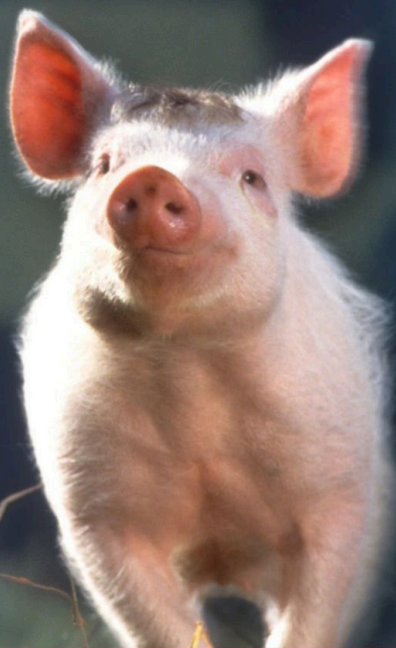




*Faith*  
**AND FILM**

**BABE**



**EXPLORE IN WORSHIP: SUNDAY, JUNE 15th | PREACHED BY REV. T. J. FITZGERALD**

For the last week there's been this refrain in my head, and what better place than to get it out of my head than here. I have some stuff written, but this is what has been on my mind. Some of you might know it. << It is time for us all to decide who we are. Do we fight for the right to a night at the opera now. Have you asked of yourselves what's the price you might pay or is it simply a game for rich young boys to play. The color of the world is changing day by day >>

You want to do it? << Red >> No, I'm just kidding. We won't do the whole song. But there's been something in that phrase of deciding who we are. Being faced with so much going on around us that it's not surprising we'd want to escape to some idyllic, beautiful, nameless, timeless farm somewhere like in our movie this week, in Babe. I saw Babe for the first time when it was in theaters 30 years ago. Oh man, you're killing me, smalls. I know. It's tough. It's tough. I thought it was charming, and it still is, I know. But when I watched it again recently with eyes and a heart 30 years older, I realized its charm was entirely different now than it was. They've introduced a lot of people to the realities of a farm and what happens to the animals who are raised on them. Hierarchy comes into play pretty quick in the movie. Humans on top. The animals who are allowed in the house, the dogs and the cats, right below them, near the top of the hierarchy because they are companions, they're useful.

Then you have the animals below that who might live out their days so long as they have treasure to give. Like sheep have their wool, or chickens their eggs, or cows their milk. And then there are animals like ducks and pigs who seem to be more or less waiting around to become food. It's a fine children's movie, really, if I ever did see one. Now, none of this should surprise us one bit because the writer and producer, as one of our viewers pointed out on Wednesday, is the mad genius George Miller, the creator of the post-apocalyptic Mad Max movies. Just to give you an idea of what we're cooking with.

Actually, he got to know pigs when he was on the set of Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome. The great Tina Turner vehicle. I know there were other people in it too.

I don't recall who else when Tina Turner is on the screen. But it wasn't just George Miller, it wasn't just Tina Turner. But George Miller was spending a lot of nights on the phone with his friend, Stanley Kubrick, and trying to work through the ways to make the animals talk because he got it in his head he's got to do this. So they went to Jim Henson whose creature group got together and created all of these effects to let these animals work. I mean, that's entertainment friends. They shepherded this movie to theaters and into our hearts. And the shepherd that's in the movie, James Cromwell, he watches... Yeah, that's right. He watches his animals closely. He notices the small things about them. Like the way Babe, a piglet that he'd won in a weight-guessing contest, who's being raised by his adoptive moms, a border collie and a sheep. That's right, Babe had two mommies and turned out just fine. Yep, that's right.

Maybe a little better than some of us, just saying. He noticed how Babe was grouping chickens by color and he got an idea. Because it's a George Miller movie good ideas just kind of fall out of the sky, they don't arise. And the narrator drops this piece of knowledge right in the middle of the narrative. "Little ideas that tickle and nag and won't go away should never be ignored for in them lie the seeds of destiny." Now, Marilyn Nelson, who grew up traveling the world with her dad, was in the military. The author of our first reading. She explained in an article that she'd had discussions with many Hebrew scholars when she was working on her translation about the full meaning and connotation, the connotation, of some of the images that she uses that might be new and surprising, the shimmering light and bringing me back to myself, but none of them are more true than this text that she brings us and this word that concerns us today.

She uses the word shepherd, but in Hebrew the word is ra'ah. Which means to pasture or to tend, mostly. To be a shepherdess or a shepherd because it does not have a gender, much as we may read translations that do. And it's the same word that's actually used to describe Rachel in chapter 29 of Genesis. And the word isn't even a noun, it's a verb. To be exact it is a transitive verb, for the five people here who care about that. And for the two people that care about what I'm about to say, it also is a contronym. Do you know what a contronym is? Ah, Jenny knows. Contronym is a word that has opposite definitions for the same word like raise. Anyway, we won't get into it all. But the two meanings that are opposite for ra'ah, for the Hebrew, are both to rule and also to put out to pasture.

