrived aliens want with the human race.

Arrival doesn't begin with the aliens, however. The opening sequence of the film shows us intensely emotional scenes from the life of one person, beginning to end. In a matter of minutes, we feel boundless joy, soul-twisting loss, and the agony of sorrow. Villeneuve masterfully crafts this sequence, helping us see and feel the fleeting nature of time from a distance, and all at once. We are voyeurs on the outside of time, looking in.

This isn't how we normally experience time, of course. We live in time. It's something happening to us in a specific moment, like a dot on a timeline. In the first few minutes of the film, we are seeing one person's timeline all at once, which highlights the brevity of life and causes us to feel as Solomon did, that life is a vapor and a vanity.

The film's aliens—who possess seven, symmetrical tentacles—are termed heptapods by Dr. Banks and her partner, a physicist named Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner). For fun and as a reflection of growing intimacy, Banks and Donnelly come to call two of the heptapods Abbott and Costello. We soon learn that these squid-like creatures, who emit symbols of ink as their form of written communication, experience time much like we did through the film's opening. Like God himself, the heptapods view time all at once: they are above it, and outside of it. As C.S. Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity*, "If you picture time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn… God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all."

Unlike God, or the heptapods, our perspective of time is humbling. Bound by our linear experience of time, we are powerless to change the past or control the future. But what if we could? *Arrival* goes on to pose this question. If we could make decisions with knowledge of the future, would we choose pain and suffering? As Dr. Banks asks Donnelly in one of *Arrival*'s closing scenes, "If you could

see your whole life laid out in front of you, would you change things?"

But we aren't God, or heptapods. Instead, we live in the balance of human responsibility and God's sovereignty. We plan our life, as God directs our steps. We cast lots and he determines where they fall. God alone sees our future and he won't share that with us for good reason. He knows we are but dust, and he will not let us know today what he has for us tomorrow. It's too heavy of a burden for our human frailty. He knows, at times, his will is difficult for us, so he shrouds the future in shadow and beckons us to walk forward with him.

Our comfort is this: that the one who created time, and is outside of it, invaded our planet and became part of our timeline. He limited himself in the ways that we are limited. He experienced the tragedy of human existence. The one who has no beginning and end assigned himself a beginning and end. Lewis expounds on this in *Mere Christianity*, "It is really, I suggest, a timeless truth about God that human nature, and the human experience of weakness and sleep and ignorance, are somehow included in his whole divine life." We can walk forward in time, knowing this forerunner has walked before us, and he walks with us. He's leading us to a place where time is swallowed up by eternity. The place of real arrival.

Liz Wann is a freelance writer living in Philadelphia with her husband and two boys. You can find more of her writing at lizwann.com and follow her on Twitter @liz_wann.

Fences

Wrestling with God for All the Wrong Reasons

by XAVIER RAMEY

Fences, directed by and starring Denzel Washington and adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by August Wilson, centers on a man in the midst of a wrestling match: with himself, his country, and his God.

Set shortly after the rise of Jackie Robinson in mid-century America, the movie's main character is Troy, a recently promoted garbage handler who struggles with his treatment by whites and sees his current station in life resulting from their refusal to allow a black man to play baseball, despite his obvious skill. While rarely leaving the backyard of Troy's Pittsburgh home, *Fences* focuses on the relationships between a husband and wife (played by Viola Davis), a father and his sons, two brothers, and even a man and his (perhaps imaginary) dog, Blue. Troy and his family feel the impact of life's losses, be they in terms of his career, as a result of war, or caused by American bigotry and structural racism.

Yet Troy is no saint, as is clear when his close friend Bono (Stephen Henderson) confronts him about his own transgressions. Later, when a defiant Troy taunts death itself (to the crackle of lightning and peals of thunder), he recalls Jacob, who wrestled with God until the morning. Washington gives a powerhouse performance of biblical proportions, as Troy sizes himself up to be great even as he's reeling from the impact of his sins.

