

You might be familiar with the film “Ben Hur,” with Charlton Heston from playing Judah Ben Hur, the Jewish charioteer who initially is set on revenge but has his life changed when he realizes that when he sees Jesus, he is meeting not an earthly king but a heavenly one, one who changes his life.

The film, which was recently remade in 2016, actually is from a book, who’s full title is Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ.

Carol Wallace is the great grand-daughter of the author of the book, Lew Wallace, and recently she wrote a contemporary version of his novel. Along the way, she found out a great deal about her ancestor, how he came to write his masterpiece, and how it defined his faith.

As a little girl, she was very proud of Lew her grandpa. He had been a Union general in the Civil War. He had put Billy the Kid in jail (they had a letter from the Kid hanging in our back hall). He was a diplomat and, of course, a best-selling author. Editions of Ben-Hur took up serious shelf space in the family home. She even has dim memories of her parents bringing home an illustrated program from the 1959 premiere of the film starring Charlton Heston.

What she didn't have though was familiarity with the book that started it all, because Ben-Hur in its original version is a tough slog for today's readers. But while adapting it she not only became a great fan of the text but also came to understand the surprisingly moving backstory.

Lew Wallace, it turns out, was a seeker—one of those people whose eyes are on the horizon looking for something more. When he was young, it was adventure. He ran away from home in Indianapolis at 16 to join the Texan war for independence, but got no farther than the banks of the nearby White River. Later, as a soldier, he longed for glory, and it seemed within his grasp until the Battle of Shiloh, in April of 1862.

He was then 34, the youngest major general in the Union Army, a striking figure on a big bay horse, in charge of the 3rd Division—nearly 6,000 hardened soldiers. On the morning of the battle they were held in reserve, waiting for General Ulysses S. Grant to call them up to the field of action. Yet there was a long delay between Lew's receiving Grant's orders and his troops' arrival at the Union line. In fact, they got there at the close of the first day's fighting. This was Lew's disaster.

Shiloh was one of the first major battles of the Civil War. The casualty numbers were appalling. In Washington, Union leaders demanded to know why Grant's troops had performed so badly. His excuse: General Wallace didn't get there in time.

Lew claimed the orders were unclear, but that didn't matter; he was stripped of active command and the brilliant trajectory of his military career was halted. He never got over it. Years later he was still trying to clear his name. His anger and shame and shock never really died away.

How do we know this? From Ben-Hur. The years after the Civil War were hard for Lew. After a futile military adventure in Mexico, he unenthusiastically practiced law in Indiana. By middle age he was deep in debt. His escape was writing. In 1873 he published *The Fair God*, a novel about Hernán Cortés's 1519 conquest of Mexico. The book was only moderately successful, but Lew kept writing.

His next effort was a novella about the Magi.

What turned that fragmentary story into a sweeping saga was a chance conversation. In 1876, Lew found himself in a train compartment with Robert Ingersoll, a superstar of the day—a sought-after speaker and America's foremost agnostic. Ingersoll enjoyed grilling new acquaintances about their faith.

Lew had considered himself a Christian, but he didn't go to church, didn't pray regularly and barely knew the Bible. He was embarrassed by Ingersoll's questions. He felt he should know more about his faith. And he decided that the best way to educate himself would be to write a novel set at the time of Christ, about a young man whose life is changed by Jesus.

People often forget that the novel's full title is *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. And though the film versions have tended to focus on the chariot race, Lew's book (like Carol's version) goes beyond that to include the hero's redemptive encounters with Jesus. It was the spiritual content that launched *Ben-Hur* into widespread success.

When it was first published, in 1880, Lew expected merely respectable sales figures. He went off to Constantinople to serve as U.S. Minister to the

Ottoman Empire. When he came home, five years later, to his surprise and great relish, he was famous. Ben-Hur's combination of excitement and inspiration had touched thousands of readers.

The plot has the hero, Judah Ben-Hur, who is a young prince of Israel, living in a palace in Jerusalem, when his childhood friend Messala returns from years in Rome. As boys, they were inseparable, but Rome's heavy-handed occupation of Jerusalem, along with Messala's arrogance, now comes between the young men.

Watching a parade of Roman soldiers from his rooftop, Ben-Hur knocks loose a tile, which wounds a Roman officer. In retaliation, his mother and sister are imprisoned and he himself is carried off in chains to serve as a slave in a Roman galley. Messala does nothing to intervene and Ben-Hur spends five years belowdecks pulling an oar, nursing dreams of revenge.

Like his hero's, Lew's life had been derailed in a shocking way. At Shiloh, his trust in a golden future was shattered. His anger and sense of outrage fuel the storytelling; Ben-Hur's bitterness is Lew's own. What's more, Ben-Hur's violent response to his grievance was one that would have been

familiar to Lew, who was first and foremost a soldier. Ben-Hur's revenge during the chariot race is merciless.

That race is not the end of the book, though. Ben-Hur continues to solve his problems with violence, leaving an impressive body count. Even his encounters with Jesus fail to change his habits until the Crucifixion, when he finally understands the message of peace. In the 1880s, as the national trauma of the Civil War receded, that was a thoroughly welcome idea to the reading public of America.

