



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

February 2, 2020

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:23-5:12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

*The Rise of Christwalkers*

The Rev. Dr. Seth E. Weeldreyer

The whole story is about who she is. There's plenty of old underdog mosquito-size resistance ships facing new huge menacing planet-annihilating star destroyers, lots of light-sabre duels and pew-pew-pewing (did I get that right, Chrissy?!). And through the last three Star Wars movies runs the central question who is Rey? Maybe time to plug ears "la-la-la" style. I'd even get it if you got up now to leave! Except when doing primary source research again this week, about four others joined me in the theatre. By now, seems we've had time to avoid spoilers. And then, some of us couldn't tell the difference between FN2187 and R2D2, Tatooine and Exegol. Don't care about Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, or even Yoda. I get that, too.

Still, Star Wars' popularity spans generations—fueling social media speculation, cultural imagination, even spiritual conceptions. Say it with me: May the Force be with you! So, for fun let's see what sense we make related to our faith and real world. Now, when I was boy and went to grandma's house, I'd make a beeline for Star Wars action figures—Luke, Leia, Chewbacca, Darth Vader. But many years later, I have no idea where they are. So today, I brought other action figures to help us—Jesus! With glow-in-the-dark hands that move to bless; and water that turns into wine! A gift from church members years ago. And his companion for today, another gift my son got this Christmas: Mashter Yoda! Mr. Potato head dressed like Yoda! In the movies, there's great special effects, imaginative worlds; and it's best when beyond simplistic good or evil, as in the Rise of Skywalker Rey searches for

identity. What defines her? What guides her? What's she willing to live for, to die for? What power fills her and flows through her to connect with others, to shape the world, to take or create life? What kind of power?

She's a homeless scavenger on a dodgy desert planet. Alone. No family, friends. No last name, just Rey. In simple homespun linen garb. Then special powers appear in her. She wrestles impulses for good or ill. The bad guy Kylo Ren also proves complicated. Son of heroes. Seduced by the Dark Side. Trying to kill Rey, then woo her. Epitomizing dominant, violent, frightful power, garbed all in black with cape and red-lined helmet. When my family went on opening weekend and pondered dressing in character, they joked: all I needed was the helmet!!

In this last movie, battles jump all over the galaxy. Rey faces internal conflict—loss, fear, anger, realizing weakness isn't feeling such emotions. It's letting them control her. She lives a question we all face: what identity do we choose? What power fills us, flows through us? With compassion, she heals a monster-scary snake, when others would have pew-pew-pewed. After stabbing Kylo Ren with a light-sabre, she heals him, too. (What's that about loving enemies?) Leia uses the Force pervading everything to give her life to flow into, to transform him back into her son named Ben. Rey leaves Ben healed physically, reeling emotionally—trying to choose his way. She goes to face her grandfather, the ultimate evil dark-side-incarnate Emperor Palpatine, who killed her father and mother for protecting Rey.

Now, friends, this is all science-fiction fantasy, fanciful extreme. Still, the fact, the premise, the question is real. Out-pouring attention, even devotion, lamentation for cultural hero Kobe Bryant and others on a helicopter. On Super Bowl Sunday the strongest grid-iron champion will vanquish a final foe. This week, the campaigning starts to get counted. And every day we keep working with bosses and colleagues, living with spouses or relatives or neighbors who can be caring, humble,

collaborative at best or critical, cynical, controlling, combative at worst. And every day, all life in this world remains connected—rich and poor, red or blue, all races and religions, all God’s creatures and creation we sang in our first hymn, all our choices for good or ill—to bless and benefit or oppress and exploit. The teen, Eric, to whom we gave a ride from the Maple Street Y late Friday night to his home on the north side. Offices where we work, stores where we shop, our dining room where we eat with church friends and city neighbors alike. Streets of Kalamazoo and chambers of Capitol Hill. What kind of power fills everyone and flows everywhere?

Lightning pierces murky gloom as Rey enters Palpatine’s dark massive-spikey-throne room. Appalled, she knows she has his power: electricity from hands to torture and kill. He appears old, wilted, weakened; scorning as foolish anything but fear, violence. He goads and incites to fuel her hatred and anger, to have her slay him so his evil force passes fully into her. Ben arrives to help her. It doesn’t go well. Palpatine sucks their magically entwined power, reviving himself. He casts Ben over a cliff. Rey lies limp at Palpatine’s feet as he does his best Tesla Ball imitation crackling bolts into space, striking resistance craft above. Rey prays to the long line of Jedi gone before: Be with me! Voices echo, the Force flows into her, raising her, restoring her loving, peaceful heart more powerful than hate. She grasps and lights her two sabres, crosses them in front, repels Palpatine’s volts of fury. He slays himself, shatters his wicked world. She falls again, lifeless amid rubble. Ben, weak, wilted, pulls himself up over the ledge, stumbles over to Rey, cradles her and like his mother Leia pours his life into her, gives his life to heal her. The power of sacrificial love.

