

## **James Bond and Meaning in Life**

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Christmas Eve at Zion was a wonderful celebration of color and warmth, with lots of singing all the familiar carols, with friends and family joining in the traditions that make the season what it is and should be. Christmas morning at the Sherwindts was spent opening presents with Austin and Anna at home, and Lily and Izabel chasing each other with the latest squeaky toy. Anna usually spends her time trying to lift me from the shameful depths of my out-of-fashion oblivion, while Austin understands how much I like to torture him by talking about the religious significance of ordinary stuff in everyday life. So, he bought me a book entitled *James Bond and Philosophy: Questions are Forever*, a book of essays by a bunch of authors who love turning mindless entertainment into real education. There are essays on existentialism, the social phenomenology of Heidegger and Husserl, a little bit of Nietzsche and the nihilism he inspired, and one essay that picked up on what I preached about on Christmas Eve, *James Bond and our Hope for Meaning in Life*. No, I didn't preach on James Bond, but I did talk about how the truths we celebrate with the stories of Jesus' birth and the mystery of the Incarnation raise issues that have to do with meaning and truth.

“The challenges to sustaining our sense of meaning and value and truth are serious and daunting, especially in a world that is really good at questioning our faith in anybody or anything, with governors selling senate seats, attorneys general abusing their power, investment advisors lining their pockets with high risk adventures leading to financial oblivion.... But there in Bethlehem of Judea, in the towns of Galilee, there walked a man who stirred the imagination of the hopeful. People sensed something in Jesus that confirmed their belief in God's presence, strengthening their trust in God's goodness, opening their eyes and their hearts and their lives to a love that overwhelmed them with its assurance that God is with us, that life has meaning, and that history is leading toward the fulfillment of all that God has promised.” Those were some of the words I used to describe the mystery of Incarnation and the assurance of meaning in life on Christmas Eve. I've got a copy of the Christmas Eve message in the Narthex; but this morning I'd like to talk about James Bond, pop culture, and the enduring truths that are given with our faith in Jesus the Christ and our Savior.

Now, don't get me wrong. The authors of these articles know that they're talking about James Bond and not Mahatma Gandhi. They know that they're having fun with pop culture; but still, the icons of pop culture are illuminating, like revelation, in their own way. When it comes to James Bond, its television spin-off with Don Adams in *Get Smart* revealed some of the obvious more obviously when their arch-enemies were identified as agents of CHAOS, which, for them, was spelled with a “K”, standing for **Killing And Other Stuff**; but for the rest of us, chaos is the organized force preexisting creation that

resists the order God's will sought to restore with Christ's love. So in *James Bond and Philosophy: Questions Are Forever*, we are introduced to what it means to pursue this quest of looking for God's order in the modern world, where *modernity* as philosophers call it, is to live with eyes wide open to seeing the limitations of conventional morality in a world where agents of terror live without guilt or shame because they expose and exploit the gap between the world as we'd like it to be and the world as it is, between the world as we wish it and one where knowledge isn't guided by truth, where power functions independently or the authority that legitimizes it. It is as if James Bond is helping us to navigate these waters of *modernity*. In fact, there is a great quote on page 40 in *Questions Are Forever* that describes the challenges, or plight, of modernity perfectly. Modernity "is the consciousness that what once was presumed to be present is now seen as missing, experienced as a series of felt absences, the gap between what we know is not and what we desire to be: knowledge without truth, power without authority, politics without virtue, existence without purpose, history without meaning."

We can't live like Bond, but we need Bond to be successful to keep our world safe from doubts that attack the foundations of our belief in meaning in life, purpose in creation, and truth in a world awash in every kind of relativism. "Come on, Pastor! Bond movies are escape thrillers, for entertainment only." Sure, I know that. But these thrillers are popular precisely because they play with themes of pop culture that question the conventional, and Bond is a pop culture savior, of sorts, who keeps us safe and shows us how to live in this world that pop culture celebrates. With my message on Christmas Eve, I suggested that these were precisely the kind of points that the doctrine of Incarnation has traditionally addressed. God became human to show us the way to safety and security. [Recall my reference on Christmas Eve to Paul Harvey's story about sparrows and the farmer's barn.] God became human to show us how to live, to show us the way that leads from receiving God's love to sharing it with others. [Recall my reference to Emma Lent's poem *Unawares*.]