And though Lew never did become a regular churchgoer, writing Ben-Hur nurtured his faith. His authentic belief and his reverent treatment of Jesus' message helped his book become a phenomenon.

In an era when fiction was often frowned on, this novel that featured Jesus as a speaking character was recommended from pulpits across the country. Word-of-mouth success was followed by a play seen by millions and, ultimately, multiple film versions.

Carol's experience writing this new book echoed her great-grandfather's. He claimed that he lived with his characters, that they lived and spoke to him in his imagination, and her process is similar. Like her great-great-grandfather, she says she has s imagined myself into Jesus' presence, not once but repeatedly.

The character of Ben-Hur, when he saw Christ, was changed by Him completely, and he responded. And while Jesus maybe did not appear directly to Lew Wallace, perhaps he was visiting him through an agnostic on a train to help him to put him on a new mission, not one of just vindicating his name and getting glory in the eyes of the world, but one of coming to know the faith that he professed. I think of one of my favorite movies, Forrest Gump, when the character of Lieutenant Dan, who is so enraged about not dying in battle and going through the guilt of being a survivor joins Forrest when he is on a shrimp boat and just starts yelling at God in the midst of a hurricane; Forrest says God responded in the hurricane, but so too did Lieutenant Dan by turning his life around and finding peace.

The point is God has a funny way of showing up when we least expect it. And the question is are we ready for those moments when he does show up, and are we ready to go on a new mission wherever that will lead us?

In this week's first reading and Gospel, we meet two men who encounter God.

From the first reading we meet Isaiah who has this vision of God who's glory fills the Temple. God bursts into his life, and he becomes aware of his sinfulness, but the angels cleanse him, touching his lips with an ember, removing the sin. God then sends him on his mission, as he responds to God's call for someone to be sent by saying "here I am, send me!" And in the Gospel, we have the call of Peter. Jesus shows up, and enters Peter's boat and starts telling him what to do. And Simon Peter to his credit he listens, and catches more fish than he can imagine. But like Isaiah, he too recognizes there is something holy about this man who has taken over his boat, and he says "I am a sinful man." Jesus though does not dwell on his sin; rather it is acknowledged as a fact, but Jesus helps him past his sinfulness and gives him the promise that from here on out, he will be catching men.

What we see in these readings is a blueprint of how we can let God into our lives and how we too can respond to that mission.

The first is asking ourselves where we are at now, what is it that drives us? For Lew Wallace as a younger man, it was about being somebody in the eyes of the world and proving himself. For Ben-Hur, it was about revenge. Maybe for us, what consumes us is a career, school, sports, money, or being recognized by others. What should consume us though is a desire to get to heaven and growing in grace, which means ordering our lives around God.

That's where being prepared comes into play, or in a position to listen to God when He acts. Peter, Isaiah and Lew each had different vocations, but all three were there to listen to the voice of God, and they didn't force Him out but did what He told them to do. Peter and Isaiah had the experience of seeing God; Lew had a spiritual experience like many of us where he realized he needed to rediscover his faith. So a question for us all to ask is are we ready, willing and able to hear God when He speaks? Do you make time for prayer? Do you make time for silence? Remember that God will

always make the first move. We don't have to do something to merit God's love; it's a free gift. One of the benefits of prayer it has been said is that it makes us attentive and ready for the moment that God breaks in. We say we are not worth that God should enter under our roofs but He wants to be welcomed in. By being a person of prayer and someone who isn't stubborn we can make way for God.

Once God comes in, we then acknowledge the reality of the situation, which is namely we all have work to do. Lew on that train realized he had fallen in his faith. Isaiah laments at being unworthy to see God. Peter says depart from me for I am a sinner. But again, notice this comes after the experience of grace. In each case God helps these people. He is all loving and all merciful, but when people experience grace, they respond to it by wanting to become a better person; grace sets us free. So how do you want to change as a person? What sins need to be addressed? Don't hide from them, but trust that God's grace will help you and liberate you, and respond to it.

Lastly, the mission. Lew learned his faith, and went out and wrote a book that helped people on their faith journey and probably helped to catch a

great number of souls for Jesus. Isaiah prophesized; Peter went on to spread the Gospel and die for the faith. The missions aren't easy.

Sometimes we want to stay on the shore, but God is calling us all out into the deep. Living one's vocation, responding to what God challenges us to do, these things will take time and going out into the deep will sometimes mean very choppy waves. But whatever it is God has called you to do, remember God is with you and has such great plans for you - so let Him guide you and challenge you, and like Peter you'll find that what happens when God works through you is incredible.

In Holy Communion, Jesus will again come to dwell in us, or to use the analogy of a fishermen, catch us. So let's be caught up in His love and let that transform us by letting Him into every part of our lives and listening always to what He might be telling us, and use the love that He gives us to overcome our sins and use his grace to win souls for Him and change the world. God has so many plans for us all, so like Peter, let's let Him into our boat for when we do, we will be amazed at what we catch together with our Lord over the course of our lives as we bring His his love into the world and the lives of one another.