

## “Joker”

*God at the Movies, 2020*

### [Bumper Video 2:24]

I’ve got to be honest with you, I lost track of my dates. Up until two weeks, ago, I thought I had one more week before we started *God at the Movies*. I thought this week we would still be in the Psalms. So when I figured it out, I had two Psalms left in the chamber and only one week in which to preach. So I wound up skipping Psalm 88 about depression. It’s a Psalm that closes with the words, **(Ps. 88:18)** “*You have taken from me friend and neighbor— darkness is my closest friend.*” It’s one of two Psalms in the Bible that ends with no stated hope. I was really looking forward to talking about it. But...in reality, I kind of am talking about it today! Because that could be Author Fleck’s life verse as he devolves into that gruesome villain Joker. Darkness is my only friend!

This is a *dark* movie. It’s set in 1981, released in 2019, but make no mistake, this is a quintessential 2020 movie! Dark times indeed. But in the beginning, Warner Brothers studios almost didn’t make it. It took them years to finally green light a film this dark about one of their “key properties.” One early email from corporate reminded director, Todd Phillips, “You know we sell Joker pajamas to kids at Target, right?”

Money talks doesn’t it? Well, in the end *Joker* shouted! Made for a “mere” \$55 million budget – which is a fraction of the typical budget for a comic book-based film – it became the first R-rated movie in history to make \$1 billion worldwide. And what makes that haul even more impressive is that *Joker* was never even released in the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest film market in the world. China said it was too subversive to authority. Which, just by the way, if you don’t like the idea of protestors taking to the streets, try living in a country where they *can’t*. Just saying.

But in addition to being received by the masses, it was adored by the critics as well – it’s pretty rare when the reviews and the revenue line up for a film. The premiere of *Joker* at the Venice Film Festival drew an eight-minute standing ovation. The film was nominated for 11 Academy Awards, the most of any film in the 2020 Oscars for the year. It won two; Best Score, which in a rarity was composed *before* the movie was filmed. And of course Best Actor for Joaquin Phoenix, who lost 52 pounds to play the role – and possibly lost his mind as well...actually, no, he says it wasn’t a dark experience at all to create this character. He says in one interview, “It was his struggle to find happiness and to feel connected and to feel warmth and love that I connected with.” That sounds right.

But before any of the awards or the box office gold, I loved this movie. I really did. Saw it on opening night. Full disclosure, I have been a huge Batman fan since I was 6 and I love everything about that world, so I was really anticipating this film. And I was not disappointed. In fact, I took my kids back to see it a few days later. And if that makes you think, “What kind of father *are* you?” The answer is “I’m a good father” because the whole drive home we talked about what this film meant and how it related to our world and how the truths of God could be the remedy for it. In fact, I am indebted to my children for some of the ideas that eventually made it into this sermon.

This is a dark movie, but truth is often dark. A lot has been made of how violent this film is, but I’ll tell you this, your typical Marvel Comic movie has *way* more violent acts, but this *feels* different doesn’t it? That’s frightening, but it’s only because the violence rings true. Truth is often dark. And I’m not interested in protecting my children – or my congregation for that matter - from dark truths. I don’t want you to be surprised when you discover darkness in the world. And I don’t want you to be overwhelmed by it.

The Bible depicts darkness, but in the end it shines light. And that is, of course, what I hope to do today. Speaking of darkness to light, this film reminds me of the creation account in Genesis 1 – but in reverse! Genesis depicts the universe in darkness – “formless

and void” – chaos. But slowly, systematically, creation progresses from chaos to order. See you don’t just jump from darkness to...Adam and Eve! No, you need to orderly create the dynamics that sustain life – land, air, water, vegetation...and eventually humanity.

Well, like I said, *Joker* tells that story in *reverse*. Arthur Fleck begins with humanity, but as all the events that sustain a healthy life are systematically stripped away, he descends into chaos. The film begins in warm daylight and ends in fearful night. I want to play you a clip – and it’s a bit longer than I would normally show – but I want us to see how it’s all set up. Arthur has a job as a clown – clowns bring happiness into the world.

