

Han Shot First

May 13, 2018

When I was growing up, Mother's Day at our house was a low-key affair. In fact, one of the only ones that I remember is Mother's Day 1977. I was four. My oldest sister, who was 10, made my mom one of those coupon books of experiences. These books, or at least in my house, these books are really better in practice than in reality. Mom despised having her kitchen made a mess, and so the idea of making her breakfast in bed or a cake really was not a gift, and we were 4, 8, and 10, and so a coupon for a massage was nice, but . . .

The one coupon that I remember my mom redeeming was good for one free afternoon. Even that had a catch, though. My dad was traveling a lot at that time and remember, we were 4, 8, and 10, so she still had to figure out what to do with us. I remember thinking that we were doing something really special for her two weeks after Mother's Day as we piled in to her green Pontiac Parisian station wagon so that she could redeem her coupon for one afternoon without us all in her hair.

We piled into the station wagon and she dropped us off at the movie theater. How do I remember this so vividly you might ask? Well, it was my first movie at a theater and because it was May 1977, it was "Star Wars." Some of you have "Casablanca," or "Citizen Kane," or "The Wizard of Oz," or "The Sound of Music." I have "Star Wars." In fact, in some regards the "Star Wars" canon is as much a part of my early formation as the Bible.

That's why today, in anticipation of "Solo," the new "Star Wars" movie due out in a couple of weeks, I invite you to join with me in exploring the theological significance of the fact that Han shot first. Hear me out. The basics, for those of you who are not familiar with the movie, are that a tiny group of rebels are trying to save the universe from the big, bad empire. This is already hugely theological. It's a story that's told throughout the prophets and apocalyptic literature.

But for today's purpose, we're looking at the character of Han Solo. He's a rough and tumble mercenary. In the original 1977 version of the movie, shortly after Han agrees to help our hero, Luke, abscond with the secret plans that would bring down the empire, one of Han's creditors approaches him, and Han shoots him in cold blood. At the outset, Han is living moment to moment, with no check on what he is or isn't willing to do. The only guide posts that he lives by are whether the options before him are enjoyable or beneficial to him. When he says that he isn't a freedom fighter, he's not just saying that he's too busy to partake in the revolution. He's also saying that he believes himself to be too much of a scoundrel to be trusted or relied on for anything morally upright, that he doesn't deserve to be part of the redeeming of the universe.

Interestingly, in the 1997 digitally remastered release, George Lucas Photoshopped in a gun shot from Han's creditor first so that Han isn't the first shot. Lucas says that he did that because he didn't think that we would believe that Han could be a hero if he was the one who shot first, if he shot without being provoked. Friends, I'd like to suggest that it is precisely because Han shoots in cold blood, precisely because he is deeply immoral, deeply flawed, that this is a worthwhile morality tale.

Rick Barry, a staff writer at the Center for Christian Civics points out:

“The Bible is full of stories of people being given Honors and responsibilities they don’t think they deserve (and to our eyes, definitely don’t): The ascendant king David welcomes Mephibosheth, the grandson of his deposed enemy, to dine at his table. Paul, a violent oppressor of the Christian faith, becomes a leader of the oppressed church. And in the Christmas story, an entire planet full of people who have learned to be content living in the dark get shown God’s wondrous light — at great expense to the light-giver himself.”

Over, and over, and over, our scripture tells us stories of unworthy heroes being tasked with sacred acts. In the movie, Han goes on to tell Luke and Ben that he doesn’t view himself as a leader, or a hero, or a freedom fighter; he just wants to get paid and move on. Over the course of the story, though, his aloof nature begins to break down. He develops affection for the passengers that he’s taken on. He sees the truth and the value in their quest. And yet he rebuffs their offer of a leadership position in the organization just to leave with their money. Nonetheless, when it seems like their mission is sure to collapse, he returns to save their lives and all of that at great personal expense.

Where the truly theological story comes in, is that Han is shown grace by the other characters. This mercenary, this immoral character, is shown grace by the rebels who are fighting for the redemption of the world. He’s shown grace and he is welcomed at the table as he is. Then, by having something to believe in, he changes. Is it being in community or having a worthy project that changes Han? Is it relationship or purpose? I see a lot of people nodding because the answer is, yes. Yes, both, of course.

This week, the Christian church celebrates the Ascension. We celebrate that 40 days after Easter, Jesus appeared one last time to his disciples and commissioned them to spread the Good News to all the ends of the earth, and then he ascends into heaven.

I understand this to be a story of Jesus taking off our spiritual training wheels. Up to this point in the Christian story, Jesus has been walking with us, holding our hands. In the Ascension he says, “I’m outta here. You’ve got this.” And since then, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, WE have been tasked with being the agents of God’s redemption.

And so I’m grateful for stories like “Star Wars” and the fact that Han shot first, grateful for stories that remind us that this redemption comes not through the perfect, or the expected, or even through the worthy, but rather through the deeply flawed characters who cast their lot on the side of good and end up being a part of the salvation of the world. What’s amazing is that in doing so they all end up being a part of their own salvation, too. Thanks be to God.

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Ascension – Acts 1:1-11
May 13, 2018

