

The Phantom of the Open

God at the Movies 2023, Pt. 6

[Phantom Bumper 2:05]

Today we bring to a close our God at the Movies series of 2023. Next week, I want to take a little time to talk to you about a very important topic that we ignore to our peril in these hectic days; Sabbath rest. And just a little sneak peak, the Scoma family are due for a month's sabbatical this summer and we will be taking off to spend some extended time of rest on the island of Sicily in a little town called Bisacquino. And I'll explain more of those details next week.

But the way that came about is pertinent to what I'd like to talk about today. You see, my father's people come from a town in Sicily called Corleone. And for the last decade he's been going over a couple of times a year and writing the family history. But when he goes, he doesn't stay in Corleone, he's become friends with a local developer who owns some Air B&B properties about ten minutes down the road in a little 5,000 person village set on the side of a mountain – the town of Bisacquino.

Well, the year before last, God woke my dad up in the night and told him to plant a new church in Bisacquino. He got up and did a little research and discovered that while the town had about a dozen Catholic churches,

it didn't have a single Protestant church...like ours. So whether you call it a vision, divine direction or whatever, my dad had a dream – a perhaps improbable dream of starting a church in a centuries old town in the middle of the hidden hills of central Sicily.

And the long and short of it is, he bought two 400 year old buildings just off the town square – the piazza – that he had renovated. Downstairs for a church to meet and upstairs for a pastor and their family to live, he's contacted the local Assemblies of God officials and they are working to recruit a pastor to go and partner with two strong churches in nearby towns to launch a new work in Bisacquino. The dream is close to becoming a reality.

But they don't have anybody *yet*...and the renovations are *done*...and the lovely apartment is sitting there *empty*...so the four of us are going to go live in it for a few weeks. I was there back in April if you recall and I preached at a couple of churches in the area. And I walked around Bisacquino – I should say I walked *up and down* Bisacquino, when I say build into the side of a mountain I really mean it. But as I explored I discovered that this little town is famous for one thing – and one thing only – this house. This is the house where Frank Capra was born.

After immigrating to America, Frank Capra became one of the most successful film directors of the 1930's winning the Best Director Oscar three times out of six nominations for such classic films as *It Happened One Night* and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*. In fact, it was one of his least successful films that has become his most famous, the Christmas stalwart, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Capra's own rags-to-riches story has led film historians to coin him "the American dream personified." That spirit was manifest in the movies he made – men with a seemingly impossible dream defying the odds to change a community for the better.

I think Frank Capra would be proud of my dad's dream for his Bisoquino. And I know he would have loved our movie today. In fact, *The Phantom of the Open* is the kind of movie I think Capra himself would have had a crack at, given the chance. As it turned out, Capra didn't die until 1991, a year after Maurice Flitcroft made his last run at the British Open.

Playing in the prestigious golf tournament – considered one of the four "Majors" in the world of professional golf – was the real-life Maurice's dream. He made six attempts at it, including the first in 1976 that is so wonderfully depicted by our film. I really, really enjoyed this film starring Mark Rylance – a

terrific character actor who brings a mixture of sorrow and optimism to his portrayal of Flitcroft. In fact, it was one of two little British films that I saw this year with similar themes. I considered doing God at the Movies on this or *Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris* – which was also fantastic.

Both are about working class Brit's overcoming great odds to accomplish something that most reasonable people in the world would think is rather silly. But in the end is incredibly inspiring. *Mrs Harris* was about the pursuit of a designer dress, which many men consider a meaningless and unnecessary expense. And *Phantom of the Open* is about golf, which many women consider a a meaningless and unnecessary expense!

In the end I chose this film, maybe because it is based on such an incredulous true story. I read experts from the 2011 book that first told the Maurice Flitcroft story and I was amazed by how many of the details - from his world champion disco-dancing twin sons, to his opening drive at the 1976 Open at Fornby Golf Club of 40 feet – are absolutely true. By the way, if you don't know, a 40 foot drive is incredibly embarrassing. It would be for *me* at a muni course, and I only play about 4 or 5 times a year.

But that's more times than Maurice Flitcroft had played before teeing up at one of the world's most prestigious tournaments. Because at that moment, the blue collar crane operator from a dead-end shipbuilding town in the north of England, had *never played a round of golf in his life!* He'd simply seen the tournament on TV the year before and decided, "I think I'd like to give that a try."

