

Field of Dreams

God at the Movies 2021...Pt. 3

[Field of Dreams Trailer 2:15]

Occasionally a line from a movie will enter the lexicon of American culture. We've already seen one in this series; "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse." But there are so many. "May the Force be with you." "Life is like a box of chocolates." "You had me at hello." So it is with today's God at the Movies selection, *Field of Dreams*. "If you build it...?" "...He will come."

If you said, "*they* will come", you're not alone. This has been ranked as one of the most *misquoted* film lines of all time, as well as most beloved. But in a sense, the "they" wound up being correct. Since this movie was filmed in 1989 in an Iowa cornfield, people have continuously streamed to the site. The farm owners kept the baseball field intact and – as prophesied – people have been coming ever sense to look around and have a game of catch.

Just last month, the site was purchased – ironically – by Chicago White Sox Hall of Famer, Frank Thomas. Major League Baseball has now built a proper field right next to the movie one and on August 12th, the first official game was held there between the White Sox and the New York Yankees.

The players actually walked out of the cornfield! It was magical. And, with the highest ratings baseball has seen for a regular season game in two decades, it's sure to be the first of many. Fittingly, Kevin Costner introduced the game on the film's 30th anniversary. He really is baseball's biggest ambassador, having made several iconic movies about the sport.

There's no denying that *Field of Dreams* is a baseball movie, but underneath it's about so much more. It's really a film about family and the longing of unfulfilled dreams and the hope of a world that we cannot see – a world where the pains of this present will be no more. But baseball is about all of that too. Like the Bible, you can really use baseball to talk about anything you want.

The writer and director of the film, Phil Alden Robinson, said, "I think that [Field of Dreams] changed some people, how they look at the world, how they feel about themselves and their families." Baseball is about fathers and sons. I've loved baseball my whole life, but I was never good enough to play organized ball, so I loved a lot through my son; dad-coaching his little league games. After the last out of his final game, we were both in tears. And I thanked him for giving me the gift of spending all those years on the field with him.

This summer I got to fulfill a dream of mine when Ari and I spent an entire day together at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. You say, “What about Deanna? No, she was perfectly happy to stay back and enjoy the bed and breakfast. Ari and I were in that museum from 9am to 4:30 pm and I think we read every single plaque. It’s sacred ground. I have been to Jerusalem by the way and got similar vibes!

And baseball has long had religious overtones. Listen to this quote from an academic book called *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion and American Culture*, “It has become fashionable to speak of baseball’s significance in American popular culture as analogous to an institutional religion...In an era defined by a variety of social reform initiatives, baseball became a symbol of post-millennial liberal-Protestant zeal that contributed to the personal and social uplifting of all Americans...In short, baseball incapsulated Protestant hope to usher in the kingdom of God in America.”

I have a book by the President of New York University called *Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game*. That’s from a scholar. There’s always been a link between academia and baseball that you don’t see with other sports.

When I was a student at the University of Texas, I took a course on the history of baseball – it combined the two great loves of my life (I had not met Deanna yet!). But I learned that baseball really is a lesson in the last hundred years of American history. It can teach us about race issues, labor tensions, economics, geographic expansion and a hot of topics.

I’ll never forget my final project for the class. With that cutting-edge 1992 technology, I used an Earl Weaver baseball simulator on my first PC to statistically recreate all the players from the rosters of the 1919 World Series. I used real data to build each of the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago White Sox down to the bench players. I then ran a variety of 7 game simulations to see what the computer thought the outcome would have been if the gamblers hadn’t fixed it.

