

THE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS

Earlier this year on April 21st, a professionally prepared major motion picture, “The Promise,” had its long-awaited public debut and we, as part of the Armenian Community, felt a number of different, sometimes conflicting emotions about it. Of course we were filled with pride and overjoyed that finally, after more than a hundred years, the story of the Armenian Genocide was being brought to the Big Screen and, as a result, to the attention of the world at large.

When we watched the movie, we were awed by the cinematography; the sound effects and the skill of the director and actors in making the film come to life. Of course, not everyone liked or appreciated the fact that the focal point of the film revolved around three people involved in a love triangle, and that the main character of the film, while betrothed to one woman, falls in love with another; that’s so...unArmenian!

Yet unfortunately, if you understand how Hollywood and the film industry work, then you know that there has to be a “hook” to get the viewer’s attention; a plot that is at the center of the film around which the actual real or fictionalized main theme is presented. Either way, whether people agreed with that method or not, I am sure everyone was deeply moved, by the realistic portrayal of scenes and events which, up until now we had only seen in timeworn photos or read about in dog-eared books. The film really brought those events to life.

One of the questions I asked myself before the film was released – and now that I think of it, really piqued my curiosity and heightened my desire to view the film –was the name: the Promise. Why had they chosen this particular name? After seeing the film, one might obviously conclude that it reflects the main character, Mikael’s determination to marry the young girl Maral to whom he was promised, even though he loved another. But the film is fraught with many, many other examples of not reneging on one’s promises and remaining faithfully committed to one’s word. Take for instance, the story of Mikael’s young Turkish friend, who never abandoned him, even though they were on opposite sides of what was taking place. It was his loyalty to the promise of their friendship that finally got Emre executed. Or take the young missionary, Pastor Merrill. Remaining loyal to the promise of his vows and the faith which molded him, he was able, even at great risk to his own life, to save, the lives of a great many Armenian adults and children. Even the fact that Mikael raised his father’s cousin’s daughter Yeva shows a deep commitment and loyalty to family. While there are many other examples of this throughout the film, even the film itself, somehow fulfills a promise that Hollywood had made to the Armenians decades ago, when Franz Werfel’s famous novel, *The Forty Days Of Musa Dagh* was going to be made into a major motion picture. At the time, however, the United States Government, bowing to pressure from its ally Turkey, barred the film from being made. Sound familiar?

Inherent in the concept of “promise” is the idea of faithfulness and loyalty. There is no doubt that as a people, Armenians are taught to be loyal and to keep the promises they make to others. They are also taught to appreciate those same qualities in others, and therefore, by extension, to be grateful for what others have done for them.

The very first promise that came to Armenia was the promise of the Good News that was brought there by two of Christ’s Apostles, Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, who set up a clandestine, yet powerful church which grew over the subsequent three centuries providing fertile ground for the Christian faith to eventually take root, prevail and became the official religion of the nation through the efforts of St. Gregory. Amazingly, once the Armenian nation became Christian, centuries of persecution, war, even genocide and other tragic circumstances could not force them to deny or abandon their faith in their Savior, whom they had promised to serve individually and as a nation and. In the mid fifth century, the response of the Armenians to the Persian king who was trying to force them to renounce their Christian faith and deny their promise, as recorded by the 5th Century Armenian historian Yeghishe was: “From this faith, no one can shake us, neither angels nor men, neither sword nor fire, nor water, nor any or all other horrid tortures,” echoing St. Paul’s iconic words: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:35)

Come to think of it, that same love of Christ was the very first promise that was given to us. Not just to Armenians, but to all people everywhere. It is the promise of Salvation and eternal life, which is embodied in this special season, when we are celebrating the birth of the Savior.

WHO MADE THOSE PROMISES AND HOW WERE THEY TRANSMITTED?

They were made by God and revealed to us through the Holy Scripture and as I said, embodied in the actions and life of Christ. The promises are an inherent part of Jesus' nativity, both in the narrative itself and the prophecies which foretell it.

WHAT ARE THOSE PROMISES?

That God Is With Us Always: In Matthew's Gospel we read: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" (Matt. 1:23)

That Jesus Is God's Son: Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children." (Gal. 4:4-5)

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 1:20)

That He Is Our Savior and Redeemer: The angel said of Mary and her impending childbirth: She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21) The name Jesus, in Hebrew means "God saves".

The Archangel told the shepherds: "Do not be afraid; [Angels often began their message with those words, so I guess it was kind of intimidating to come face to face with an angel] for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah [Christ], the Lord.

That He Rules the Whole World: Isaiah wrote this prophecy 800 years before Jesus' birth: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

Isaiah also wrote: "...our Lord Jesus Christ...is the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords...to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (Isaiah 6: 14-16)

And in the Book of Revelations we read a prophesy, which is yet to come to pass: St. John writes: "And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'" (Rev: 11:15)

WHY DID GOD MAKE THESE PROMISES?

As we later find out in the film, part of the promise is "that we will survive;" survive as individuals and as a people. And that promise that Mikael, Maral, Ana, Marta, Yeva and the rest comforted each other with, came to pass. The promise of survival was fulfilled and indeed, we have survived those days of death and hardship.

BUT GOD WANTS MORE FOR US THAN MERE SURVIVAL!

He Wants Us to Have Abundant Life: Jesus told His followers: "I came that they might have abundant life." (John 10:10)

He Wants Us to Be Happy: Jesus says: "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete." (John 16:24)

He Wants Us To Live Forever: Jesus also tells us: "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:40)

God gave us these promises that we might have the opportunity to receive eternal life through faith. May this season of Christmas and the celebration of the birth of your Savior inspire you to put your faith and trust into God's ineffable Promise of salvation and everlasting joy in His Kingdom.

Merry Christmas!

Rev. Archpriest Antranig Baljian
Christmas, 2017/18