Where does someone even get the idea – much less the courage – to believe they could be capable of something like that? After all, England is not America. We pride ourselves on our lack of hard caste divisions. But England still has a "House of *Lords*" and a "House of *Commons*" let's not forget. Well, as a boy, the coming of the war suddenly thrust Maurice into a place where his view of the world was expanded a little ahead of many of his peers. He explains in this flashback scene early in the film. **[Shipyard 1:16]**

He may be shipyard fodder, but Maurice was given a gift many of his other workmates weren't – hope. A dream of a different kind of life than the one he had. The book of Genesis tells the story of a young boy who had a dream that set him apart from the rest of his community. The last of the big three Patriarchs of ancient Israel was Jacob – we're going to do a whole series about his grandfather, Abraham, this summer. And Jacob had twelve sons, the second to the youngest being Joseph.

Now, if you think 1960's England was a rigid culture, it had nothing on the ancient near-east. How and where you were born meant everything to your future. What your father did for a living determined what you would do. And in a culture where the eldest son inherited *everything*, birth order mattered. So we shouldn't even know who Joseph is. You ever heard of Zebulun? You have not. He's right above Joseph.

But we are told that for some reason – because Jacob was already an old man when he was born – Joseph's father loved him more than any of his other brothers. And maybe, like young Maurice, that childhood gave him a glimpse of the impossible. But that did not go over well with the rest of the boys. Plus we are told that Joseph was something of a brat, so his brothers already resented them. And then one day – one night? - Joseph had a dream in which he saw a future where all of his family would bow down before him, not to the eldest in the pecking order. And he was unwise enough to tell his brothers; "Hey guys, wait 'till you hear what I dreamed!"

So in **Genesis 37:5** we read – not surprisingly - "*Joseph had a **dream**, and when he told it to his brothers, **they hated him all the more.***" If we are honest, all of us have a love/hate relationship when it comes to people with big dreams. Even the concept of the term itself is multifaceted.

If you look it up in the dictionary, the first entry is simply “a series of thoughts that occur while sleeping” – straightforward enough. But right after that is “to indulge in daydreams or fantasies”. If you attended a parent-teacher conference and was told that your child was frequently “indulging in daydreams and fantasies” during class...would you receive that as a compliment or a critique?

How do we know the difference between a hope and a wish? When does it make sense to hope for something better and when is the wiser thing to make the most of current realities? Are there times when a dream can be damaging? How much of it is just the nature of optimist/pessimist personality traits? I recently read a leadership book with a chapter entitled “Hoping Versus Wishing” and it’s big point was that “the best predictor of the future is the past”.

Well, that sounds good and practical, but that would exclude Martin Luther King’s dream – America’s past has never looked like his preferred future. When MLK said “I have a dream”, we get inspired. Less than a decade later, John Lennon wanted to inspire with his song, *Imagine*, but when he sang, “You may say that I’m a dreamer...”. He knew that many people did not consider that a compliment. It’s often used as a term of derision.

Listen to how Joseph’s brothers use it on an occasion when his father sends him out to deliver a message to the rest of the boys. This is **Genesis 37:19-20**, “*Here comes that dreamer!*” they said to each other. “Come now, *let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.*”” Well, that seems harsh!

In our movie, Maurice’s dreams stir up plenty of angst as well – to his great surprise. He feels like since it’s called The British “Open”, it should be “open” to anyone in Britain that wants to play. The stewards of The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews saw things differently. After his dream turned into the highest score ever shot at The Open – that’s *bad* remember - they really did ban him from their game and take extraordinary measures to keep him out – even employing a handwriting expert to analyze all the applications. And Maurice really did don more and more sophisticated costumes to fake entry on five different occasions.

But in the movie, the anger that stings him the most comes closer to home. His oldest son, Michael, has been climbing the management ladder at his dad’s shipyard and he is terribly embarrassed by his father’s perceived foolishness. “Dreamer” is certainly a bad word to him.

He tells his father that you have to take up golf at 6, not 46, to which his father replies, “Says who?” Michael replies, “The world says...reality says...” He warns his father that it’s not just him, but the executives at the shipyard who feel humiliated by Maurice’s very public televised golfing performance.

And sure enough, when a round of redundancies are announced, Maurice find himself without a job. Which means he and his wife Jean lose the family home and are eventually seen living in a small trailer while he works as a street sweeper. It seems like his reckless dream has cost him everything. Even the twin disco champions come home in despair when that particular trend crashes to earth in the early 80’s. And it’s then that son Michael comes in with an accusing stance against his father, “that dreamer”.

[Ruined 1:36]

Essentially a dream is about being something you’re not – or at least not yet. But what if it is something you can never be? Is there still value in such a dream? Could it actually be damaging? We live in a world of computer generated alternative realities. I have spent literally hours existing as a blue cat-like humanoid alien exploring outer space – thank you Mass Effect and XBOX.