It’d be fun to chat with George Lucas, who created Star Wars. I don’t know of conscious attempt to echo Christian messaging. I doubt it. Still, maybe there is truth about love, the power of love pulsing in all humans, an impulse to give, connect,

create. A Force, if we like, that links all life. Transcends religions. In artistic expression like movies or books, in our relations, intentional or not. Truth we can also affirm as inspiration for living faith. What kind of power do we choose? What fills us, flows through us?

We proclaim Christ crucified, the message of the cross, the power and wisdom of God. Jesus, as Rachel Held Evans says, who came to live—to teach, to heal, to tell stories, turn over tables, touch and eat with people others didn't welcome or even see, to break bread, pour wine, wash feet, forgive, and show God's reign of grace and peace.<sup>1</sup> All that Jesus did on his journey to the cross. Which is why he was killed in that form of torture as bad as Palpatine's bolts. We proclaim how Jesus lived in the power of God, as the incarnate wisdom of God, for that's precisely what gives meaning to the Christ crucified.

To some it seems idle foolishness, Paul admits. He writes to people living in a city reborn just decades before by Romans to bolster commerce, repopulated by slaves and outcasts—"not powerful or of noble birth". Like any crossroads, maybe Kalamazoo in our way, one could find just about anything in Corinth, any popular wisdom bandied about. Probably the kind that also transcends all times and places, some variation of "take care of number one, at all costs to others." Get knowledge, absorb good ideas, polish rhetoric to accrue status and power, feel secure, worthy, life under control. Of course, knowledge and wisdom aren't bad. It's necessary. What's the motive and the means? Why publish or post or debate on Capitol Hill? Why pursue training, advancement, achievements? What's the purpose? What do we hope to accomplish? What do we value? How do we wield power we all have?

In our world of sports heroes, billionaires, political leaders, even meanies who sometimes seem to win, for some people the message of the cross, the power of sacrificial love can seem foolish. Still we trust. We give our hearts, Paul says, to the

promise that God's foolishness is wiser than popular assumptions, expectations, priorities. God's weakness in Jesus Christ proves stronger than a weight-lifting champion, trillions of dollars, or all military might. For the message of Jesus' journey to the cross and the resurrection is really about how it defines and guides our loving, peaceful hearts, inspires choices about what we're willing to live or die for, empowers the Divine Creative Force of Grace flowing through us, entwining, and bringing life right here and to all the world. What kind of power do we choose?

We talked again recently, as before, about life, work, goodness, difficulties. He's excited about a new theology book. He's earnest about faith. And he said, what really struck him and stuck was one time I said "I'm just here walking with people." No absolute truth claim. No expectation of perfection. I don't exactly recall that nugget, but sounds good—something I'd want to say! Walking with people through questions, through hopes and hesitation, joy and yearning, disappointments, fears, dreams. Come to share our journey together. Because that's Jesus—all he did began with who he was. Filled with compassion, humility, love, making God real—grace and forgiveness and hope—that's the human connections that guided his actions.

You see, friends, here's what I get from the Bible, from being with Jesus and people like you. Here's truth about how power works. If we choose to take life from others, at a deep pernicious, insidious level, that power passes into us, and like Palpatine takes our own life in the end. If we choose to give, to heal, to bless, then in the symbiotic force of sacrificial love, we are healed, blessed, graced to live abundantly. We don't have to be elected president or take on Emperor Palpatine. Our everyday choices matter and make as much difference as a mosquito-size rebel ship pew-pewing a huge menacing planet-annihilating star destroyer. When centered in peace we will act for peace. When centered in fear, hate, hurt, we will live that way, too—and it will hurt.

As Matthew tells the story, Jesus just started the journey with others, walking around Galilee. Like Moses went up a mountain and came down with the Law, Jesus says, this Blessed Wisdom is what we're about. If you walk with me, here's how we do it. Here's the kind of power we live on our journey beyond simplistic good and evil. If Master Yoda read scripture today, maybe it'd be like: "the poor in spirit blessed are; those who mourn and hunger and thirst for righteousness blessed are." You see, it's a state of being before anything we're doing. Orientation before action. Whatever our wealth, we know we need and depend on God. We lament realities of our world, yearning for the way God wants it. We identify personally and assess society by people oppressed and powerless, moved to offer unearned kindness, even if it seems weak failure to win. Centered in Divine Love and Holy Peace, we pray, as we'll gather at this table: be with me, God! {As Pat sang with our children:} "Send us love, send us power, send us grace." Friends, hear voices in a lineage of faithful people gone before. Join the song, singing out strong: Blest are they! Blest are we! Be filled with sacred strength and wisdom, that it may flow through our living faith, a force for good to bring fullness of peace that is abundant life to all.

In the last scene, Rey returns to where Star Wars began with Luke's story—his now abandoned home on Tattooine. An old woman meets her and asks who she is. For the first time, Rey chooses ... a full name: Rey Skywalker.

Who are we really? What do we choose? Dear friends, we know sometimes in life, Jesus can be hard to see, his kind of power might be hard to trust—the promise of resurrection when we face the cross. Come up here to get a closer look, if you want. Keep returning to this home, to this journey with friends, to this font where we are claimed, we are identified, we are defined by Holy Love. Keep choosing to be with God and be with one another. It's the Rise of Christwalkers!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 154-155.