

“The Gospel According to Gump”

Scripture: I Samuel 3:1-11

Series: *At the Movies 1. Forrest Gump*

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Earlier this year we asked you to vote for your favorite films. May I have the envelope? The winner of the Woodside Academy Award is *Forrest Gump*. This one topped them all by far. It ran away from the competition faster than Forrest ran from the Greenbow, Alabama bullies. Released on July 6, 1994, *Forrest Gump* earned over \$678 million worldwide and won six Academy Awards including: Best Picture, Best Director for Robert Zemeckis, and Best Actor for Tom Hanks. Even the soundtrack, with all those classic tunes, sold 12 million copies.

People love this movie. It's on my top ten. In fact, I even made a pilgrimage to Savannah, Georgia to stroll by the church in the opening credits (of course it's Presbyterian) and to sit on Forrest's Park bench in Chippewa Square. He didn't show up to offer me a box of chocolates. I guess he was out catching shrimp.

For the five of you who never saw it, here's a quick summary. *Forrest Gump* is raised by a single mother who takes in boarders and dishes out wisdom like “Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're going to get” and “Stupid is as stupid does.” Forrest has a below average IQ, a spine as crooked as a politician, and leg braces that look like they belong in a medieval torture museum. Not your typical hero type. Surprisingly, the one thing he can do is run! And as we follow Forrest's race through the 50s, 60s, and 70s he unexpectedly and unintentionally appears at many historic turning points of these tumultuous decades. He teaches Elvis to swivel, helps desegregate the University of Alabama, wins the congressional medal of honor for his courage in Vietnam, opens diplomatic relations with China by playing ping pong, launches the road running craze, founds a multimillion-dollar shrimp boat fleet, blows the whistle on Watergate and meets three Presidents in the White House. Just one of these achievements should make him famous and fit for life. Forrest does them all and yet they don't change him. He doesn't care about being rich, famous, revered or followed.

Not so with two key people in his life. Lieutenant Dan Taylor seeks a destiny. He longs for the honor and glory of dying in battle just as his ancestors did in every major American war. After Forrest saves him from an ambush, Lt. Dan is forced to live life without his legs. Swamped with self-pity, depression and rage, he rails against God, people and Forrest for winning the medal of honor he so coveted.

Dan: We all have a destiny, nothing just happens, it's all part of a plan. I should have died with my men. But now I'm nothing but a cripple, a legless freak, Do you know what it's like not to be able to use your legs?

Forrest: Yes sir I do.

Dan: You cheated me out of my destiny. I was supposed to die in the field with honor. That was my destiny and you cheated me out of it. This wasn't supposed to happen – not to me. I was Lt. Dan Taylor.

Forrest: You still are Lt. Dan.

Later Forrest meets up with Lt. Dan on New Year's Eve 1971. Dan asks Forrest,

Dan: Have you found Jesus yet?

Forrest: I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for.

Dan: That's what all these cripples down at the VA say – Jesus this, Jesus that. Have I found Jesus? God is listening but I have to accept him with my heart. So if I accept Jesus I'll get to walk beside him in the kingdom of heaven. What a crock of ...

Forrest: I'm going to heaven lieutenant Dan.

It's safe to say Dan's a little angry with God.

The other lost soul in Forrest's life is his best friend Jenny. Abused as a child by her widowed alcoholic father, Jenny prays for God to make her like a bird to fly away. In college, Jenny asks Forrest:

Jenny: Do you have a dream of what you're going to be?

Forrest: Who am I going to be? Aren't I going to be me?

Jenny: I want to be famous. I want to be a singer like Joan Baez. I just want to be on an empty stage with my guitar, my voice. Just me.

For the rest of the film she is always trying to fly away and be famous. But instead of stardom, Jenny is simply used and abused until she abuses drugs. She flies through the folk scene, the hippie protests, the disco clubs. At one point she tells Forrest he doesn't know what love is. Yet she's the one longing for love and never finding it, always trying to fly away from the scars of her past, always flying into the arms of more abusers, until she attempts to fly off a balcony. She never achieves her dream, her destiny of fame.

