Let’s face it – Auntie Em is ridiculous. The woman was wrong from the start of the movie to the finish. I had not until recently thought about The Wizard of Oz in such detail until recently, especially this last week, and since some of us watched it again the other night. It has long been an iconic movie for me – has been in our culture for over 70 years – but in the last week Auntie Em’s stock and the Wizard’s went down with me, and Dorothy’s went up!

This is the last summer installment of our Faith and Film series (Jesus and the Jedi), and we finish with the Wizard of Oz. Filmed in 1939, starring a 17-year old Judy Garland, directed by Victor Fleming, and written off the 1900 book by Frank Baum, it was one of the first films to use Technicolor – and dramatically, as the action begins in a sepia-toned Kansas, changing to brilliant color when Dorothy’s house, swept away by a cyclone, lands in Oz. (“Oz” comes from Frank Baum’s file cabinet, bottom drawer, O –Z.)

Before we parse this film and put it in conversation with scripture, let us note that it is a fairy tale, and in writing the book, L. Frank Baum warned us against turning to allegory. Fairy tales have certain characteristics: Frederick Buechner reminds us that in fairy tales the enchanted world is not very far at all from the ordinary world – one need only step through the looking glass, enter through a wardrobe, come upon a cottage in the forest, or fall on your bed in a Kansas farmhouse. The protagonist is usually changed in a major way – a frog into a prince, a duckling into a swan, a marionette into a real boy, a British schoolboy into a master wizard, a farmer into a Jedi Knight. It happens.

In 1939, The Wizard of Oz lost the Academy Award for best film to Gone with the Wind. But in 1939 the nation was still closer to Kansas roots, to home, and didn’t need the fairy tale. By the time of the 1950’s, and television, there was massive social displacement, and greater anxiety about rootlessness. Philosopher Aaron Fortune wrote: “Deep down, we know that Dorothy’s right, that there is no place like home, because that’s the country we grew up in – that’s what’s in our blood. But today we need to hear it a little more often, because the voices of those who would tell you otherwise are getting awfully, awfully loud.”

Surely you’ve seen it, but if not – Dorothy Gale, a teen-aged orphan, lives with her aunt and uncle on a Kansas wheat farm. Dorothy wants to be somewhere less harsh, and in black and white sepia tones, ironically sings of her longing to be “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” where there are no troubles. The local biddy, Almira Gulch, was bitten by Dorothy’s little Cairn Terrier, Toto, and wants to put the dog to death. Auntie Em folds up like a cheap shirt and gives the dog away, but it jumps out of Gulch’s bicycle basket on the way home. Dorothy gets the dog, runs away, a tornado comes though, and she runs home, is in the house when the tornado sweeps it away. Dorothy hits her head, and when she comes to, the house has landed in the magical world of Oz. She steps out of the house into Technicolor, the wondrous Munchkinland, discovering that her house has landed on and killed the Wicked Witch of the East. The Munchkins are overjoyed. The good Witch of the North, Glinda, arrives, wanting to know if Dorothy is a good witch or a bad witch, and giving her the deceased’s ruby slippers. Dorothy just wants to go home, and Glinda sends her down the yellow brick road to find the wonderful Wizard of Oz to seek a way home.
On her journey she encounters a talking Scarecrow who only wants a brain, so he can think deep thoughts, a Tin Woodsman who wants a real heart to he can feel, and a Cowardly Lion who wants courage. Upon arriving at the gleaming Emerald City of Oz, the Wizard sends them on a quest to capture the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West. They combat soldiers and flying monkeys to invade the witch’s castle, finally defeating her when Dorothy accidentally throws water on her and melts her. Returning to the Wizard with the broom – his glowing apparition floating in mid-air – he at first is hesitant, until the dog Toto pulls a curtain away from a mechanical image generator that exposes the wizard as nothing but a man. Yet he grants their requests in creative ways, because they already had the attributes they sought – giving the Scarecrow a diploma (Th.D.-Doctor of Thinkology), the Tin Woodsman a heart-shaped clock, and the Lion a medal for courage inducting him into an imaginary society. Dorothy is harder to satisfy, and the Wizard – who had arrived in Oz via hot-air balloon – prepares to take her to Kansas in it when Toto jumps from the basket, Dorothy chases him, the balloon goes away. Fortunately good witch Glinda arrives telling Dorothy to click the heels of her ruby slippers 3 times and say “There’s no place like home,” and she wakes in Kansas to find her aunt and uncle, farmhands with the faces of her traveling companions in Oz, and the realization that she does not have to look farther than her own backyard.