Now to rule or put out to pasture, I might be alone in wondering whether somewhere along the line a grievous mistranslation of that word was applied to the leaders that we see among us today. Could be. Because I think we can agree no matter which side of the aisle we're on or where we are in the world, that there are some rulers of nations who ought to be put out to pasture before their patriarchal insanity is the death of us all. Yeah. They can't hear you here. They are not watching, I promise. They are not watching us. We all think they're watching, but they're not watching.

There's got to be another way, friends. And the brilliant poet Li-Young Lee shows us one of those other ways we can feel the power of what true masculine love is like in his words. And on this day for

dads, Li-Young Lee echoes the origins of Father's Day. Which began in Spokane, Washington. Where do you think? In a church, because that's where good things start. After a daughter was in a service where the preacher was preaching about Ann Jarvis. Where Beth brought the house down with a sermon about Ann Jarvis, thank you very much, earlier this year. And just like in our tradition, it was that creation of Mother's Day and Ann Jarvis that Sonora Smart Dodd heard and went up because she wanted to honor her father, William Jackson Smart, with something like Father's Day and told the pastor so.

Now her dad, William Jackson Smart, grew up in Arkansas. Because Arkansas switched sides during the Civil War, her father actually fought for the Confederacy and then fought for the Union. Now, after that, he lost two wives in close succession and so raised his daughters as a single dad. So Sonora Dodd worked to make this one day to honor the sacrifices her dad made to raise her and her siblings. Now it lost steam a little bit and she went off and got a graduate degree, like everyone. It's fun to do. And when she came back to Spokane, realized it hadn't really gotten anywhere. So she got some help from, who do you think, some retailers and marketers who thought it was a pretty good idea.

So they got behind it and helped create what we have today with a little bit of help from our friends', capitalism. So now we have Father's Day too. But for all those who do father in this world, whatever that looks like for you. With that gentle support and that solid love that we each deserve, we have this beautiful image from Li-Young Lee. The poet doesn't even remember the story that his dad told. We don't remember what they said, we remember how they made us feel. He remembers the gift of gentle tenderness in healing his wound, in the exact moment he shares that same gentle tenderness with his wife who has the same wound. He remembers being taught how to tend the wound. How to be a tender, verb, how to love and be loved in return.

Now back on the farm, our animals, they talk a lot. They put a lot of work into making these animals talk, so they do it. And almost all they talk about is the job they have, the role that they play in the farm, and whether it is one that will let them live out their days or not. Babe learns from a house cat, conniving little house cat, that he is a food animal and that he's meant to be slaughtered and that everyone has a role to play and that's just his. Now, the filmmakers and the author of the underlying book use these adorable animals to pose one of the hardest ethical questions we face in the world. Why does one life matter to more of us than another?

Armed conflicts, ethnic cleansings, assassinations taking place before the eyes of the world are forcing this question into minds everywhere. Can the accident of where we're born really still spell doom in this life, in this world with so many riches? Does being a member of a group disfavored by power risk our lives and our freedom still, when we have learned the lessons of so many ancestors and seen how that plays out. And do we have to be simply resigned to it? I don't think so. Now, back on the farm, Dave and Ferdinand, the anorexic duck. His words, not mine, it's his journey. He shared that with us. These two food animals, Ferdinand has learned to crow like a rooster so he can find usefulness on the farm and he's stolen an alarm clock. We love Ferdinand. Now, these two food animals, they break the yoke of the destinies they were given. Which was to die in the slaughterhouse simply by the virtue of their birth.

To do this, they worked all their damn lives to prove, to connive that they are good enough to live, that they could serve a power greater than them on that farm. That's one way to look at it. But I think the filmmakers were saying something a little more expansive. I believe they're saying that a divine order, and by order I don't mean something out there, I mean something more that holds us all as parts of our creation. That divine order rewards those, celebrates those who break from shackles of conformity, who stop bowing and bending to worldly power by listening to that still small voice. Little ideas that tickle and nag and won't go away should never be ignored for in them lie the seeds of destiny.

Does anyone else have some nagging little ideas they've been kicking around lately? Anything? Should I think about bangs? I think it might be my destiny. I don't know. Or why do you park in a driveway and drive in a parkway? I mean, seriously. Could an authoritarian world order built on hateful and toxic masculinity be the death of us all? But, T.J, wasn't this movie about a happy pig? Come on. The guys, gals, everyone, authoritarianism is out in the streets, Dallas. Southern Baptists were in town this week. I don't want to give them much of a platform, again they're not watching, but they voted to try to abolish marriage equality here in Dallas this week. There was what some would call a military parade in the streets of the nation's capitol on the birthday of an authoritarian regime leader where squeaky tanks and a few dozen people adorned the nation's capitol. Much to my delight, I mean that was painful. But people are being disappeared. Senators shackled for asking questions, and assassins targeting lawmakers painted by others in power as enemies of the state.

