

"Slumdog-Millionaire: The Little Movie that Could"

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Scripture: Matthew 13: 31-33

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kin-dom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kin-dom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it rose and was leavened."

Sermon: Six years ago, Larry began the tradition of focusing a June sermon on the Academy Award winning film of the year. A few months ago, he said to me, "Why don't you do the movie sermon this year? It would be a good change for both of us and probably for the congregation too!" I immediately downloaded all the reviews I could find of *Slumdog Millionaire*. With varying degrees of intensity, all of the reviewers either began or ended with the observation that the film was unrealistic. My favorite phrase was in New York magazine, where David Edelstein called the movie "*irresistibly preposterous.*"

I was an English major in college and I taught high school English for three years. While I subsequently changed professions, majoring in English has served me well the rest of my life. So drawing on the wisdom of my English professors, my first response to all those film critics is to remind them of Samuel Taylor Coleridge who in 1817 defined successful drama as a medium that created "*the willing suspension of disbelief.*" Coleridge suggested that if a writer could infuse a human interest and a semblance of truth into a fantastic story, the reader could and would suspend her judgment about whether the story was realistic or not.

Not only did I learn this principle as an English major, it also seems to be ingrained in who I am. I'm an easy target; I get drawn right into movies to the point that I sometimes forget all about reality. Watching the video of "*Fatal Attraction,*" the suspense at the end was so overwhelming and real to me that I actually had to go stand in the next room and ask Larry to tell me what was happening. Even worse was the time in the movie theater when I was watching "*The River Wild*" with Meryl Streep and Kevin Bacon. Toward the end of this amazing white water rafting trip, Kevin Bacon, who has held Streep and her family hostage with threats and abuse, drops his gun in the shallow water. Meryl Streep manages to reach down and grab the gun just as Bacon is coming to attack her. Without even knowing I was speaking, I yelled at the movie screen, "*Get the gun! Just get the gun!*" I am so susceptible to that willing suspension of disbelief that I have to remind myself regularly during a movie that this isn't real.

While I admit to being an extreme example, this willing suspension of disbelief is the crucial element in all fiction, in fairy tales, even in religious myth and many Biblical stories. We suspend our disbelief in exchange for the promise of stories of inspiration, metaphors of discovery, and also for sheer entertainment. So to all those movie reviewers, I say, whether it's *Slumdog Millionaire* or *Superman* or *Star Wars* or the *James Bond* or *When Harry Met Sally*, the question of realism is not, for me, what is important to ask. The important question for me is why *Slumdog Millionaire* has such appeal, especially this year?

Before I address that question, let me catch you up just a bit in case you haven't seen *Slumdog Millionaire*. Set in Mumbai, India, a city with seventeen million residents, the three central characters are orphaned children from the slums: Jamal, his older brother Salim, and their friend Latika, who are always literally or figuratively running for their lives. As the film begins, Jamal is a young man being violently interrogated by the police. Jamal is one question away from winning twenty million Rupees, the equivalent of one million American dollars, on the Indian game show of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. He has already successfully answered a question about the star in a 1973 Indian blockbuster film. Jamal has correctly answered what is written under the three lions on the national emblem of India, what the God Rama holds in her right hand, whose face is on an American \$100 bill, and who invented the revolver. The smarmy preening game show host can't believe that this impoverished uneducated young man can possibly have known all these answers without cheating, so he turns Jamal over to the police to find out the truth. And the movie takes off from there as we learn through flashbacks that the answer to each question comes from an experience in Jamal's life, a life that has been filled with extraordinary twists and turns, separations and reunions. Underscoring the entire film is the love story between Jamal and Latika and the more complicated love and rivalry between Jamal and his brother. The sheer energy of the film, the headlong, fluid momentum, and the beautiful cinematography are all seamless and dazzling.

So what does this movie say to us about faith, about life, about ourselves, about being human? First, I believe that *Slumdog Millionaire* was the movie of the year because this was a year when we needed a movie exactly like this. In the midst of all the crashing economic changes, as the New York Times reviewer Dargis says, "*We in the United States have now experienced a financial vulnerability that is long familiar to those in the developing world.*" (*M. Dargis, New York Times movie review, 5/27/09*) And, in the midst of our own disillusion, we search for hope, for good news, for the promise that things can get better, that things can work out. We feel a sense of kinship with Jamal's journey, through his setbacks and his ultimate victory over adversity.

Second, *Slumdog Millionaire* is a classic epic, a classic fairy tale, where the unrecognized and impoverished prince finds his way, through trial and tribulation, through obstacles and evil forces, to his moment when he proves through his quest who he really is, what he can really do, and the nobility of his character. It is a story of coming of age, a journey into adulthood. It is a story of finding true love. It is a story of finding your true self. It is the universal human experience of fighting for survival and for dignity. And, in the course of his incredible journey from childhood to adulthood, we see Jamal's inner reservoir of strength, his perseverance and perceptiveness, his loyalty and innate calmness, his street-smart resilience, all of which allow him to survive, to grow, and to triumph.

As brothers, Jamal and Salim are perfect shadows of one another and their fates are bound up in one another's strengths and weaknesses. Salim constantly takes advantage of Jamal, almost delivers him to be blinded, deceives him with Latika. Yet Jamal and Latika would not have survived without Salim's cunning and his ability in the flicker of a moment to kill those who would have killed them. And in the end, Salim saves both Latika and Jamal.