We first see him actually as his reflection in a mirror – in fact, that’s a recurring theme in the movie, reflection. I think it’s meant to get us to take a good look at our own reflection – individual and societal. At any rate, Arthur is putting on his clown makeup – he is transforming – and notice his exaggerated facial expressions. He mimics the two masks of the theatre, joy and sadness, as if to say, “Is life a tragedy or a comedy?” That’s the question, isn’t it? Well, here’s the clip, and I intentionally start before the action, because I want you to pay attention to the *very first* words we hear in the film...[**Opening Scene 3:35**]

By the way, did you catch the opening line? “The news never ends”. Boy, ain’t that the truth? In fictional Gotham city, the garbage strike serves as a backdrop to the societal malaise, you feel like the city is a powder keg, ready to blow. But not Arthur Fleck, at least not in the beginning. Now, I said the film starts in light – and somebody pointed out to me “Well, it doesn’t last long!” – that’s right. But the opening scene on the street, for a good 30 seconds is pretty hopeful. The sun is shining and piano player is striking up an old rag.

By the way, that is part of a link in the film to a classic Charlie Chaplin move called “*Modern Times*” – very important in film history. And an important film in *this* story. And one point, Arthur crashes a ritzy fundraising soirée that is actually playing the silent film – also a film that mixes comedy and tragedy in a single setting. Set in 1936 it features Chaplin’s famed Little Tramp, as a social outcast struggling to find a place in a society – marked by the degradations of both the Industrial Revolution and the Great Depression – that treats him like a cog in a machine until he winds up accidentally leading a communist revolution in the streets. According to director, Todd Phillips, “I think you’d have to watch *Modern Times* because we believe there is some Chaplin in Arthur that I think is really important.” So the themes are not accidental.

We’re supposed to begin by viewing Arthur as an innocent misfit. Yes he has problems. Clearly he is plagued with mental illness – he has a condition that makes him laugh uncontrollably at inappropriate times, it’s a real neurological disorder called Pseudobulbar affect that can be triggered by a traumatic brain injury, which we later discover Arthur experienced as a 3-year-old child.

And yet, he holds down a job, he has friends – of a sort – he is regularly seeing a counselor, he’s on medication, he has a playful spirit that makes children laugh on the bus, and he is an able care-taker for his elderly mother. As he says, “I take good care of my mother, she says I was put here to spread joy and laughter.” In fact, he has a dream of becoming a stand up comedian, in spite of his mother’s – rather perceptive – question, “Don’t you have to be funny to be a comedian?” All in all, Arthur is a functioning member of society, in spite of his challenges.

But then the senseless violence at the hands of those kids in the ally. Which by the way, our first thought is to make them the villains, but we have to remember we don’t know *their* story either. What’s gone wrong in their lives that they hassle and abuse innocent citizens in the middle of the day? There’s a saying, “You wouldn’t hate anybody if you knew their story.” I think that’s a big part of what this movie is about – not *excusing*, but understanding. But whatever the motivation, their cruel attack is the push that starts the dominoes falling in Arthur’s life.

Bruised and battered, he returns to work, where his boss calls him in to say that the client is complaining about his missing sign – which of course was destroyed in the attack – but the boss doesn't believe him and tells him to return it or have it taken out of his – already meager – paycheck. It's unjust. Running low on medication, he goes to see his counselor, only to be told that due to city wide cuts to social services, she won't be able to help him anymore and neither will he be able to get his meds. *That's* not a good idea. But as she tells him, "Nobody cares about you."

Well, one of his friends appears to care, slipping Arthur an illegal handgun, so he can take care of himself next time. *That's really* not a good idea. And sure enough, one day while doing his clown dance, the guns slips from his pants and clatters on the floor, *in a children's hospital!* And of course he's fired, but to add insult to injury, his "friend" lied and said that Arthur had come to him asking how to obtain an illegal weapon.

And then on the late night subway ride home, three drunken Wall-Street hotshots begin harassing a young woman on Arthur's, otherwise empty, car. He may be wearing scary clown makeup, but these guys are the real monsters at this point. He draws their attention to himself, allowing the woman to depart, and for a second times, privileged hoodlums begin to taunt and

finally physically assault poor helpless Arthur. But this time Arthur is not so helpless. And in desperation, he fires his gun, killing first one, then another of the bullies.

Now at that point, had he been in Texas, there's not a jury that would have convicted him of a crime – any decent lawyer would have successfully argued self-defense in a "stand your ground" state – but then, emboldened, frustrated, tired of being picked on by *life*, Arthur snaps and hunts the third, wounded, bully down the station platform before finally shooting him multiple times in the back. Cold-blooded murder.

And he appears to get away with it. He escapes running into the night, but news reports indicate that someone in a clown mask was spotted on the train so the circle will slowly begin to tighten around Arthur. But for a season he feels empowered. He's off his anti-depression medications which give him some renewed energy and he actually makes an appearance at a local standup comedy club on open mic night. It's very painful to watch, but he is in his own little world and oblivious to the reality of the awkwardness.