And it's here too. We got some mail ourselves this week, didn't we, Beth? Yes, we did. Suggesting that our wayside pulpit, the sign you see out the front that says "No human being is illegal," is an incitement to violence and we should, "Reverse course." My pearls. Sorry. If you've been waiting to act until authoritarianism is at your door, it is at your door, friends. So dear Southern Baptist, I hope you made it to Dallas Pride while you were here where dozens of our people and our minister were having a gay old time. We will not reverse course. No.

And dear authoritarian wannabe, downtown Dallas and all the Metroplex, in case you didn't notice, and cities around the nation swelled with millions of people, some of them sitting right here who called out cruelty and called for a just and equal treatment for all. We will not reverse course. And dear friendly neighbor who believes a person is illegal if they overstay a visa, I apologize for not getting back to you this week. I had a lot going on. I've been so worried about fascists and other streets I didn't realize there was one on mine, but I've got a draft started that I'd like some help with. I'm just kicking it around. One of those ideas, we can work it out together. Workshop.

Dear neighbor, we thank you for your concern for our church and for this neighborhood. We have always defended staunchly the civil liberties of our neighbors and we always will. We can only pray they will do the same for us. We see this as part of loving our neighbor. Disagreement is also part of loving our neighbor. We believe that though a person's actions, like overstaying a visa, may be deemed illegal by a court of competent jurisdiction, there is no doctrine in law and in our faith to name a person themselves as the embodiment of a crime and hence illegal.

And any belief that does is a footfall on the loathsome path tyrants long for us to tread until dehumanization pervades society on all levels. I am not done. I am not done. As people of faith, we will have no part in bargaining away to the cheap specters of violence and intimidation. The certainty of those liberties are forbearers in faith and freedom fought and died to establish in this nation for all. No patriot should, it is you, sir, who should reverse course. Yeah. PS, we are having a picnic for homecoming. Please bring potato salad. We'll welcome you. I think Sharon Thompson wrote that last part there.

Now back on the farm, Babe has fallen ill. He's sick. He is cold. He is shivering. He's close to death actually, the veterinarian says. The shepherd tries to heal him, like our poet's father did, with tender affection and care. And when nothing works, when the shepherd is desperate for Babe to live, what does he do? He sings and dances. Just my kind of movie. Just when it's getting rough, singing. The shepherd, this guide, this tender is hoping now, is literally hopping now for life, is doing all he can to sing into this faltering creation one more day of life, one more day he could make last forever.

And it works. Babe is revived and is able to take part in the finale of the movie. Now in a scene, that still moves me today... Now, who's seen the movie? A lot of us. Okay. I'm sorry for those of you who haven't, you had 30 years and you didn't. So in a scene that still moves me today, the shepherd enters the arena after being told how ashamed he should be of his pig. Boo. Yeah. He and the pig are there together though, no shame. And the people, those awful, awful people who bought a whole ticket to a sheepdog competition, sold the place out. What do they do? They bellow and they ridicule and scorn that Shepherd and his pig who dare not know their place. Boo.

So with a nod and with a few words, Babe does, with love and kindness, what generations of dogs before him had done with aggression and intimidation. And for his work, receives a perfect score. And those same awful sheep herding fans, who were just being complete jerks, change sides. They cheer with a shout loud enough to open the skies and the angelic light comes down and backlights James Cromwell who looks down at his creation and says, what? So the moral here is clear. I'm looking at my vegans over here. The moral here is clear. Just be a total standout. Transcend your fate with singular rare gifts in ways that are applauded, televised. Receive a perfect score. Do it all as a child prodigy. Then maybe you can also be told, eh, that'll do. That's all right.

No, no, that's not it, Reverend T.J. The guiding force of life that is shepherding us all, discloses to us over and over, everywhere we look in our own lives, in movies, especially in the lives of those we love and watch grow, how much that force that connects us all celebrates when we get free of dreadful fates wanting to be determined and imposed by others upon us. It celebrates, it rejoices when that happens. The world, the nation, the neighborhood, the church, the family, and the heart we are trying to build in each of you when we are the most celebratory is when we are more than what is expected of us. When we are the full expression of our being. Or as the poet teaches, when you give me back myself. Point me to the road toward justice, one of your sacred names. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death where threats may seem on the streets, in our towns, we do not bow to kings. We do not bend to the patriarchy.

That's right. We stretch the bow of human kindness across our destiny until the arc of the moral universe bends to toward justice, if it is the last thing we do. We do not stop working to help those in bondage until those yearning for liberty are free, if it is the last thing we do. We take that road to justice, come what may. We trod the path to peace, come what may. We make channels for the streams of love and celebrate with every day we have the ways the children of this earth, the ways we all recreate the true message of humanity and hear and feel that they are loved, that they are enough, that they are not alone. If it's the last thing we do, that is what a faith that fathers, that parents, that guides with justice and equity, with love, without shame, with compassion and strength and dignity will do until the day it can't anymore.

Until, at last, we all are there with the skies opening and James Cromwell telling us, like an echo of the love that birthed us all that birthed each of us, "That'll do. That'll do." May it ever be so. Bless it be and amen.