And on one level, that 1919 Black Sox scandal is what this film is about. But only on one level. This movie is like Psalm 22 – oh, it’s about David for sure...but it’s really about Jesus. So I want to play you the opening montage of the film. It sets up the White Sox angel, but with the opening words, it also tells you what the film is really all about. Let’s watch...[**Opening Montage 2:17**]

Ah, “the voice”. We’re never told what the voice is and famously, even the actor that said the lines remains a mystery to this day. The closing credits tease, “The Voice as Himself”. And everyone involved has remained tight-lipped about it sense. Three times the voice speaks to Ray in his cornfield – a very Biblical number you’ll agree – “If you build it, he will come.” With those seven words Ray sets off on a life-changing journey, though the reluctant traveler doesn’t have a clue where it will take him.

Through a subsequent vision, Ray surmises that if he builds a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield, Shoeless Joe Jackson will get to play baseball once more. So Ray risks his wife’s patience, his brother-in-law’s scorn, the mockery of his neighbors and the very livelihood of his family to do just that. He plows under his crops and builds a lovely ball-field. And nothing happens. This is a point in the film that is easy to miss, but we’re clearly shown that all through the winter nothing happens as he gazes worriedly at the empty field. Patience is indeed a virtue.

But come spring, his painful efforts are rewarded as Shoeless Joe emerges from the corn field, eventually joined by his seven other teammates, all of whom were banned from baseball for life for their sins. Soon more legendary ballplayers arrive and the field

is alive with the sounds and smells of baseball. To Shoeless Joe it’s like having an amputated limb reattached. Mission accomplished.

Expect...the voice isn’t finished. It rarely does speak just the once, does it? Soon Ray receives another revelation with the cryptic words, “Ease his pain.” And Ray is not happy about it. After all, he’s already done his part, taken the risk. But eventually that nagging faith kicks in and Ray begins to research until he discovers whose pain it is that he needs to ease.

He sets off on a journey to Boston in search of the legendary civil writes author, Terrance Mann, a recluse who has stopped writing because he couldn’t be the answerer to his generations problems. By the way, in the novel that this film was based on, the writer is J. D. Salinger, but he was not happy about that and threatened to sue, so the movie makers invented the fictitious Mann.

Now, Boston is a long way from Iowa, and Ray feels like he’s on a fool’s quest as he steers his retro VW van across the highways of America. The American novelist E.L. Doctorow once wrote, “Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” You know, living a life is like that too. Especially a life of faith.

I have often said, that the Holy Spirit operates like the light on a miner's helmet. It doesn't illuminate the entire cavern, but it gives you just enough light to see the next step, and then the step after that. Our modern GPS devices have tricked us into thinking we are like God. Before we ever set out on a journey, we can know every obstacle we will encounter along the way – the dangerous turns, the drop offs, the sections slowed by construction and even the accidents to be avoided. We want to see the whole trip at a glance and know exactly when we will arrive at our destination and how much it's going to cost us to get there.

But real life is more like getting directions from my Apple Watch. It just says, "turn left up here", "at the next intersection, go right." We are reminded of Abraham, the "father of faith", so named because when God called him to leave everything familiar and go to a land he knew not of, Abraham simply said, "Ok". **Hebrews 11:8** says, "*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.*" That's what the life of faith looks like.

Well, Ray eventually finds Terrance Mann and – comically – convinces him to attend a Red Sox game with him. During the game, the two men see a cryptic message appear on the outfield scoreboard, the name and baseball statistics of an Archie "Moonlight Graham". Along with them is a new fragment of revelation, "Go the distance". What does this new fragment mean? Initially it is as confusing as the first two.

The same pattern of piecemeal progressive revelation can be seen in the way the Messiah was revealed. We think of the Christmas story in one nice nativity scene package, but it had a strange way of coming. The revelation starts out obscurely but grows clearer with each piece. The first piece of the puzzle came in Genesis 3:15, when God told Eve that, though her seed would be bruised by Satan, in the end it would triumph over him. Another piece came in Genesis 12:1-3, when God told Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

In 2 Samuel 7:12-16, another piece is turned over and fit into the puzzle, revealing that this Messiah would come through David's line and would eventually establish an everlasting kingdom. Isaiah 7:14 states that this coming king would be born of a virgin. Isaiah 6:1 one tells us that the Messiah's ministry will largely be with the afflicted and the brokenhearted. The piece of Micah 5:2 gets specific, identifying the village of Bethlehem as the place where he would be born. Matthew 1:21 gets even more specific, revealing the Promised One's name to be Jesus.