Meanwhile, the vigilante violence has led to protests in the city, not against the violence, but against the rich. Turns out a lot of people see the clown as the hero and the Wall-Street guys as the villains – that's not just a comic book story obviously.

And that leads us to the introduction of Thomas Wayne – Gotham business tycoon and potential mayoral candidate. Author’s mother is obsessed with Wayne, whom she worked for years ago, and so is intrigued when she sees him on the news talking about the victims, who were employees of his. By the way, if you know who his son – Bruce Wayne – grows up to be, you will understand the irony of his “hiding behind a mask” comment. Let’s watch...[**Thomas Wayne 1:33**]

Ah, you’ve heard that argument before, haven’t you? Who’s to blame for the ills of society? It’s not the people at the top, it’s the people at the bottom. It’s not that society keeps them down, it’s that they are clowns who refuse to “make something” of themselves. This is the same argument that we see time and time again in society. It’s an argument that – especially with regard to class distinctions - we will revisit in some detail in a couple of week’s with the film, *Parasite*.

But there is – and has always been – a dichotomy to nearly any issue you want to talk about built around societal causes vs. personal responsibility. At the moment, we’re dealing with it most visibly in this country around the issue of race. Is racial inequality due to systemic societal injustice? Or is it the result of personal racist prejudice? Well, I can confidently tell you the answer...it’s *both*. But why can’t we recognize that? Why can’t we work on both causes instead of taking sides and arguing over who’s fault it is?

I’ll tell you why I think we have this artificial disagreement, spiritually speaking at any rate. It’s because humanity has an enemy, and his name is Satan, “the accuser of our brethren” the book of Revelation calls him. He hates what God wants, which is for His children to get along in peace, love and grace. And so Satan works to attack that spirit of universal love through the only tools he has, confusion, fear and disunity. If you think the Russians are hacking our social media feeds – and they are – you should see what Satan is doing! Read the comments after *any* post and you will get to the demonic rather quickly.

See, Satan wants the chocolate fans to go to war against the peanut butter fans and never come realize that when you put the two together, Reese’s Peanut Butter cups are delicious! But the Bible simply will not play that game. The Bible is *always* talking about our corporate responsibility for societal ills. *And* the Bible is constantly calling us as individuals to account for how we conduct our moral lives.

It’s too easy to scapegoat our problems on others – *either* on the rich and power, or the down and out. I think in the film, the mob is obviously wrong – chaos and violence is never the answer – but Thomas Wayne is wrong too, it’s not all on the people who are struggling. But we’re always looking to scapegoat and blame to avoid responsibility.

Can I give you a contemporary Texas example? Texas, has one of the strongest economies in the nation – the “Texas Miracle” we call it. Obviously people are moving here at a rapid rate – welcome Tesla. And they aren’t coming for the wilting heat and bird-sized mesquites, they are coming for the economic benefits. And those benefits have been built on a model of low taxes. Now of course, low taxes also means lower government spending.

And one result of that is we have cut social spending to the bone, especially in the areas of public mental health. Among US States, Texas ranks second to last – 49 out of 50 – when it comes to mental health spending per capita. Dallas-Ft. Worth is currently without a single state-run psychiatric hospital – making it the largest city in the state certainly, but one of the largest in the nation without one. We have the second largest shortage of mental health care professionals in the nation. And then when you factor in that 2/3 of our licensed clinical psychologists and counselors practice in the *five* most populated counties in the state, it leaves the remaining 249 counties with desperately inadequate care.

Now, that’s a real problem because as the resources have shrunk, the needs haven’t. More than 4.3 million Texans, including 1.2 million children, live with some form of mental health disorder. Of these, 1.5 million cannot function at work, school, or in the community due to their illness. So where do they go? Well, many of them are living under the bridges and on the street corners that we drive past every day here in Austin.

There’s a direct link between the mental health crisis and the homelessness crises.

See, the Austin homeless population isn’t actually larger these days, it just seems like it because it’s more visible. Last summer the City Council voted to decriminalize public camping. The homeless were always around, they were just hidden. And I’ll admit that it’s a complicated problem and I don’t know what the answer is, but I don’t think criminalization is the answer. There are 10 times more individuals with serious mental illness in Texas jails and prisons than there are in state psychiatric hospitals. Not only is that more expensive – but does anybody really think that the largest mental health facility in the State of Texas should be a prison? Is that a good idea?