Although Troy does confront God, there are important distinctions between his story and Jacob's. After fighting God, Jacob asked for and received a blessing. But Fences does not end well for Troy. Maybe this is because Troy fought God for the sport of it, taunting him. The issue of vanity also comes into consideration. Troy used his winding soliloquies and arguments to capture the heart of his wife, the approval of his friends, and the admiration of his children. But he did not consider the importance of actually following the Lord. The fights that we have in the nights to come should be ones of honesty, but also obedience. Troy's faults were not ones he asked forgiveness for, nor did he offer much consolation to his victims. Instead of mercy, he offered his vanity—powering up over those around him and eventually losing that fight for all to see. Troy is a Jacob figure who lost his way; he fought with a God he did not fully respect or love.

To wrestle with God because we think we are gods is destructive. We must ask whether we are imposing barriers or being imposed by them. As Bono, Troy's friend, tells him, "Some folks build fences to keep people out. Others build them to keep people in." One must seek to understand and grow from our wrestling. God can work through anything if we submit ourselves to the power that comes through following him.

Xavier Ramey is an educator, artist, social justice consultant and activist living in Chicago, Ill. You can find him on Twitter @XavierRamey.

Hacksaw Ridge

Mel Gibson's Desecration of the Body

by JOSH LARSEN

A crucifix in a World War II drama's clothing, *Hacksaw Ridge* takes a remarkable story of Christian pacifism and contorts it into a suspect station of the cross.

This shouldn't come as a surprise, given that the director is Mel Gibson, whose *The Passion of the Christ* was a monumental work of conviction that nevertheless couldn't see past Jesus' physical pain. At least there the suffering had a logical—indeed, Biblical—context. *Hacksaw Ridge* purports to tell the story of a man opposed to violence, only to gruesomely detail the bodily effects of violence for much of its running time.

Gibson's movie dramatizes the true story of Desmond Doss (Andrew Garfield), a World War II medic in the United States Army who was the first conscientious objector—due to his Christian beliefs concerning violence—to win the Medal of Honor. It's an extraordinary tale, and to be fair the set pieces involving the Battle of Okinawa do include scenes of Doss performing acts of nonviolent service. We see him risking his own safety, many times, to drag the wounded from the battlefield or apply life-saving tourniquets. Yet even in these instances, the focus is as much on the spurting arteries and dismembered legs as it is on Doss' healing hands. More representative of the film are its opening images, which capture, in slow motion, the many horrific ways men at war can be killed: blown to pieces by grenade explosions, shredded by bullets, set afire by flamethrowers.

Even before *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson's movies equated physical suffering with spiritual victory. From the start of his career, many of the characters he's played have had to endure wounds in order to win. This is somewhat in line with Christian theology, most notably in regard to Jesus' crucifixion, and also in the notion that our created bodies, and what we do with them, matter. But it also underestimates Christ's experience on the cross. Yes he endured great injury, yet he also faced so much more in our place: the full weight of our sin and the abandonment of the Father. In this sense, Christ's physical suffering is the least significant aspect of the crucifixion (if the one we mortal beings can most easily understand).

Returning to *Hacksaw Ridge*, which Gibson has described as a Christ allegory, it's important to note how corporeal the film is. Even when it considers spirituality, it's always within the context of the body. Here, the literal flaying of flesh is the pathway to salvation. (Notice how Gibson's camera fetishizes, rather than laments, the gory details.)

Hacksaw Ridge demonstrates this most clearly in what I think of as Doss' halo moment. This comes the day after Doss has heroically, single-handedly saved some 75 wounded men from the battlefield, a sacrificial act the film treats with dutiful respect, but does not offer as its narrative or emotional climax. That, instead, comes the next day, back on the battlefield, when Doss himself is wounded in a grenade explosion. Now, finally, he has

been blessed to physically suffer too. As Doss is loaded on a stretcher and lowered from the steep ridge where the fighting is taking place, Gibson swings the camera from above the medic to below him. From this vantage point, he appears to be rising to heaven.