The film is ultimately a story of faith, like many stories of faith in our own Judeo-Christian tradition. Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Battle for God*, reminds us that the

ancients viewed the world simultaneously in two different ways. One way, she calls *logos*, the rational and practical side, the factual knowledge these people used in farming or building homes. On the other side, and at the same time, there is *mythos*, the stories that gave meaning to their lives. So the ancients knew that the story of Exodus was not to be taken only as factual, but also as *mythos*, a tale whose significance was not about each small detail but instead about the meaning of freedom from oppression.

"*Fundamentalism*", Armstrong says, "*is the attempt to apply logos to mythos, to turn faith into rigid fact.*" Instead, faith is the ability to believe in what cannot be seen, what cannot be quantified, predicted or guaranteed.

Slumdog Millionaire begins with a question, typed onto the screen: Jamal is one answer away from winning twenty million Rupees. How did he do it? a) he cheated; b) he's lucky; c) he's a genius; d) it is destiny. Jamal did not cheat; nothing in his life thus far seems very lucky; he's certainly not a genius; so we are left with the answer that this must be Jamal's destiny. Yet the movie points the way to a very different destiny, for it is not the money that Jamal pursues. We see Jamal in contrast to his brother Salim, who in his final scene is sitting in a bathtub full of money. Jamal instead keeps on playing the Millionaire game, giving up the certainty of what for him would be huge amounts of money that he has already won. He keeps on going from question to question, because he believes that the longer his face is on television, the more likely it is that Latika, who seems lost to him now, the more likely it is that she will see him and that he will be able to reach her.

The last question Jamal is given is one he doesn't know the answer to. Ironically, it is the same question he was asked as rambunctious boy in elementary school. "*In the Alexander Dumas' novel, who is the third musketeer?*" As children, Jamal and Salim encounter the also orphaned and frightened Latika when they are fleeing the rioters who had killed their Muslim mother. Jamal pulls Latika into their primitive shelter out of the monsoon rain. Jamal says, "*She can be the third musketeer.*" Salim says, "*We don't even know who that is.*"

So when that question about the third musketeer is put to Jamal for the final prize of one million dollars, Jamal phones a friend, the only phone number he knows, his brother's. Latika picks up the phone, but she doesn't know the answer either. So Jamal guesses; he's right; he wins; all Mumbai rejoices with him, the newly crowned prince. He then goes to find his princess, who has escaped from the tower where she has been held captive for so long, to find her at the train station where long ago they had promised to meet one another some day.

The final words in the movie are spoken by Latika who says to Jamal, "*This, our love, this is our destiny.*" And down at the far left on the bottom of the screen in small print are the words, "*It is written.*" While the Indian culture has a broadly shared notion of one's life being written or in the hands of destiny, we in the West have an ambiguous relationship with this notion. My friend, Rabbi Michael Joseph said once that while he believes God is not behind the scenes of our lives, controlling everything that happens to us, he also believes that God calls us to create stories that give meaning to our life journeys, stories that reveal then our destiny.

Latika is Jamal's destiny: she is the embodiment of his devotion; she is the feminine compliment of his masculine psyche that completes his humanity. In the beautiful shot of her standing at the train station, I also believe that Latika becomes the recovery of Jamal's

mother's beauty and grace. *"Destiny – that sense of it is written - is not the same as passive acceptance. Jamal's sense of destiny energizes him and his devotion to Latika provides him with the North Star of his life" - the grounding of his faith – "that enables him to navigate through the turbulent waters of this world."* (Religion Dispatches, Paul Courtright, professor of Religious Studies, Emory University, May 27, 2009).

Paul Tillich once said that *"Faith turns fate into destiny."* It is the faith at the heart of Jama's quest that touches our faith, that reaches our hearts and souls, calling us willingly to suspend all disbelief in this moment and believe instead in dreams come true.

"The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but that tiny seed of faith, when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with flour until all of it rose."

So is faith, so is love, so is grace.

Hindu chant: Om Sri Ram Jay Ram Jay Jay Ram

Prayer - We open our hearts in this moment to the voice of the story-teller God deep within us, and for stories that we learned and treasured, we pray.

We remember the bedtime stories our parents told and read to us – and the comfort those stories brought us of reassurance in little friendly animals and what is right and wrong.

We remember the fairy tales of growing up, of beanstalks and bears, princes and princesses, and dreams come true.

We remember legends and sagas, Bible epics and stories of faith, with surprises and hopes that are planted deep in our souls.

And we pray today for the stories of our own lives, for the loved ones who inhabit them, for the demons we address each day, and for the ways, O God, you live in our stories. We pray in this moment for a dream yet to live, for a transformation yet to happen, and a rainbow promise yet to come, not only for us, but for all who struggle in the chaos of this world.

O God of the stories of our lives, let today's *Alleluia* be the reminder that you live in us in hope. Amen. Blessed be.

"Alleluia"

Responsive Benediction - "Fearful Joy" by Rabindranath Tagore

Leader – Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?

People - All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind. No power can hold them back; they rush on.

Leader - Keeping step with that rapid music, the seasons come dancing and pass away.

People - Colors, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment. Amen.