By the way, I know all this because the State of Texas mental health is not just important to me as a citizen, but – I don’t know if you knew this, I don’t talk about it a lot - I currently serve on the Texas State Board of Examiners of Marriage and Family Therapists. Governor Abbot has officially entrusted me with responsibility for a big branch of mental health workers in our state. And three years ago when I came on the board we had a massive backlog of cases both for license applications and criminal and ethical complaints against counselors – and the other mental health boards were even worse. Do you know why we were all so behind?

It was because our department was operating with 3 full-time investigators instead of the mandated 20. The legislature acknowledged it takes 20 to get the job done, but The Health and Human Services Department was under a hiring freeze. Even though we were bragging about how strong the economy was. And that directly exacerbated our health care worker shortage in the state. Now, I am happy to report that today we are fully staffed and providing excellent on time service to the constituents of the Great State of Texas. They loosened up the purse strings a couple of years ago and started spending on mental health again. But would you like to know why?

On November 5, 2017, a man wearing tactical body armor and carrying a Ruger AR-556 semi-automatic rifle entered the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs and shot to death 26 people while wounding 20 others. It was the deadliest mass shooting in Texas and the 5<sup>th</sup> deadliest in US history. The next year, 2018, we had the shooting at Santa Fe High School that killed 10 and last year the El Paso Wal-Mart massacre that took 23 lives.

What do we do with this? Well, we can't blame it on *guns*, this is Texas after all. So the day after the Sutherland Springs massacre, the President announced that "this isn't a guns issue, this is a mental health issue at the highest level." All the top politicians in our state followed suit. It's not guns, it's mental health. Well, ok then, so what are we doing about mental health? And it turns out we're not doing nearly enough.

That's starting to change. That's why they started to fund our department again. Last session the Texas Legislature approved \$745 million for the construction of mental health facilities in Texas. It's a start, but it's not near enough. In fact, if anything the COVID pandemic has drastically increased the burden on mental health resources, while drastically lowering state revenues. So our leaders are going to have some difficult challenges to face when they come back to session in January.

But it's a shame that we so often have to be forced by tragedy to do the right thing. I think there's a warning that we need to heed – all of us. And our film this morning paints the picture. Let me set up the scene. Arthur continues his descent into villainy as even more pieces of his support structure are removed. After being questioned by the police about her son's whereabouts – they suspect him for the subway killings – his mother has a stroke and winds up incapacitated in the hospital.

Then he finds out that in her past she herself had been institutionalized for psychiatric disorders and for failing to protect her young son from brutal physical abuse by one of her boyfriends; abuse that was responsible for Arthur's own mental and emotional challenges. Hurt people, hurt people.

On top of that, while he's sitting by her side in the hospital, he happens to catch his favorite late night talk show host, Murray Franklin – Gotham's version of Johnny Carson – playing a video from *his* stand-up performance on his show...*but* only to mock and humiliate him in front of a nation-wide audience. He's despondent, he's humiliated, his mother dies, well, he *kills* her - look there's plenty of personal responsibility angle with Arthur, he's no angel. What did we say about the ruffians in the ally? Understanding does not equal excusing!

Well, back in the apartment, he gets a call out of the blue from a show runner inviting him to actually appear live on the Murray Franklin Show. It seems his video clip went the 1981 version of viral. So Arthur decides that he's had about enough of this ride and agrees to be on the show...but with the plan of killing himself live on the air. Maybe his death will have more meaning than his life. So he puts on his finest clown duds and makeup, pockets the gun that's caused so much trouble and heads down to the studio.

But once on air, his plans change. The audience turns on him – his jokes really *are* awful. And he begins to argue with the host and the others guests. He shocks everyone by confessing to killing the three men on the subway. And he doesn't regret it because as he says, they were awful. "If I was laying in the street you'd walk right over me, but these guys, because they are

"elite" they can get away with being awful to anyone they want." And then he turns to tell Murray another "joke". I will warn you, this is a disturbing clip, with some disturbing language. I cut away before the bad visuals, but I decided not to edit out the language because – as we've said, the truth is dark. Ok, you've been warned, here we go...[**What You Deserve :19**]

What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner...with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? I'll tell you what you get...you get what you deserve. And after that scene goes out over the airwaves, the city comes apart. Mobs take to the streets. Violence erupts. Gotham is burning. Those same streets that were sunny and bright at the beginning of the film, are shrouded in darkness at the end. It's hellish scene. And that's what it is; hell on earth.