And like any hobby, that’s a fun distraction, but I think we have to be aware that it can be almost like a narcotic – a numbing agent to distract from the pressure of real life. And the more realistic it becomes, the greater the temptation to check out. Richard Bauckham has written some of the most influential things for me when it comes to eschatology – that is the theology of the Christian understanding of the end of times.

He wrote in a book about the power of hope: “As we are reminded each time we log out of cyberspace and our colorful simulations fade, the anxiety inducing contours of our shared history remain the same. Indeed, every retreat into individualistic fantasy threatens simply to reinforce them by diverting the vital resources of energy and effort which might otherwise make some small intrinsically worthwhile difference. Postmodern imagination is, in this sense, distinctly unethical. It fosters a sense of alienation from a public world which is, after all, a social construct which I may choose either to endorse and participate in or not.” (*Hope Beyond Hope*, 59)

I think a big way to measure whether or not our dreams are liberating, or just frivolous escapism, is to measure that very thing. Not necessarily, do they “come true”, but what does our pursuit of them plant in society? Do our dreams make a difference? Are they just for our comfort and convenience? Or do they somehow – even in a small way – make the “public world” better?

This is what I've always counseled my children as they consider career paths – don't just pick something that makes you the most money. Yes, financial provision is important, but do something that leaves a lasting good in the community. There are ways to make money that tear others down – but there are ways to earn a living that make things better. And I think especially as Christians, we have to measure the potential outcomes of our dreams.

When you know the whole story, it's pretty clear that Joseph's dream was from God. But I think at first, Joseph's immaturity probably made it just a nice daydream about how one day he'd be bigger than these jerks that were pushing him around. One day he'd be the one to do the pushing. But through a lot of adversity, God changed that. I don't think the adversity was necessary for God to redeem the dream, but the adversity is what He used to redeem Joseph to be able to fit the dream.

His dream cost him. Almost his life, but at the last minute, one of the brothers grew a conscience and said, "Let's not kill Joseph, let's just sell him into slavery and tell dad he was eaten by a lion." Well, with brothers like that...am I right? But it cost Joseph his family.

Then in Egypt, he is bought by a powerful man and eventually rises to become the head steward of his household. But then Joseph loses his job through false accusations. Land's in prison even. And he's forgotten, neglected, all kinds of things.

We don't have time for the whole story – which is a shame, because it really is one of the best stories in all the Bible – but in the end, Joseph's dream is realized, and his whole family does bow before him, but not so they can serve Joseph, but so that Joseph can save them. He is released from prison to become the Prime Minister of the nation – usually that works the other way, politician *to* prison. But it was his wisdom and skill that caused Egypt to prepare for a coming famine so that they could keep all of their people – and even some neighboring tribes like these Hebrews – from starving to death.

You see the maturity of Joseph by the end. His brothers finally figure out who this powerful Egyptian official is and they are scared to death of retribution. But by now, his ego had been tamed so that the dream isn't just for himself, but for them as well. As he says, (**Genesis 50:19-20**) *"But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'"*

So in the end, we can evaluate Joseph's dream, only because we can see that it did indeed accomplish good for the people around him. And as it turns out, that's the same stick for measuring Maurice's dream as well. If we're to measure it by the success that the PGA would normally rate such things...it's not great. He never makes any money, never wins any trophies, he really is a pretty bad golfer. Maybe Michael is right, he is a fantastic failure. Should have gotten a proper job.

After that scene of confrontation, a shaken Maurice goes out for a walk and doesn't come home. The family, suddenly worried, goes out in search of him. It is implied in the movie that he at least had thoughts of doing himself in. He had come to agree that his dream might have been a big waste and a burden on everyone. But then, when they find him on the top of his old crane, Jean pulls out a letter that had just arrived in the post. It turns out the reach of Maurice's dream was bigger than any of them realized. Let's watch...**[LETTER 1:34]**

So his dream did inspire people – not through his success, but actually through his *failure*. And they get to have a lovely banquet and meet people who had been touched by his story and even Michael came around in the end. It's a touching story and an uplifting film.

So, quit your job and take up golf? Probably not. But do think about your dreams a little. First of all, some of you need to give yourself a break for some dreams that you had that didn't come true. They can still make a difference in this world. There's a verse about comfort that always brings me...well, comfort.

Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**, "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*" You see even in our trials, and even failures, we can find something to help somebody else. I've never been laid off from a job, some of you have. You're going to be a better comfort to someone in that situation that I can be. So look for the silver lining as it were.

But I want to end with something a little more esoteric – and less pragmatic even – than an inspirational “follow your dreams no matter what” speech because I think – for the Christian at least – there's something deeper to be said for dreams. Even for escapism. Don't be a “dreamer” right? That's what proper society says. Well, I want to defend the dreamers for a minute.