Well, Moonlight Graham doesn't turn out to be Jesus, but when Ray and Terrence track him down in rural Minnesota, they do discover something of a saint. Graham had baseball ambitions as a youth, making it to the big leagues but only having played a half-inning in 1922. When things didn't work out, he retired from baseball to become a beloved small-town doctor. That's all a true story, by the way – Archie Graham was a real person.

Although the men discover that Graham died in 1972, Ray is undeterred. While taking a midnight stroll he is magically transported back in time to meet an elderly Doc Graham – played by legendary Burt Lancaster in what would be his final film appearance. Graham tells Ray that it was ok that he never fulfilled his baseball dreams because he was able to help so many people in the healing profession. Still he confesses that if he had one wish, it would be to get just one at bat in the big leagues.

Ray and Terrance leave Minnesota to complete their trip back to Iowa. Along the way, they pick up a young hitchhiker who turns out to be the young Moonlight Graham. This unlikely trio – all connected by their love of baseball and Ray’s faithfulness in following the commands of The Voice – eventually show up in Iowa with it’s corn and it’s magical Field of Dreams.

You know, the revelations given to Ray are remarkably diverse. Through an audible voice that only he can hear – “If you build it he will come”. Through visions – the baseball diamond and later the scoreboard. Through a dream – which his wife had as well. Through a fellow traveler - Terrance Mann. And through other worldly messengers – Doc Graham and Shoeless Joe himself.

And it’s easy to dismiss this movie as fanciful. As some New Age Hollywood claptrap. But before you think that all these revelations are – pardon the pun – out of left field, consider how God actually works in the Bible. It makes me think specifically of Acts Chapters 9 and 10 which is a sequence of scenes regarding Peter and Paul and their respective ministries in the early days of the church.

In **Acts 9:3-4**, a mysterious voice calls out to a traveler minding his own business along the road, “*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’*”

The voice identifies itself as Jesus, and Saul, overcome and blinded by the light, is led by his companions into Damascus. Meanwhile, in the city, we are told that a man named Ananias is given a vision. He’s told to find a stranger and ease his pain. **(v.11-12)**“*The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”*”

The words mystify Ananias because Saul's reputation for persecuting Christians was so notorious, but the Lord assures him that there is no mistake and that Saul is a chosen instrument of His witness to the Gentiles. In faith, Ananias goes on what he must think is the strangest mission ever. Once he finds him we're told, (v.17) *"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'"*

After that Saul goes to Jerusalem to connect with the disciples, but can you imagine how crazy his story must sound to them? And as expected, the disciples – who with their own eyes had *seen* Jesus' miracles don't forget – they are leery. (V.26) *"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple."* Can you blame them? Who would believe such a bizarre story.?

In the next chapter, then focus shifts from Paul to Peter, but the mystical weirdness is still fully on display. In the opening verses of Acts 10, a believing Gentile, Cornelius, is given a vision. In it he is visited by an angel of God who tells him to go to Joppa and find Peter. What the angel doesn't tell Cornelius is...why? "Nope, you don't get to see that far ahead in the journey. I just want you to go."

Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter is on a rooftop, praying, and it is there that he too sees a vision. Animals of all sorts being lowered down before him in a sheet. And he doesn't get an angel, just a mysterious voice from the cornfield. (Acts 10:13), *"Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'"* By the way, the voice repeated this...you guessed it...*three* times. In my first draft of the sermon, I wrote here, "And the voice didn't tell him to have a ballpark hotdog." Except, you know what? It kind of *did*! He was to eat all of these un-kosher things. All these unclean animals forbidden by his scriptures.