Gibson's cinema, then, is one of crucifix-ation. In *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis considered the value of focusing so intensely on Christ's bodily suffering on the cross, and he was conflicted:

> *"There is indeed one mental image which does not lure me away into trivial elaborations. I mean the Crucifixion itself; not seen in terms of all the pictures and crucifixes, but as we must suppose it to have been in its raw, historical reality. But even this is of less spiritual value than one might expect. Compunction, compassion, gratitude—all the fruitful emotions—are strangled. Sheer physical horror leaves no room for them. Nightmare. Even so, the image ought to be periodically faced. But no one could live with it. It did not become a frequent motive of Christian art until the generations which had seen real crucifixions were all dead. As for many hymns and sermons on the subject—endlessly harping on blood, as if that were all that mattered—they must be the work either of people so far above me that they can't reach me, or else of people with no imagination at all."*

Hacksaw Ridge has both artfulness and imagination—Gibson proves himself especially to be a confident commander of military action—yet to my mind that imagination is severely limited. Our bodies are indeed not our own; it should give us pause to see them so eagerly slaughtered.

Josh Larsen is editor of *Think Christian* and the co-host of Filmspotting. His forthcoming book, *Movies Are Prayers*, is now available for pre-order. You can connect with him on Facebook, Twitter and Letterboxd.

Hell or High Water

Hell or High Water's Sweltering Critique of the Prosperity Gospel

by WADE BEARDEN

About halfway through David Mackenzie's Best Picture nominee, *Hell or High Water*, two Texas Rangers watch as a televangelist roars at them through a small hotel television screen. Reminiscent of a real-life Texas pastor, the preacher's sermon reflects what's known as the "prosperity gospel"—the belief that if one "sows" faith and obedience to God, they will "reap" or be rewarded with personal benefits.

"God doesn't say, 'No,'" the minister punctuates in a southern drawl. "Whatever you believe becomes the truth."

Growing agitated, Ranger Marcus Hamilton (played by the amusingly grizzly Jeff Bridges) growls to his colleague, "God doesn't talk to this man any more than he talks to my dog."

Hell or High Water may have all the fixins of a classic, if contemporary-set, western—thieves, oil, and greedy land grabs—but it can also be viewed as an indictment against the legalistic cues of the "health and wealth" gospel. In Mackenzie's tough look at economic disparity in rural West Texas, the lines of punishment and reward curl together like the threads in its characters' worn flannel shirts. Some individuals receive proper dues for their sowing; i.e. they get what they deserve. Then there are those, particularly the less influential, who plant and receive nothing, for others have stolen their harvest away.

This theme of personal entitlement is told through the lens of two siblings turned outlaws. Hitting up small banks for quick cash grabs, Toby Howard (Chris Pine) and his wild ex-con brother Tanner (Ben Foster) work to meet a strict deadline: they must accumulate $43,000 by the end of the week or their family land will become the property of Texas Midlands Bank. Before her death, the boys' mother entered a reverse mortgage deal that offered just enough to cover her meager expenses. When she passed, ownership of the ranch was due to go with her.

Hell or High Water isn't preachy, but more akin to the "straight-shooter," or lone cowboy who "tells it like it is." Whether it's the image of a billboard with the words "Fast Cash" emblazoned on the front or graffiti that laments corporate bailouts at the expense of working people, the background details often reveal the movie's hand. This is a fable chronicling the fall of the self-sufficient American cowboy under the power of faceless institutions. If the prosperity gospel is the freedom to create your own reality, *Hell or High Water* imagines that freedom being yanked away without recourse. This is a world where hard-working people are left out to wrinkle in the parched West Texas heat. Banks exploit the elderly for profit. Manifest Destiny decimates Native American culture—a reality referenced by Hamilton's part-Comanche partner (Gil Birmingham). A soldier serves his country only to return to a foreclosed home. The televangelist's message just doesn't play here.

In her book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Kate Bowler cites a recent survey finding that 43 percent of Christians believe God grants the faithful health and wealth. A surprising two-thirds "agreed that God wants people to prosper." Sure, we may scoff at Toby and Tanner's decisions, or even the bank's financial maneuvering, but Mackenzie's tall tale pushes us to consider what our visions of the good life have in common with these brothers.