We started this *God at the Movies* series with Thor and I read to you from an essay that JRR Tolkien wrote in defense of Fairy stories – that the realm of fantasy is actually very important for thinking Christians. And Tolkien included in that essay a defense of what he called “escapist literature”. This is the flip side of my earlier warning of retreating into individualistic fantasy. I think it’s a needed word of balance. So here’s Tolkien once again:

“I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used...In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic...”

“Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.”

“In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter...It is part

of the essential malady of such days - producing the desire to escape, not indeed from life, but from our present time and self-made misery - that we are acutely conscious both of the ugliness of our works, and of their evil. So that to us evil and ugliness seem indissolubly allied.”

Maurice Flitcroft was a man of imagination who happened to be born into a time and station in life in which he was locked into a prison of the industrial machine – a cog spinning away in service to the dreams of others. Why shouldn’t such a man dream of the stars? Just because no one else could see true beauty, why shouldn’t he?

When I was a kid, I was a dreamer. I read everything I could get my hands on – didn’t matter the genre really – but whatever I read, I *lived*. In my mind. When I read Matt Christopher’s “*The Kid Who Only Hit Homers*”, the bat was in *my* hands. Even though I was a terrible athlete and usually picked last on the school playground. When I read “*The Chronicles of Prydain*”, by Lloyd Alexander, I was the assistant pig-keeper on a magical quest to become a hero. Rescuing the princess – even though at school none of the princesses ever looked my way.

We lived on 6 acres when I was growing up and I used to map out our land into different kingdoms and create rival tribes for the different areas. I would walk the property and imagine great battles taking place. And the reality was, I liked those worlds a whole lot better than the one I was living in. Oh, I lived a safe middle class suburban lifestyle with loving parents.

But even then I could sense that there was something wrong with this world. Elementary, junior high, those were cruel worlds – I didn't fit. I was very quiet, very shy. The first time I saw Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, I knew I belonged on the island of misfit toys – but in my imagination I was leading that sleigh on Christmas Eve. I spent most of my childhood escaping from the ugliness of the world – in my imagination.

Even now it frightens me to admit all that to you. It's too vulnerable. I'd rather lie and make up stories about being the cool kid. I mean who would know, *you* weren't there? My parents are in their 80's, if they contradict me I can have them put in a home! You know how the elderly forget.

But the reality is, it's much easier to admit that I *was* a dreamer than to confess that I still *am*. I have family responsibilities now, a church to lead even, so I can't totally get lost in my head like a used to. But I can find my moments of escapism. You've heard of a functional alcoholic? Well I'm a functional dreamer. I have all kinds of places I go to in my head. And I've learned to evaluate them theologically.

Sometimes they are just self-centered attempts to shut out the noise – like the video games I used to play. But I realized that most of them are a longing for a world the way it was meant to be. A world that only exists in the imagination. I think that's what drew me to theology. Maybe imagination is at the heart of theology. A longing for what could be. You remember we said eschatology is the fancy word for the study of the end of time?

The greatest Russian Orthodox theologian of the last century, Sergei Bulgakov, said, “**Eschatology is the foundational element of Christianity. It contains the answers to all the torments and questionings of the life of this age, to all its ruptures, incomprehensibilities, and tragic difficulties...For the gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God coming in power and proclaimed to all creation, and our souls thirst and wait expectantly for this kingdom coming in power and glory**” (*Sophiology of Death*, 19)

Everything is pointing toward the end. The Bible is full of apocalyptic literature – fanciful and imaginative depictions of a world that seems so strangely different than our own. The prophet Isaiah is given a vision from God that begins, (**Isaiah 65:17**), “*See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, **nor will they come to mind.***” He’s saying the way things are now will seem so dull that we won’t even remember them the minute we see what’s coming. Once you get into Disney World, you don’t think of the parking lot outside for the rest of the day.

So we keep reading Isaiah’s dream and we can imagine it, we can harvest grapes without ever losing a crop, play with our children without ever facing a health scare, chat with our 200-year-old neighbors, lay down hay for the oxen to eat, and watch the lions – not eat them - but eat *with* them. Now, I’ve never seen that at the zoo, but I can imagine it. So that can’t be the extent of the “things not remembered” – that’s just a better version of what we have now.

But by the time we get to Revelation, St. John’s vision becomes all together too much for us. When it all wraps up at the throne of the conquering Jesus who proclaims, “I am making everything new” we are forced to believe him. Nobody can agree on how to interpret this. Even how to picture it. Some say, it’s very literal and “I’m going to explain to you exactly who the anti-christ is”...again.