Destiny. This film asks: do we have a destiny? At the end, Forrest says, I don't know if Momma is right or if it's Lieutenant Dan. Don't know if we each have a destiny or if we're all just floating around accidental like on a breeze – maybe it's both. Maybe both happening at the same time.

This question is symbolized by a feather floating aimlessly on the breeze at the opening and closing of the film. Actor Tom Hanks says,

Our destiny is only defined by how we deal with the chance elements to our life and that's kind of the embodiment of the feather as it comes in. Here is this thing

that can land anywhere and that it lands at your feet. It has theological implications that are really huge.¹

What is the Gospel according to Gump? Destiny is not a pre-written script. Forrest's Momma, played by Sally Field, says on her deathbed,

I was destined to be your Momma. I did the best I could. I happen to believe you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you.

The path of your life is a partnership between you and God. How you use what God gives you to respond to the wind gusts of life determines your destiny.

This movie challenges our usual image of a destiny. We think a destiny is some grand achievement like winning the Medal of Honor, dying a heroic death in battle or standing in the spotlight of fame. Those are the destinies Dan and Jenny seek and they almost destroy them. Forrest receives all those and more and it doesn't change him, it doesn't matter to him. He's just as happy cutting the grass in Greenbow, Alabama as he is meeting the President. He's content. He's at peace. He has faith in God. He doesn't have to BE somebody. His destiny is not to do something heroic or famous but to be what God calls him to be and do what God calls him to do in that moment.

There's a difference between a Destiny and a Calling. A Destiny is something we want to achieve, usually something great. A Calling is what God gives. A Destiny feeds the ego and impresses people. A Calling is humble, I serve God and others more than myself. A Destiny focuses on the future – what I need to achieve – or on the past – what I didn't get. A Calling focuses on the present – what does God want me to do now? A Destiny never satisfies – when you get it, if you get it, it's never enough. Your ego always needs more. A Calling begins with the truth you are already enough in God's eyes. You've already arrived. The search for a Destiny can depress you or even destroy you as it almost did for Dan and Jenny. A Calling makes you content like Forrest.

How do you hear God's call? How do you know what God wants you to be and do? There was a Forrest Gump in the Bible and his name is Samuel. Both Forrest and Samuel show up at just the right time to make history happen. Samuel is not a Lawgiver like Moses, a General like Joshua or a King like Saul or David. Sameul does, however, help God's people to follow the Law, drive out their enemies and crown a king or two. Samuel even has a Momma named Hannah who desperately loves him, raises him on her own and is willing to let him go to fulfill his calling.

Like Forrest, Samuel lives in tumultuous times. It's the age of the Judges – that chaotic era between the conquest of the Holy Land by Joshua and the crowning of the first King Saul. When Samuel was a little boy, he served the Lord under the direction of an elderly priest named Eli. "In those days, the word of the Lord was rare: there were not many visions" (I Samuel 3:1). Maybe God was speaking but the people were not

¹ Forrest Gump-(Through the eyes of Forrest Gump) (DVD). Paramount Pictures. August 28, 2001. Event occurs at 23:27.

listening. Their hearts were attracted and distracted by other gods. Threatened from without and within, Eli just shook his head. He was too feeble to stop their slide into destruction. He just wanted to go to bed.

Then, in the middle of the night, young Samuel rouses him from sleep. “Here I am,” the boy cries. “Why did you call me?” Tired, arthritic and annoyed Eli replies, “I didn’t call you. Go back to bed.” An hour later his sleep is interrupted again, “I’m here,” Samuel says, “At your service. What do you want?” With half closed eyes, Eli says, “I didn’t call you. Go back to bed.” Still a third time, Eli’s slumber is disturbed, “Here I am. What do you want?” Eli cries, “For the love of God...!” and then he stops. He remembers that Samuel sleeps in the Tabernacle, next to the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant. Could it be? After all these years of silence? Could the Lord be speaking to Samuel? “Go and lie down, Samuel” Eli advises him in a kinder voice, “and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’” (I Samuel 3:9). So the boy lays down on his bed near the Ark. And once again the Lord calls, “Samuel! Samuel!” “Speak, for your servant is listening.” At that moment, Samuel received his call from the Lord. “And the Lord said to Samuel: ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle’” (v. 11). Change is in the wind. God is about to do something new through Samuel.