And as Peter reflects on what he's seen in his trance, the Holy Spirit speaks to him, informing him that there are three men downstairs looking for him. They are messengers, sent from Cornelius, inviting him to come back to his house. Which Peter does. And when he arrives, Cornelius tells him about his vision of the angel. And Peter suddenly realizes that God has declared Gentile believers to be on equal footing with Jewish believers, rendering them clean, just like the animals in his own vision. God validates their acceptance into the body of Christ by having the Holy Spirit poured out on the Gentiles who were there with Peter. It's one of the most earth-shattering moments in the history of the church.

Do you think God can still speak through dreams? Right before we moved here to plant this church, I had five other pastors who had agreed to come with us – we had a great start-up team. But I wasn't sure what role each was to play – after all, we had five pastors and no congregation! What do you do with that. And one night I had a dream that I was sitting on a rooftop and each of the guys came and sat with me and I explained to each of them what they were to do. And I woke up and I remembered the dream and it really made sense. And that's exactly how it played out.

I remember, the strongest leader among them, I had dreamed that he was to lead the children's ministry. Now, that's not normally what the strongest leader wants to do. But when I told him about my dream he said, "You would have no way of knowing this, but when I was a teenager, I was called to be a children's pastor. In fact, I am a closet ventriloquist." And for the first four years of SWFF, Scott Evans built the foundation of our kid's ministry. I don't know; dreams and visions, man. Dreams and visions.

Do those happen every day? No. Actually I'm more than a little suspicious of those who claim they do. After all, we read the life of Abraham and it looks like he was having a supernatural encounter with God once a week. But that cat lived to be 175! I mean, a half dozen miracles works out to one every 30 years! Again, the Bible is like a snapshot from above. But when you're actually in the journey, it can seem like forever.

God is the ultimate Father on a long journey. He constantly hears the same refrain from His children in the back seat; "Are we there yet?" But the reason why God reveals His will in such a piecemeal manner is that it helps us realize that we can't *possibly* have His will entirely figured out as we can figure out a roadmap. Because God parcels out these bits of revelation to other people, we need to come together with those people in order to put the pieces of the map together.

The piecemeal revelation serves to make us not only more dependent on God but on each other. When we do come together, sharing what God has given us, a community of faith is formed. In that community each member is important, and each member desperately needs the others. What we are seeing come together in Acts 10 is the earliest formation of the body of Christ.

None of the pieces makes a lot of sense until the end, when they have all been put together. In the end, in a moment of epiphany, everything becomes clear. And there is no clearer illustration of this process than in our movie, *Field of Dreams*. When Ray's puzzle is finally assembled, we see that the "he" of the initial call turns out to be neither Shoeless Joe Jackson nor Moonlight Graham, nor even Terrence Mann – although he does give one of the greatest speeches about baseball ever recorded.

I can't take the time to play it for you, but if you ever make it to Cooperstown, be sure to sit down and watch their movie, there's not a dry eye in the house. And James Earl Jones' words are featured prominently. "This field, this game - it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and could be again." One of the greats.

But no, the "he" of the revelation is much closer to home. As the sun sets on a day of baseball, Shoeless Joe directs Ray's attention to a rookie near home plate removing his catchers gear. It is a young John Kinsella, Ray's father. As a rebellious teenager Ray had rejected his dad's offer to continue to play catch – "Can you believe that?", he told Terrance, "An American boy refusing to have a catch with his father? Son of a bitch died before I could take it back. Before I could tell him...you know."

Well the young catcher comes over to express his thanks to the couple for allowing him to come and play. As Ray's wife encourages him to introduce their daughter to her grandfather, Ray can at first do so only in formal terms. He says, "Karen, this is my fa...this is John." But on the field of dreams, Ray too finds the courage to be healed and forgiven.