I want to come back to that concept of hell, but before I do, I need to say something really important. The movie *Joker* has led to a national conversation about mental health. That's good, but it's also problematic. You see, it wasn't just the political leaders that blame mass shootings and societal violence on the mentally ill. The media does too. Now, this is a movie – a made-up story to entertain, but real life is always a great deal more nuanced.



A 2016 Johns Hopkins University study found that more than *a third* of all news stories about mental health conditions were linked with violence toward other people. But that does not in fact reflect the actual rates of violence where mental illness is involved. And I want to be careful not to add to that stigmatization today – this movie has been criticized for that, and I think it can be a valid criticism.

Assigning blanketed blame to mental illness can have long-term consequences. It further alienates people with mental health issues and makes them feel like their experience isn't understood. That could ultimately lead them to not reach out for help. Research shows negative attitudes surrounding mental illness often prevent people from seeking treatment. So let's talk facts. The chief of Harvard's mental health department says "The reality is that only 3-5% of violent acts can be tied to those living with a serious mental illness. In fact, people with serious mental illnesses are up to 10 times more likely to be the victim of a violent act than someone who doesn't have a mental illness." (Dost Öngür, MD, chief of McLean's Center of Excellence in Psychotic Disorders.)

So what is more accurate than the violence we see *Joker produce* are the multiple times we seen Arthur Fleck fall *victim* to abuse himself. That's the part of the movie that is grounded in reality. If we're not careful, it's very easy to take a film like *Joker* and to make the same mistake that Thomas Wayne did. Fail to listen. Fail to think. Fail to empathize. And, maybe most importantly, fail to take any responsibility.

I came across a podcast by the Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute that reviews films surprisingly enough. And the psychiatrist host said about this one, "I have a very different take on the film, starting with not seeing it about a person with a mental illness and the issues of medication and stigmatization. Rather, *Joker* is a film about the 'illness' in all of us, including the experience of lack, envy, rage, and manic and narcissistic defenses against these." (Rodrigo Barahona, PsyD, *Off the Couch*)

I think that's right. I think the worst thing we could do with this film is use it as yet another tool to scapegoat "the other" for the problems of society. That's not what the Bible does. That's not what Jesus does. He always points the finger squarely at his audience and asks, "What are *you* going to do about it? How are *you* taking responsibility for your neighbor? How are *you* contributing to a solution rather than just complaining about a problem?"

We mentioned hell on earth. I find a lot of Christians in these uncertain times want to talk about all things apocalyptic. Is this the end of the world? On Friday somebody sent me a Tweet asking if this picture was a sign of the end times – it announced the introduction of Kraft *Pumpkin Spice Mac & Cheese*. Well...yeah...probably so! But when I watched *Joker*, my mind went to a passage of scripture where Jesus actually talked about the end of the world. Talked about hell even.

I've got to tell you, if you think watching a clown use the F-word and shooting somebody is disturbing, I think this particular passage of scripture should disturb us *way* more. The Bible says something very startling here. In Matthew chapters 24 and 25, Jesus is talking about the end of the world. He points to the grand Temple in Jerusalem and says, "See that? It's coming down." And his followers say, "Tell us when? Tell us what the 'end of the age' will look like."

And for two chapters Jesus does just that. Very enigmatic. Lot's of hidden meaning and riddles - very much like Jesus! But when he gets to the end, he talks about "judgment day." He says on judgment day the Lord will have all of us standing in front of him, and he will set on one side the people who are saved and on the other side the people who are lost. This is what he's going to say to the people who are lost. This is in **Matthew 25:41-43**, "*Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*"

Well, that's a lot to take in. And so the people naturally have some follow up questions. **V.44**, "*They*

*also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'"* "Jesus, I saw you on the poster at the Christian bookstore. I saw you in the painting in my grandma's kitchen. But I never saw you on the street corner, or camping under the bridge."

**V.45**, "*He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the **least of these**, you did not do for me.'*" Summary: This is what God says: "If you don't love the poor, if you don't love the hungry, the naked, the poor wanderer, the homeless...If you don't love *them*, then no matter what you say, you don't love *me*. You do not have a relationship with me. It's a formal relationship. It's filled with compliance and ordinances, but you don't really have a relationship with me. The way you treat the 'least of these' tells me the reality of how you regard me."

Let me say this as clearly as I can. A deep social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to others, especially the poor and overlooked in society is the inevitable sign of real faith and a real connection with God. You are welcome to be a Thomas Wayne, but you can't be a Thomas Wayne *and* be a Christian. I don't mean be rich – this is not about the state of your back account. This is about the state of your heart.