Whether tempted towards the prosperity gospel or just a corrupted version of the American dream, our decision to place trust in either of these philosophies can often lead to the path of Toby and Tanner (taking what we feel like we deserve) or Texas Midlands Bank (exploiting others to build our own fortunes). This likely won't involve rapid heists or predatory loan programs, but it often reveals itself in those daily decisions that force us to choose between ourselves and others.

Hell or High Water is a knotty tale, yet it's not without a moral center. In one scene, Toby says to Tanner, "You talk like we ain't gonna get away with this." Tanner's reply illustrates the film's hesitancy to glorify what might have easily disintegrated into a Robin Hood-style cliché: "I never met nobody that got away with anything, ever." There is Someone keeping score—even if fair hands aren't dealt immediately.

In the film's riveting conclusion, after the rangers and the robbers have finally come head to head, Hamilton and Toby speak of punishment and justice against a beautifully harsh landscape. Their western world is simultaneously inspiring and imposing. As to the fate of these characters, and what they deserve, the film doesn't say. Rather, the narrative ambiguously ends as the camera settles into the middle of a shaggy field.

This final image, too, seems to defy the simplistic theology that typifies the prosperity gospel. What is wheat and what is the chaff? Will they eventually be separated? The answer to that question doesn't follow the outline of homilies promising riches and physical strength. It's far more mysterious than we often realize, even if eternity promises a great reckoning.

Wade Bearden is a writer and the co-host of *Seeing and Believing*, a Christ & Pop Culture podcast about film and television.

Hidden Figures

Intellect and Imago Dei in the Women of Hidden Figures

by KIMBERLY DAVIS

"In all my years of teaching, I've never seen a mind like the one your daughter has. You have to see what she becomes."

With those words in *Hidden Figures*, a teacher at little Katherine Goble's school sets her on a journey to fulfill her potential, while filmgoers take a journey to rediscover people who would have otherwise been lost to history.

Nominated for three Academy Awards, including Best Picture, *Hidden Figures* employs truth, humor, triumph, and earnestness to tell the story of three African-American women whose work was crucial to NASA's success in the 1960s—a time when gender norms and Jim Crow laws worked doubly against them. It was because of their work that John Glenn was successfully able to orbit the earth and return home in one piece. Goble (who would later marry and become Katherine Johnson), Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan possessed an ambition to blaze a path none like them had traveled. They were among NASA's first non-white, non-male "computers"—women who checked the calculations that all-male teams of NASA engineers performed for potential space exploration.

But it was more than ambition that motivated these women. It was their intellect—their unique minds—that made them trailblazers. Thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas believed that *imago dei* (the image of God) existed in a person's intellect—that it was perhaps their most God-like quality. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas wrote that "nothing is more like to God than the human soul in its generic and intellectual nature, because as Augustine had said previously, 'Things which have knowledge, are so near to him in likeness that of all creatures none are nearer.'" If this is true, no viewer of this film could fail to see the image of God in these characters.

Holding on to that image is essential, as the Jim Crow-era segregation so often sought to deny it. To dramatically emphasize this, *Hidden Figures* repeatedly shows Johnson running all the way across the NASA campus to the "colored ladies" restroom, as she wasn't allowed to use the restroom near the office where she has recently been promoted.

Hidden Figures shows these women as fully rounded characters, with vibrant and rich family and community lives which serve to augment their intellect and their work—not detract from it. There's a sense that these women are in this together. Sometimes that's what it takes to blaze a trail.

That strength to be the first—to be a trailblazer—must, indeed, come from somewhere. Perhaps it, too, is part of our *imago dei*. In showing such vision and making the most of their intellect, even when the world would hold them back, the women of *Hidden Figures* reflect the goodness of the one who first blessed them with those very gifts.

Kimberly Davis is a journalist, blogger and communications consultant living in Athens, Ga. Follow her on Twitter as @KDavis.

La La Land

The General Revelation of La La Land

by JOSH LARSEN

Although *La La Land* heads into the Oscar race on a wave of nominations (14, including Best Picture), it also faces a fomenting backlash. While most moviegoers have embraced this original musical, in which Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling play romancing artistic types in modern-day Hollywood, some have grumbled that it's too derivative, too pleased with itself, too inconsequential. Sure it looks good, the argument goes, but what does it *mean*?