Ray and John have a conversation about heaven – and I'm going to play the clip for you – but the million dollar moment – the moment that never fails to make grown men cry - comes as his father turns to leave the field and Ray, for the first time in years is finally able to use a familiar term of affection. Let's watch the closing scene of the film. [**Catch 3:50**]

Shortly before filming began, the actor that played John Kinsella, Dwier Brown, was notified that his own father had unexpectedly passed away. So as it worked out, he traveled directly from the funeral to Iowa to shoot that scene. It's not hard to imagine that the emotions you see on screen aren't really acting.

Anyone who has lost a parent – but especially, I think, a father – is emotionally impacted by this movie. You can't help it. Thankfully my own father is still around – he surprised me for my birthday dinner just this week – but I know that's not the case for many of you. In fact, there are a number in our congregation who have lost a father in just the last year. We're praying right now for more than one dad who is hospitalized and on an incubator. That pain is real and it's lasting.

Death leaves a powerful ache if you had a *good* relationship with your father. But if you didn't...you know, even good relationships aren't perfect in this fallen world. There are hurts that remain. Pains left unspoken. I sometimes tell grieving people, that when a parent dies, you're grieving not only the loss of the relationship that you *did* have...but also the relationship that you'd always dreamed of having, longed for, but now can never be a reality. That doesn't just go away.

What all of the main characters in *Field of Dreams* have in common is their need for a healing of memories and a rekindling of their hopes and dreams. Each person in the movie needs to suspend his or her skepticism and enter fully into the wonder of the story's magical realism before reconciliation can take place.

And so do we as viewers. What makes *Field of Dreams* a classic is that an overwhelming number of it's witnesses do just that, often through tears. The movie is about the universal experiences of loss, disappointment, reconciliation, and hope. It is a story that invites the audience to reconsider their own losses and failures and reach out for redemption.

And in this sense, the movie is ultimately not a "baseball" movie at all. Baseball, the great American pastime, becomes simply the crucible in which hopes can be gathered and reconciliation achieved. Twice in the film someone asks of the field, "Is this heaven?" "No, it's Iowa." But heaven really is a place where dreams come true.

You know, there's a lot of mystery surrounding heaven. Lot's of questions we can't answer. I don't know if you get there through a cornfield or not. I really *hope* it's not in Iowa. But we are given *some* descriptions. Maybe the most powerfully in **Revelation 21:3-5**, "*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."*

4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'"

You know, you can't wipe away tears that aren't there. Eventually we're told there will be no more crying, but there are clearly initial tears to be wiped away. But I don't think they are tears of sorrow. Like with this film, I think they are cathartic tears of joy. When the deep longings of the heart are finally fulfilled. When we see our loved ones? Sure. I do believe God put us in earthly relationships that are meant to last forever.

But let me be honest with you. Ultimately - just like in this movie, baseball is metaphor for something else, something transcendent – so are your relationships with your closest friends and family here on earth. My friends are meant to remind me that in the Holy Trinity, the Godhead is deepest friendship that has no beginning or end. My marriage is meant to point me to the ultimate wedding of Jesus Christ and his bride, the church.

And my relationship with my earthy father...and my son's relationship with *his* earthy father...as special as it is, it is pointing to something much, much greater. One day, we will be *with* Him and He with us. And when we finally see his face, in glorious radiance, we will speak with true love, for the first time in our lives really, we will say, "Abba...father...dad."

God is the Father that *all* of our hearts long for. And one day – because His True Son made room in the family for us - we will see Him.

You see, heaven really is the place where dreams come true, but it's not just the destination, God has an amazing plan for your life along the journey. The Christian life is not just about the final result - a catch with our Heavenly Father - but just as much about the journey, and how His voice guides us, and how we are to be developed along the way.

Much of the journey is mysterious, some of it is painful, some of it is joyful. But we have to have faith that in the end, it will all come together. "Mister, is this heaven?" Not yet, but it's taking us there.

Let's pray...