Against this overly literal mistake, you have other people who say of it’s all myth and has nothing to do with the future at all. Just metaphors for what we are already living through – and here is the cypher to all the mysteries. But neither of those views take any imagination.

People have been arguing over Revelation probably since it was written. I don’t know of an issue in the history of the church more divisive than our view of the end times. My denomination just kicked out a long-term faithful scholar because he dared write a book saying maybe we should be a little more humble about our approach to end times.

I think at the heart of it is we’re all afraid to dream. To admit that we’re all a little like Maurice Flitcroft with dreams of the impossible. Dreams that the world and reality would say are foolishness. But that’s what is required to be a Christian. To dream of a world where “behold all things are new.” Bauckham goes on to say this about hope: “According to the popular proverb ‘You don’t miss what you have never had.’ **But to imagine is, for all practical purposes, already to have had, to have tasted the fruit which lies beyond, to have one’s appetite for the possible thoroughly whetted so that the actual begins to taste sour by comparison. Soon hope begins to devise strategies for escape.**” 56

Polite society condemns the attempt to escape from the “real world”. But again, who wouldn’t want to escape from a prison that reeks with the unholy stench of death? But you don’t have to fight over Revelation to see the dream of a better tomorrow, it’s right smack in the middle of the Bible. The gospels themselves are thoroughly eschatological documents designed to direct the reader to the promise of God and it’s fantastical irruption within dull “realistic” history’s midst, in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

You can’t believe the gospel without an imagination because it is bookended with disruptions of the ordinary and acceptable. Think of how it starts – Christmas – an angel appears to Mary and says she will conceive and give birth to a son. Her response is what anyone’s would be, (**Luke 1:34**) “*How can this be,*” *Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”* There is nothing rational about a virgin birth. It’s as fantastical as an elf riding a dragon. How can this be? Surely this is impossible, outrageous, unnatural? But it is what is required.

But the gospels are just getting started. The virgin birth is just the entry marker to story after story of miracles, healings, demons and more. We may have more scientific understanding than Jesus’ contemporaries, but they were no more comfortable with these oddities than we are. Mary’s question was constantly on people’s lips during Jesus’ life – “How can this be?”

But if the virginal conception marks the beginning of this outrageous disruption of the world’s orderly system, it is with the Resurrection of Jesus –Easter – that it reaches its climax. Here if anywhere the question “How can this be?” is forced from the lips of Jesus’s friends and foes alike. Because “The dead don’t rise” is an irrefutable fact of this rational world.

But it is just these things that the Christian confession demands of us. We must believe in something much more improbable than a novice dock-worker winning the British Open. We are called to believe the impossible. That virgins conceive. That water becomes wine. That the dead do indeed rise again. And for that, I think my lifetime of escapist fantasy has been a good preparation. And they both scandalize all the right people.

But be warned, just like with any dreams, they can be used to help or to harm. It’s never hard to find members of the church who have weaponized eschatology. Like those narcotic level post-modern escapist scenarios that leave us no good to society, plenty of Christians have a view of the end times that “fosters a sense of alienation from a public world.” I’ll just say in short-hand, if your interpretation of Revelation is some version of “me and the right kind of folk are going to-all-inclusive-resort-heaven and the rest of y’all can go to hell”, you’re doing it wrong.

“Jesus loves me, but he can’t stand you” maybe a great country song, but it’s not a worship song. Remember Maria Kondo’s advice on the best way to decide what to keep and what to throw away? “Take each item in one’s hand and ask: “Does this spark joy?” If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it.” I have to tell you, that’s a pretty good rule for theology as well. There’s too much end-times theology out there that does not spark joy. What did Joseph say when he finally came to a mature place about his dream? “Am I in the place of God?” We are not.

So be a dreamer, but have a dream that makes everyone around you better for it. Let me leave you with one last quote by Bauckham on how to hopefully and joyfully interpret eschatology. How to walk that wise balance. These is how to read that weird apocalyptic literature; “The description is not literal but imaginative. It is fictive, but intends to be taken seriously as an imaginative account of how things will be in the eschaton. When we reach the concluding, 'Thus says the Lord', we should be thinking *neither* 'that’s literally what it will be like', *nor* 'this is just an imaginary world which tells us nothing true at all'.”

“The appropriate response is: yes, all that, and, *of course*, unimaginably more and better. The new creation will fulfill the authentic utopias of every generation, and still more and still better. It’s transcendence is of an inclusive, rather than an exclusive sort.”

Be a dreamer, because one day – the promise of the gospel is - all of our dreams will come true. We may indeed all be lying in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Let’s pray...