Simple. So why has this movie been iconic in the culture for more than 70 years? There have been wonderful spin-offs: The Wiz, a wonderful Broadway play set in the Black community, where Dorothy is a Kindergarten teacher in Harlem who has never been south of 125th St., but in her journey that direction discovers home is not a place but a people – her African-American people, and that home is relational. We “ease on down the road” but we do it together. And then more recently, Wicked, a Broadway play off the book by Geoffrey Maguire, which looks at the fairy tale from the viewpoint of the Wicked Witch of the West, who he names Elphabah, who unlike Dorothy, leaves home on purpose to combat in justice she has encountered, and unlike Dorothy has no protectors, and is “the perfect embodiment of a feminist hero.”

So what is going on in this movie? When Dorothy sets off down the yellow brick road, and picks up her traveling companions, they embark on a common quest. It is as old as the Iliad or the Odyssey or King Arthur’s knights searching for the Grail, as modern as Frodo and Samwise delivering the ring of power to Mordor. The journey is not solo, we take it together. That road starts out orderly in Munchkinland, but becomes forked, overgrown with poisonous poppies, and dangerous. There is the setback, having reached Oz, when the Wizard sends them back out on a knight’s-errand to get the witch’s broom, but they all develop more. Through their actions, they create themselves into the character they seek to be. Note: the Wizard has nothing to do with it! “It is when they become as concerned with each other as with their own quests that they are able to differentiate themselves from the evil beings of Oz.”

They have longings to fulfill, but the journey itself, the quest, fulfills that more than the ending. A wise man said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Which is similar to Calvin’s contention that all knowledge is knowledge of God.

But think about what is really happening. The Scarecrow always has a brain and thinks, even from his post telling Dorothy: “Bend the nail down and maybe I’ll slip off.” In one of the funnier lines, Dorothy asks, “How can you talk if you haven’t got a brain?” He answers, “I don’t know, but some people without brains do an awful lot of talking don’t they?” And she agrees. It is interesting that when he gets his diploma from the Wizard, he begins to err, saying, “The sum of the square roots of any 2 sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side.” But that’s right triangles, not isosceles, squares of the sides, not the square roots.
It is the Scarecrow who plots the entry into the witch’s stronghold, the Cowardly Lion who fights off flying monkeys and leads the charge, and the Tin Woodsman who wants a heart so badly that his heart aches, he cries, and rusts his joints. Each of them sought what they already had.

Even Dorothy, who only wanted to go home. Salman Rushdie, commenting on the film argues for two competing dreams here – one of escape (somewhere over the rainbow) and one of home. “There’s no place like home,” becomes a mantra. And in the end, Dorothy finds that what she longs for in escape is available at home, but is changed, in that she will always have a home, and her home will always expand – her backyard may include eventually the whole world, because she is changed. Salah Rushdie thinks Over the Rainbow ought to be the anthem of all the world’s migrants, searching for the place where “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

You can go home again, but you don’t go unchanged, Dorothy didn’t go unchanged. The home Dorothy left is different than the one she returned to because she is different. And she herself is part of what home means (as are you), and it will be to large degree what you create it to be. (Flamm and Rea say: “We should not go back to Kansas as it was when Kansas was all there was.”

When Dorothy wakes up in Kansas, Auntie Em says, “Lie quiet now, you’ve just had a bad dream” She is wrong. It wasn’t a dream, had none of the muddled character of a dream, and Dorothy is right to protest that it wasn’t a dream, that it was (as she said) a real place, and a wonderful place at that. It was a place in which Dorothy became, no less than her companions, what she longed for. German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that “we are born, so to speak, provisionally, it doesn’t matter where: it is only gradually that we compose, within ourselves, our true place of origin, so that we may be born there retrospectively.”