When it comes to awards, we tend to prefer movies that feel important—and we tend to associate importance with a film's story or theme. Yet *La La Land*, as I argued when I placed it on my top-ten list, brilliantly brings to the forefront cinematic elements that often get less attention: music, dancing, singing, costuming, camera movement, staging, color. Who is to say that the inspirational narrative of something like *The King's Speech*—2011's Best Picture winner about King George VI's struggle with a speech impediment—has more intrinsic value than *La La Land*'s aesthetic elegance, of which the most inspirational element may be the way Stone swings her canary-yellow dress?

There is, interestingly, a theological parallel to this question, one that involves the Christian notions of special and general revelation. Most Christians affirm that God reveals himself both through Scripture (special revelation) and through the general revelation of creation itself. Just as some moviegoers can place less value on a film's formal elements in favor of its narrative or theme, so some Christians can treat general revelation as a mere afterthought. (Never mind that Paul argues vehemently in favor of creation's power to reveal "God's invisible qualities.")

Writing in The Banner, Donald Oppewal pushes back against such an imbalanced approach to revelation: "Those who readily dismiss the validity of general revelation seem to argue that only special revelation is normative, a particular application of the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. What this view seems not to consider is that the trustworthiness of both revelations is rooted in God as the writer of both books."

God is not the writer of *La La Land* (that would be Damien Chazelle, who is also the film's director). But Chazelle and his collaborators are, like all of us, made in God's image—and they bear that image in numerous ways, including in their glorious creativity. As I wrote earlier on TC, movie musicals are one of the best genres for celebrating the various creative gifts God has bestowed upon us, his created beings. This image-reflecting creativity is why *La La Land* does, in fact, mean something. Not necessarily for what it says, but for what it displays.

Although God's glory is filtered through fallible human beings (I'll admit the movie isn't perfect), we can see it in *La La Land* much like we see it in nature. Consider Psalm

19:1–2, another scriptural case for general revelation:

> *The heavens declare the glory of God,*
> *and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*
> *Day to day pours out speech,*
> *and night to night reveals knowledge.*

What exactly does a sunset mean? I couldn't really say. Yet I'd watch its remarkable display each night if I could, knowing that I was encountering evidence of God in the melding colors and awesome rays. Similarly, I've frequently revisited "Another Day of Sun"—*La La Land*'s bravura opening number, which transforms a congested, concrete L.A. freeway into an elaborately choreographed dance party. With each viewing, something joyous is revealed—about God, his world, and the boundless creative energy with which he blesses us all. And that, I can say, means a lot.

Josh Larsen is editor of *Think Christian* and the co-host of Filmspotting. His forthcoming book, *Movies Are Prayers*, is now available for pre-order. You can connect with him on Facebook, Twitter and Letterboxd.

Lion

A Love That Knows No Borders

by JONATHAN STONER

In one of his most famous speeches, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about how "our jet planes have compressed into minutes distances that once took weeks and months." His point was that "through our scientific and technological genius we've made of this world a neighborhood," yet our goal should be to "make of it a brotherhood."

I found my thoughts returning to these words as I watched *Lion*, a Best Picture nominee that involves technology which connects people on earth like never before. The film opens with stunning aerial photography of the mountains, hills, valleys, and plains of India. We have a God's-eye view of Google Earth before swooping down to meet our protagonist as a 5-year-old boy. When we first see him, Saroo (Sunny Pawar) is standing alone in the hills mesmerized by a kaleidoscope of yellow butterflies fluttering around him.

A heart-tugging musical theme, featuring a lone piano surrounded by swelling strings, offers a striking juxtaposition to the ethereal beauty; both combine to paint a portrait of the desperate poverty that Saroo and his family live in. The young Pawar is a wonder in the lead role; he was cast specifically for the Charlie Chaplin-like quality he possesses, which enables you to know exactly what he's thinking and feeling even when he doesn't say a word.