God says, “If you think you have a real connection with me, that you’ve humbled yourself and you’ve found me, yet you don’t care about the poor and the downtrodden, then you haven’t. This is the real index of the condition of your heart.”

This is the message all through the the Bible. So many places in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, in **Proverbs 14:31** it says, “*Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*” Why did we just do the Back to School bash? Can I tell you, as cute as those kids are, we did it as much for God as for them. That honors the heart of God.

You’ve heard of Sodom and Gomorrah? Whenever Christians talk about God judging a society, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah tend to come up. Do you know why God did them in? Hold on...because **Ezekiel 16:49-50** says, “*Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; **they did not help the poor and needy.** They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.*” That’s not what you thought it was going to say, is it?

The prophecy of Isaiah opens with God telling His people, “Hey, I am sick and tired of all your worship. Stop it! No more sacrifices, no more songs, no more lifting up your hands in prayer. I’m weary of you.” What could they do to get back in God’s good graces.

He tells them, **Isaiah 1:17**, “*Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.*” God says, “If you don’t have that, you don’t have me. You think you do, but you don’t.” That’s God’s voice in Scripture, again and again and again.

And it’s Jesus’ message too. So listen, I don’t pretend to have all the answers to societal woes. I can’t tell the politicians what to do. And believe me, I know that just throwing money at a problem doesn’t fix it. Of course, I also know that being stingy in the face of a crisis makes the problem worse. No, this is not n a party platform. But it is about a heart. Specifically your heart. My heart. Do they line up with Jesus’ heart?

I want to close out by showing you something. You may be wondering what this big orange cloth has been covering up here on the stage all morning? Well, back in the early part of the year, I knew that I was going to use this film in our God at the Movies series – of course I thought we would be *doing* that series six months ago. But I was walking around an art gallery up in Bee Caves, really good place featuring a local artist named Chacasso – he started off selling his stuff on the street corners of South Congress and got noticed. He does a lot of really cool stuff – pop culture references, avant guard. I really liked it.

And he just happened to walk in while I was there and I met he and his wife – good folks – and he said, “Hey, let me show you some stuff I’ve been working on in the portrait gallery, next door.” And we went over and he unlocked and I went inside...and then I saw *this* hanging on the wall. And in that moment I knew two things. I knew I would be standing here today talking about this painting. And I knew I wanted it to hang in our church. So I bought it.

Now, Chacasso was all set to come and be here with me and talk about the painting and you could meet him afterwards – but that was supposed to be in *April*, before any of us knew the world was coming to an end! And so I’m bummed he can’t be here with us, but I want to show you this. Ready? Tada!

Now, the handful of people who have seen this already have either thought it was super cool...or were horrified! But let me tell you why this painting is the key to this God at the Movies sermon. And why this painting is going to be hanging in our foyer. And there’s going to be a little plaque next to it, like in a museum, that has the art details, the artists name, but then below will have **Matthew 25:40**, “*Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*”

Is there any hope for the Arthur Flecks of the world? I believe that there is. In fact, I believe there is only *one* hope. And that hope is found in the person of Jesus Christ. I think Jesus would love to have the Joker at his nativity site with his mom! Because that little baby...as he grew up, he was always hanging out with people society didn’t have time for. Scandalous women, irrelevant children, political radicals, government sellouts, ethnic outsiders, people with the wrong religion, people with the wrong social status, beggars, lepers, people with mental issues that made them the rejects of polite society...jokers one and all. The least of these.

Jesus loved the least of these. Jesus cared for the least of these. Jesus ministered to the least of these. And in the end, on the cross...he became one. Did you know at one point Jesus’ own family tried to have him committed because they thought he was crazy? In the end, all of his friends abandoned him. The crowd turned on him, booed him, mocked him. He was falsely accused of a crime. He was beaten unmercifully. He was executed unjustly.

And he did all that for the least of these. Which means he did all that for you. He did all that for me. And I have to believe – have to! – that he did it for Joker too. And I want Jesus, when he looks at Southwest Family Fellowship to say, “There’s a church that get’s what I’m all about. That’s a church that embraces the least of these.” Is that your heart?

Our world is looking pretty dark these days. “The news never ends”. And it might grow darker still. But I know where to find the light in the darkness. How about you? What’s in your heart? What are you doing for the least of these? What are you doing for Jesus?

Let’s pray...