I said earlier Dorothy’s stock went up for me, while others’ went down. Oz turns out to be a city in the chains of the wizard, putting on a show, and it doesn’t matter how lovely your emerald-colored glasses make it, how much you stuff the scarecrow, buff a shine into the tin man or tie bows in the lion’s mane, a hapless despot is still throwing them to the flying monkeys. The Wizard of Oz himself, in this movie, is a cynical phony, inept and powerless, afraid of witches and unaware of even the power of the slippers, who tricks little girls into fighting witches and then rewards them with trinkets. He only gave the trinkets when he was exposed, as Toto (who caused this ruckus in the first place) unveils his fakery. Even Glinda the good witch is a vapid nincompoop who doesn’t seem to know much.

But Dorothy, she grows from the inept. Pouty, underfoot child, to a moral agent who overthrows evil in not just one, but three kingdoms, liberates people, redeems life, aids her friends without demanding a thing in return, and is the catalyst for change everywhere she goes. She is a wild card. She is a tornado blowing through Oz and leaving freedom and redemption in her wake. It is no accident that her last name is Gale. If you think about it, in that last scene when she wakes up in Kansas, they have no idea what they are in for. “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” She’s no witch, she’s a Jedi Knight. Next time Almira Gulch comes looking for puppies to persecute she is gonna get kicked right in the … bicycle.

So here’s the scriptural point: the enchanted land and the ordinary are a breath apart. When Isaiah stood terrified in the temple, before the Lord, there was no hidden charlatan behind the curtain, no buffer between the prophet and God. God is that close, and asks, “Whom shall I send
and who will go for us?” Isaiah croaks out, scared as Dorothy before the great and terrible Oz, but him with reason: “Here I am, Lord. Send me.” The living God himself called Isaiah in time and space, out of his normal world to serve.

Paul writes in Romans that “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God…. in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage …and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” It’s the fairy tale story of Dorothy transformed, or Luke Skywalker, or Peter the Apostle, or Paul, or you or me, called into wonder by the Maker. Today we baptize Banks Webb into the church, and I promise we are using the same water that melted the Wicked Witch and set the people free – the water of life. We are becoming, being revealed, as we travel together the path, the way, the yellow brick road, and help one another in that becoming, to become more like Jesus, like the sons and daughters of God, with every action that shapes us. Ann Lamott writes about why she makes her son Sam, get cleaned up and go to church. “The main reason is, I want to give him what I found in the world, that is to say, a path and a little light to see by.”

Paul’s promise is that we are not yet what we shall be, but that creation itself is waiting for us to join it in completeness, obtaining the freedom of the children of God. That expert of fairy tales, C.S. Lewis, wrote that “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors and everlasting splendors.”

This summer we have looked at tales that rise from our culture, in film, and tried to show how they tie to THE story, the only story, the greatest enchantment and mystery, that of the life of God, infused through Christ into the very fabric of our world. We are becoming, grace-filled beyond measure, if you can for a moment believe the scripture, that once upon a time this was set in motion by no less than our Creator. If Dorothy can do it, you can do it, we might say. As I told the 8:30 service back in June, on the first Sunday of the series, I want you all to become Jedi Knights. Or “disciples” is another word for it. So that when the Lord calls, “Whom shall I send?” you will answer, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.”

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3 ibid, Wicked Feminism, Pam Saliers, p. 291
4 ibid, Off to See the Wizard, James McLachlan, p. 145.
5 Socrates, in Apology, by Plato, line 38a.
6 op cit Auxier, Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain, Tschaeppe, Mark, p. 101
8 Op cit Auxier, Coloring Kansas, Matthew Flamm and Jennifer Rea.
9 Rilke, Rainer Maria, The Migrant’s Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households, Temple University Press. 2004, p. 137.