Our Gospel text this morning places these themes of expectation and hope within a narrative that is very Bond-like. Luke's Gospel doesn't shy away from expressing the political context of God's hope for the coming of Christ. We think of the Magnificat as a beautiful liturgical solo and Simeon's song as a post-communion canticle; but the language of these passages talks of military victories and political vindication. In today's Gospel text, Jesus is a prince-like figure who is going to shake up the political world of power brokers. There's some of that in verse 34. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel..." There's great drama, and lots of violence, with the rise and fall of many struggling to maintain and assume power in a place that holds center stage in a strip of geography where reigns are established and fortunes sustained or squandered. Jesus will be that figure that exposes the inner workings of our world and the people who would rule it. Empires will rise and fall. The inner thoughts and outer wealth of many will be exposed, revealed. We are told that Mary's very soul will be pierced, because of what will be her *view to a kill*, and not *for her eyes only*.

Luke's Gospel does not shy away from the nuts-and-bolts of what it means to be a savior in a world that is struggling to find its way to peace and freedom. As we read through its narrative, Jesus shows us that the world's tools of violence and deception are not going to make our world safe or secure or free. What I am saying is that like Bond, Jesus is a savior. But unlike Bond, fighting evil on evil's terms is not the path to securing salvation. Jesus chooses not to be good at inflicting hurt (as is Bond), but at absorbing it through his suffering on the cross. He chooses not to be good at manipulating truth like Pilate or Herod; rather, he serves the truth by standing its ground and suffering the consequences. James Bond and Jesus are caught in the middle of an historic, in fact, a cosmic struggle between the chaos we fear and the order we need, the peace we desire, and the security we seek, where good and evil are at war and our world, our very lives, lie in the balance. James Bond is one kind of savior and Jesus is another.

James Bond has a license to do what we cannot so that we can be free to perpetuate the illusions of living in peace and security. Jesus, in contrast, will not buy into the premise that *a license to kill* will bring us closer to the peace we seek, or that skills at deception will cause truth to triumph. It is interesting to observe that James Bond is unstained by the evil he employs to defeat evil's aims; and this is one of the great myths of modernity and nihilism, namely, that there is no connection between what we do and who we are, between the deeds we do and the ends we seek. We'd like to think so, but that's not the truth of God's word, or our lives. In other words, Jesus won't humor us with escape entertainment and box office success. We'd like to think that he could have chosen that route if he wanted. That's the myth we seem to be holding on to in verse 3 of that familiar hymn, *I Wonder As I Wander*. "If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing, a star in the sky or a bird on the wing, or all of God's angels in heaven to sing, he surely could have had it, 'cause he was the King."

If Jesus wanted to be James Bond, he could have, and he would have sold more tickets too! But would he? Entertainment sells, to be sure, but truth endures. We would like Jesus to become the myths we create to keep us safe without changing our world or our lives. But that's not what God does in sending us Jesus as our Savior. With Jesus, God shows us the way for dealing with violence, not embracing it or perfecting it, but suffering it. With Jesus, God shows us the way for dealing with sin, not joining in it or obliterating it, but forgiving it. And so it goes with peace, and justice, and wealth, and leadership. Jesus creates a community of followers committed to organizing their lives, individually and together, in a way that proclaims that hope is real, change is possible, and love is the way. With the birth of Jesus and the Gospels to tell his story, we have been given a Savior intent on changing the course of human history with a story that changes lives still today by exposing the myths we create and sticking to the storyline that God has called the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, the truth as seen in Jesus' life, seen even more clearly in His death, and seen in the way that we try to live, seen in the way that we are learning to live it ... in Jesus' name. Amen.