Does God speak today? Yes. We don’t listen. Sometimes it requires a child-like faith like Forrest Gump’s to hear his voice. Mary Williamson, a nurse in Kirbyville, Texas, says, “I neglected to tell my new patient, a little boy, how his hospital room intercom worked. Soon his light flashed. I called his name and asked what he wanted. There was complete silence. I repeated myself. After a long pause he said, ‘Jesus, I hear you but I don’t see you. Where are you?’ I couldn’t wait to go in and give him a hug.”²

As with Samuel, God’s call comes whenever, wherever, to whomever, in whatever way He chooses. It might be an audible voice but more likely God will speak through Scripture and the Holy Spirit in your spirit. How do you hear God?

Be Still and Hear God Speak. Our lives are filled with so much hurry and rush it’s no wonder His voice is drowned out. Mother Teresa once wrote, We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence, the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us.³

Samuel was alone and silent before the Lord. If you and I want to hear God’s voice, we must make time to be alone and silent before Him. You may say, “I don’t have five minutes to myself. How can I find time to be alone with God?” Dag Hammarskjöld was Secretary General of the United Nations. He was an extremely busy man. And yet he made time for the Lord. It’s not a question of time but of our willingness to make time.

² Mary Williamson, Kirbyville, TX, Today's Christian Woman, "Heart to Heart."

³ Malcom Muggeridge, Something Beautiful for God (Garden City, NY: Image, 1977), p. 48.

How can you expect to keep your powers of hearing when you never want to listen? That God should have time for you, you seem to take as much for granted as that you cannot have time for Him.⁴

Someone more important than a President wants to speak with you. Make time for Him.

As you begin to listen the Lord, **Confirm What You Hear with Scripture.**

God's voice is always in harmony with the Scriptures. Ross Lakes says,

If we think we hear something from God that is already a heartfelt yearning of our own, a warning light should flash: This needs extra verification!⁵

The chapter ends, "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word" (v. 21). The Lord will do the same for you.

Finally, **Do What You Hear from God.** Samuel listened to the Lord his whole life. What he heard, he did.

The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. I Samuel 3:19-20

God called Samuel to do some difficult things. He crowned Saul King even though he thought it was a bad idea. He crowned David King even though Saul thought it was a bad idea. Like Forrest Gump, he never sought glory or fame. He answered God's call, showed up and did what was right. Don't worry about your future destiny. What's God calling you to do here and now?

Forrest Gump came out in 1994. That was my first year as the pastor of Woodside. This was a big step for me. I sensed God calling me to leave my first church, Lenape Valley and become a solo pastor. I interviewed with several churches and sensed Woodside might be where He wanted me to be. Your Search Committee extended the call and now it was time to take the step. It was one of the greatest changes in my life.

In accordance with our Presbyterian tradition, I could not tell anyone at my church about my plans to move. Not even my children knew until the night before I came to here to preach a sermon and for you to vote on me. Was this the right time? Was this the right place? Was I up for the challenge? I was anxious and nervous. When I came back into the sanctuary with Lisa, Peter and Kristin, you welcomed us with applause. You voted and called me to be your pastor.

Now came the next difficult step. I had to announce to all my dear friends at Lenape Valley I would be leaving them. They were my family. How was I going to break

⁴ Dag Hammerskjold, *Markings*.

⁵ Ross A. Lakes, pastor, *Leadership*, Vol. 6, no. 1.

the news to them? I still wasn't sure I'd done the right thing. The next day, Monday morning, I received a call from a very dear friend named Diana. Seven years before, Diana and her husband Dave were completely unchurched. In fact, Dave did not want to set foot in a church. But over the years they not only gave their lives to Jesus, they also grew so deep in the Lord they often heard His voice – especially through Scripture. Even though they are very close friends, I did not tell Diana about my plans to leave. She called me up Monday morning and said, “Doug, I was in prayer this morning and the Lord gave me a Scripture passage about you. It’s about Samuel. He’s gathering the congregation of Israel together and he’s going to make a big announcement to them. Do you know what this means? Is there some announcement you are going to make?”

God spoke to me, through the Scriptures and my friend. This was the right move. I’ve never looked back.

Wake up tomorrow and say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” Cause you never know what you’re going to get.