

Peter Keyel on the Usefulness of Superhero Movies

Colleagues,

I learned early this morning that a pathophobic phillumenist is a matchbook collector who is scared to death of getting sick. While I can't suppose the rest of you were aching to know this too, still, there it is.

The source of this revelation was the daily note I get from Anu Garg's team at wordsmith.org. I've been ignoring these in recent weeks, my attention wholly consumed by the astonishments and fulminations that keep gushing from the morning news feed. The flow has been especially intense over these past ten days of Brussels, Britain, and Helsinki, and nothing has astonished more than the news that isn't there. Seriously, had Obama said and done as Trump did on Monday, the articles of impeachment would be ready for a vote in the House tomorrow with the Fox News crowd prepping gleefully for its role as Madame Defarge. As it is, the wrath of God is by no means done with America, the Almighty expressing Godself as if by absence or omission, leaving the dark lord of tribal mendacity firmly in place to despoil the land and bring shame on the people who dwell therein. And yes, to the extent that folks on the left are in enthusiastic thrall to this same lord, Donald Trump is their champion too. God's wrath, as the Psalmist observes, is not without its biting humor. He who sits in the heavens laughs them to scorn, and the cherubim chortle along. Or so it seems.

But these, gloomy and grim, are the reflections of the current hour's late night. When I rolled from bed at daybreak I felt instead that there was only so much news a single crow could take, and I determined to breakfast for a change on something

trivial and light. So I popped open that Wordsmith note and munched contentedly for a few minutes on the alliterative extravagance of phrases like “a pathophobe with phillumenistic fancies,” and—to the present point—I decided to keep things light for you as well today.

All this is by way of explanation for the following post. The general topic is superhero movies. Unless you’ve been snoozing somewhere with Rip Van Winkle, you’ll have noticed that they’ve been smashing box office records around the world for the last decade or more. A couple of weeks ago I stumbled across two reflections on the phenomenon, one dismissive ([in The New York Times](#)), the other enthusiastic ([in The Washington Post](#)). Both merit the attention of anyone who is trying to put a finger on the mindset of the times we’re in; and if one’s goal is to address an age’s deepest fears and hopes with the promise of Christ, then it’s all the more important to seek these out within those things that most fascinate the age. It’s not for nothing that people spend buckets of money to watch the Avengers smashing up New York in their battle with the bad guys.

Mulling on this, it occurred to me that Peter Keyel sent me an essay on precisely these lines a while back. It’s been languishing in the storehouse awaiting a propitious moment for pushing it along. That moment is now. Peter was a member of the Crossings board when he wrote the essay, and he aims in part to explicate our so-called Crossings methodology. His bigger goal is to help the rest of us dig into a movie to discern two things. First, how it serves as a proxy for God’s law, exposing the hearts of the people who watch it; second, how it sets the stage for a proclamation of Christ that people might hear and wind up thanking God.

The movie Peter explores is Marvel’s “Guardians of the Galaxy.” If you don’t know it, are at all inclined to watch it, and don’t

like having plot lines exposed before you've followed them yourself, then hit the "Pause" button here and get busy watching. Otherwise, read on.

One last quick note before exiting stage left and leaving you to Peter: the 2019 Crossings Conference is set to launch on January 27, running to noon on the 30th. The conversation, centered on the topic "[When God is Silent](#)," will be fueled by Fred Niedner, Susan Briehl and Rob Saler among others. I hope you'll mark your calendars today with happy plans to be there.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Tracking Entertainment: "Guardians of the Galaxy"

by Peter Keyel

Crossings uses a six-step matrix to examine Biblical texts for words of Law and Gospel. That matrix is applied in three phases, to a Biblical text (Grounding), to a real issue in someone's life (Tracking) and then comparing the two to identify both Law and Gospel in life (Crossing). Although easy in theory, application takes some practice, especially Tracking and Crossing. Tracking is the second phase, which critically examines a "slice of life" from someone's story. This phase can get very personal very fast as we ask the same hard, critical questions that we would of a Biblical text—not just Step 1: what is the surface problem?, but also Step 2: what is the deeper, heart problem? and Step 3: what is the God problem? Even in just asking these questions, we tend to evoke defensiveness, and a need to justify oneself. The Old Adam/Eve that lives within each of us resists the accusing Word of God's Law. In so many

conversations, we raise walls of defensiveness and misdirection to shut down the conversation and prevent us from hearing God's Word of Law. This is not surprising, given the desolation that one faces in Step 2 and especially Step 3. Tragically, in refusing to face God's Law, we also shut ourselves away from the Good News that God in Christ has reconciled us to Him. To overcome this defensiveness/self-righteousness, one common approach is to try hammering and battering at those walls of defensiveness that others raise, as though we can break through via dint of arms. This only makes things worse. Is there a better way?

