WORTH WATCHING
A Movie Review by Nathanael Hood, MA, New York University

The Nativity Story

Directed by Catherine Hardwicke
2006
The United States of America

Twilight approaches and a young woman has been cornered in the center of her village. The men brandish rocks and the women stand nearby, their silence betraying tacit approval. “Stone her,” they scream as the mob tightens closer and closer together. A young man carrying wood is accosted: “Let him cast the first stone!” He moves forward, hate burning in his eyes, stone at the ready in his hand. At one time, he may have loved the woman before him. They were even promised to be married. But now young Mary is pregnant, her honor ruined and his reputation shamed. The law is clear: she must be killed.

But as he readies the first blow, an angel cloaked in white materializes in front of him. “Joseph. Fear not. For that which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall be --.” And with a start, Joseph wakes up. It was just a dream. Or perhaps a vision? And then Joseph knows: his betrothed told the truth. She will bear a son. His name shall be Jesus. And He will be the Messiah. In all of Catherine Hardwicke’s The Nativity Story (2006), perhaps no other scene better captures the film’s intent and purpose. A cinematic retelling of the Annunciation and Nativity of Jesus Christ, The Nativity Story differs from most other adaptations of Christ’s birth by focusing not on the Savior himself, but on his parents.

Though the film is firmly rooted in the tradition of the Gospels, it is more of a character study than a mere recreation of biblical events. Much of the first half of the film is devoted to Mary (Keisha Castle-Hughes) and Joseph (Oscar Isaac) trying to come to terms with the duty to which they have been called. What was it like for a young, unmarried woman in ancient Judea to become pregnant? What kind of anger, fury, and feelings of betrayal must Joseph have felt? Such topics are familiar territory for Hardwicke, a director known for making films dealing with troubled youth like Thirteen (2003) and, most notably, the first adaptation of Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight series.

The moments when the central narrative are approached from a purely historical and cultural context are when The Nativity Story shines brightest. Joseph and Mary’s village was constructed to be both historically accurate and fully functional. The actors were taught how to use period-specific tools and even trained in mundane household tasks like making cheese from goat-milk.
Rarely have Nativity films managed to portray the truly terrifying and suffocating presence of the Romans so successfully. Crucified rebels line the paths to towns and dot the cliffs overlooking cities. Ruthless soldiers steal young girls from families unable to pay their taxes. Even the Jewish temples are darkened by the shadow of Rome. Caesar Augustus’ census decree is seen as just another injustice that must be obediently followed under penalty of violent retribution. Indeed, Hardwicke’s Judea is not just a meager setting for an epic; it is a living, breathing environment ripe with political intrigue and social unrest.

Unfortunately, the film is not perfect. Some of the drama is tepid and stale, particularly in the second half when Joseph and Mary actually travel to Bethlehem. The film also has a tendency to abandon plot threads. For example, much of the first fifteen minutes of the film is devoted to the story of Zachariah, Elizabeth, and the birth of John the Baptist. And while they do reappear later in the film as a temporary refuge for Mary when she first becomes pregnant, the entire storyline concerning John the Baptist is dropped. If the film had flashed forward about thirty years in the future at the end of the film to when John baptized Jesus, then this sub-plot would have had purpose. But as it stands, John the Baptist’s birth is merely a pointless narrative cul-de-sac.

The Nativity Story is not a flawless film. But it is worth watching at least once. Too many times we Christians have a tendency to view the events of the Bible as mere stories featuring larger-than-life characters. But The Nativity Story humanizes the Greatest Story Ever Told, desperately reminding us that at the center of Jesus’ birth was a scared young woman and a frightened young man. Jesus wasn’t born in some nondescript village in the distant, unknowable past. Jesus was born in a specific time period to specific people in a specific culture. And by embracing this, the story of Christ’s birth becomes de-mythologized, thereby achieving new levels of immediacy and importance in our everyday lives.

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