Saroo spends his days with his beloved older brother Guddu (Abhishek Bharate), hopping freight trains to steal coal from unattended cars, which they sell to buy milk and food. Saroo's incredible journey is set in motion when he and his brother become separated and he accidentally ends up as a stowaway on a train that takes him 1,600 miles away from his rural home to the bustling metropolis of Calcutta.

After surviving for months in the Calcutta slums, narrowly avoiding unthinkable violence and exploitation at the hands of the men who prey on the weak in this city of lost children, Saroo ends up in an orphanage. When attempts to locate his family are unsuccessful, he is eventually adopted by a childless couple from Tasmania. His adopted parents are played by Nicole Kidman and David Wenham, who radiate an aura of empathy, love, and trustworthiness that allows Saroo to open his heart to them just as they have opened their hearts to him.

Despite having a happy home, when we meet Saroo as a young adult (played by Dev Patel) he seems marooned in his life. Questions about who he is and where he comes from begin to stir a dormant desire to find his first home. When classmates tell him about Google Earth, the die is cast and his quest to find his way back to his mother and brother begins.

In one of the film's most powerful scenes, Saroo confesses to his adopted mother that a part of him wishes she could have had children of her own, because adopted children don't come as blank pages but with their own complicated backstory. She in turn reveals that when she was a little girl she had a vision that she was going to adopt a child some day. With so many children born into extreme poverty, she and her husband decided to forgo having children of their own to give a better life to children in need.

The psalmist writes that "God sets the lonely in families." There is a very real sense that it was no accident that little Saroo was brought to this specific family. No mention is made of their religious faith, but this couple seems driven by the conviction that we find in the gospel: that those who have been blessed by God have a responsibility to give out of their abundance to provide for "the least of these."

My hope is that my brothers and sisters in the faith community who have been tempted to give in to the fear that leads to fortifying borders and keeping out refugees will see this film and be challenged. May we be inspired by this Christ-like example of a "perfect love" that "drives out fear." And may we realize, as Martin Luther King Jr. did, that we have been knit together as the human family "in a single garment of destiny," one that unites us across religious, cultural, political, racial, and geographic barriers.

Jonathan Stoner is finishing his MDiv at Fuller Theological Seminary in preparation for a vocation in chaplaincy. His dream is to work as an on-set chaplain providing pastoral care to filmmakers and actors working in the trenches of film and television production.

Manchester by the Sea

The Suffocating Sadness of Manchester by the Sea

by JOEL MAYWARD

There's a brief but important moment in *Manchester by the Sea* where a paramedic attempts to load a patient on a gurney into the back of an ambulance. The mechanism that allows the wheels to fold up fails and the stretcher locks, creating an awkward, jarring experience for paramedics and patient alike. It's a small gesture indicating a larger theme: no matter the effort or exertion, our world is broken. Left to our own devices, it appears to be stuck that way.

Manchester by the Sea is a very, very sad film. Its central character, Lee—portrayed with remarkable intensity by Casey Affleck—carries his grief around like an invisible backpack full of bricks. (We don't learn the source of this grief until midway through the movie.) Affleck's performance centers not on Lee's eyes or words, but on his hands and posture. Whether those hands are straining on a fishing line, shoveling snow from a sidewalk, turning a wrench on a pipe, punching a person in the face, shaking from the shock of horrific news, or stuffed into jean pockets, Lee's palms and fingers are his primary form of emotional communication, a sort of "tell" unveiling his deep shame and self-loathing.

Upon learning of the death of his older brother Joe (Kyle Chandler) at the start of the film, Lee is compelled to return to his former home of Manchester-by-the-Sea, Mass., to take care of the arrangements. Forced to be the guardian of his now-orphaned nephew Patrick (Lucas Hedges), Lee walks a fine line between being a responsible adult and an unstable presence in Patrick's life. Haunted by his own past tragedy, Lee remains in a state of perpetual emotional disrepair. Patrick serves as Lee's foil, a sarcastic and light-hearted teenager who seems to handle the death of Joe with a surprising maturity, while still navigating his own grief. There is a good deal of humor in their interactions; a pleasant relief in what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly doleful film.