One alternative approach for Tracking—bringing our real, human problem out into the open comes from Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments. Two examples from the Old Testament are 2 Samuel and Jonah. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan applies God's Law to David. However, he does so by engaging David in a Tracking exercise that dodges the walls of defensiveness David would almost certainly raise. In Jonah 4, God uses a worm and bush to similar effect on Jonah. I don't know anyone who can create worms and bushes like God, and I suspect that like me, many people lack the ability to come up with a perfectly fitting parable right on the spot like Nathan. Thankfully, we don't need to do either of these things, because we have many tools already at our disposal. Along with Scripture, from which we can pull texts and parables for our Grounding phase, we also have professional story-tellers to assist with the Tracking phase. The success of these story-tellers often rests on their ability to connect with an audience emotionally. This connection relies on shared experiences that are usually already "translated" into local cultural understandings. Additionally, one subset of these stories, movies, are widely distributed, readily accessible to many people and appeal directly to people who might otherwise not be interested in Tracking, Crossings, or anything linked to

theology. All of these aspects make movies good proxies for Tracking individual people.

When one identifies strongly with a character, Tracking a movie character is not just good practice for Tracking, but it also becomes a way of Tracking someone's life in a "safer" manner. This helps us avoid the risk and the need to overtly open our human hearts to those Tracking with us. This means the first Grounding phase and final Crossing phase with movies can also end up as more than just practice. Since the Crossing phase is helping a sinner see how all six steps in the Crossings matrix—both the accusing parts and the Good News of the Gospel—connect in their life, movies become a conduit carrying the life-saving Gospel, even ones that have nothing ostensibly to do about religion.

"Guardians of the Galaxy" is a recent exemplar of a non-religious movie that could serve as a conduit for the Gospel. Although the villain is ostensibly a religious fanatic, religion does not play a role in the lives of any of the protagonists, who are best developed for Tracking. This helps set the stage for identifying with real life situations, where God and "organized religion" may seem quite distant. However, despite the apparent distance to theology, there is a wealth of material for practicing Tracking, and in so doing, setting the stage for a Law-and-Gospel-grounded conversation. The movie is a good action movie to boot. One particular gift in "Guardians of the Galaxy" is that unlike other Marvel movies, the protagonists are "outlaws", which in practice translates simply to sinners. They are people who, while generally alien in appearance, possess very understandable and readily identifiable motives, desires and needs. One powerful aspect of this movie is that it lays bare the emotions and desires of the Guardians, which corresponds with Step 2 in the Crossings matrix. It also goes further to illustrate how these sinful emotions and desires all

lead to death (Step 3), and how the Guardians respond after facing death (step 6). Each of the Guardians can be individually Tracked, which would make for a great group activity, since they span a reasonable range of sin. Much as repentance in the Old Testament does not overtly involve Jesus' death and resurrection, the repentance present in this movie also avoids overt God-talk or deep examination of the changes that each character undergoes (Steps 4 and 5), though near-death experiences certainly figure heavily into most of them. Thus, the movie provides a large amount of starting material, but also leaves a crucial hole at the most important steps.

As one example of this bounty, I will Track one of the Guardians, Drax, the Destroyer. His surface problem in the movie is the loss he suffered when Ronan murdered his family. He misses them and wants revenge against Ronan. To that end, he wants to destroy Ronan and everything associated with Ronan, provoking his attempt to kill Gamora, one of Ronan's associates, in prison. His grief over losing his loved ones blinds him to his compatriots' plights and most other things around him. His single-minded lust for revenge leads him sacrifice everything to get a chance to kill Ronan. When it becomes clear that his compatriots are successfully hiding from Ronan, he chooses to betray them and the safety of the Infinity Stone by summoning Ronan to their secret location. The great part about Marvel movies is that the result of this single-minded focus on revenge as a coping strategy for his grief is that we watch the results. Ronan beats him nearly to death and throws him in a vat of spinal fluid to drown. The consequences of his choices are very clear. Being in a superhero movie, Drax survives this loss because he is pulled from the vat before he fully drowns by the very friends he betrayed. It is only after his defeat, and rescue by his friends, that Drax is now repentant. He realizes what his bondage to his grief and his idol of revenge have cost

both him, and the others with him. Because of this, he is willing to face Ronan again, not to kill him for revenge, but to stop him from killing an entire planet. He does this, knowing that he will likely die in the attempt, but free of his idol. Unlike the other steps, what drives him through repentance and on to Step 6 is not clear in the movie. However, it seems clear that he willingly does so with his friends because his heart has changed, not because he has found a new law or a new set of rewards to pursue. Even after Ronan is defeated, we get a picture of Drax, very much a sinner-saint: at the end he asks Nova Corps law enforcement (=Law) whether it is lawful to kill and fails either to accept or understand 'no'. This makes it clear that the Old Adam lives yet inside him.

Aside from Tracking the other Guardians in the movie, the other phases of the Crossings method are Grounding and Crossing. I encourage readers to practice choosing Grounding texts and then Crossing that chosen text with the Tracking laid out in the last paragraph. Even better would be sharing those choices with the rest of the Community.