Have you ever heard how to trap a monkey? (Bear with me here.) You trap a monkey with a banana in a jar with a hole large enough for the monkey's hand to fit inside, but not large enough for the monkey's closed fist to emerge. The monkey clutches the banana, unable—or unwilling—to free itself due to the power of desire. Lee has locked his grip with grief, and this embrace prevents him from entering into healthy relationships. He becomes isolated in a purgatorial state, distant and aloof, disconnected from those around him due to his inability to open himself up to the healing presence of others. While Patrick seems able to ultimately find a sense of freedom from the grip of grief, Lee admits in defeat, "I can't beat it." So he lets

grief beat him, over and over like a boxing match in which the bell never rings.

The brokenness we see daily in our world should affect us deeply, but often we don't allow ourselves to feel it. Whether from others or ourselves, however, tears cannot be ignored. In *Listening to Your Life*, Frederick Buechner writes, "Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay closest attention… More often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next." The tear-eliciting sadness of *Manchester by the Sea* lies not only in Lee's trauma, but also in his inability (or unwillingness) to achieve healing. A broken world resigned to the absence of redemption? That's about as sad as it gets.

Joel Mayward is a pastor, writer, and film critic. He is the author of three books, including *Jesus Goes to the Movies: The Youth Ministry Film Guide*. You can follow him on Twitter *@joelmayward*.

Moonlight

What it Looks Like to be Bathed in God's Grace

by JOSH LARSEN

Intellectually, we understand what it means to be "bathed in God's grace." But what might it actually *look* like? *Moonlight,* a nominee for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards, offers an answer.

Taking a cue from its title, the movie casts a soft glow on its main character, who otherwise endures a harsh life. The movie details three distinct periods in the life of a young man named Chiron (played by Alex R. Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes at different ages in the character's life). Growing up black, gay, and poor in a rough Miami neighborhood, Chiron knows little love and almost no peace. And yet even as writer-director Barry Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton document his daily struggles, they light Chiron with what can only be described as the aching color of compassion. Much of the artistry has to do with the care they take to capture the particular hues and contours of the various actors' skin, something films featuring African-Americans don't always bother to do.

One scene displays this luminousness particularly well. As a small boy, Chiron finds an unlikely protector in a local drug dealer named Juan (Mahershala Ali). Juan occasionally takes him to the beach for swimming lessons. During one such outing, Juan holds the child gently in the water. As Jenkins' camera discreetly watches between the waves and sparkling sunlight, an incredible tenderness and peace overwhelms the screen. For a moment, Chiron is quite literally bathed in grace.

A post about the imagery of the Psalms from Ligonier Ministries notes that biblical references to the light of God's face are usually meant to convey three things: "his glory, his beneficence, and his love of righteousness." It's God's beneficence that *Moonlight* best reflects—a granting of momentary mercy, a blessing of recognition, a hint of what could be. As I watched, I was reminded that God sees us, no matter who or where we are, and that his desire upon seeing us is to bring us closer to him.

Reunion, notably, is the theme of the film's final third, when Chiron—now a bulked-up drug dealer himself—hesitantly visits a friend from high school with whom he had had a violent falling out. Their tentative, patient reacquaintance takes place in a late-night diner, amidst the quiet clinking of dishes and beneath a lamp's slow glow. Throughout the film, but here particularly, *Moonlight* reflects the light-infused hope of Isaiah 60, which looks forward to something even greater than what the movie's narrative offers:

The sun shall be no more
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give you light;
but the Lord *will be your everlasting light,*
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord *will be your everlasting light,*
and your days of mourning shall be ended.
Your people shall all be righteous;
they shall possess the land forever,
the branch of my planting, the work of my hands,
that I might be glorified.
The least one shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the Lord*;*
in its time I will hasten it.

This is the prophetic hope of God's incomparable light, should we accept it. That goes for you, for me, and for kids born black, gay, or poor, like Chiron.

Josh Larsen is editor of *Think Christian* and the co-host of Filmspotting. His forthcoming book, *Movies Are Prayers*, is now available for pre-order. You can connect with him on Facebook, Twitter and Letterboxd.