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Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Mark's Gospel

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Palm Sunday

## “Slumdog Christ”

*Slumdog Millionaire* was far and away the darling of the Academy Awards, winning eight Oscars. Adapted from the novel, *Q and A*, by Vikas Swarup, it tells the story of a young Indian boy, Jamil Malik, who enters India's version of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. Somehow, this nobody kid, from the Mumbai slums, manages to get on the show, and then correctly answer all the questions thrown at him. Before the final million dollar episode, he is kidnapped and taken to police headquarters, where he is brutally tortured. They interrogate him, refusing to believe that an uneducated kid from the slums could possibly have known the answers. The authorities are certain that he must be the front for some kind of illicit operation, and they aim to get to the bottom of it. The interrogation is the dramatic device of the film revealing, through flashbacks, the circumstances and experiences by which he came to know the answers to the questions. His knowledge was gathered through the school of poverty and hard knocks and an abiding love-interest that sustained him through the ordeal of growing up on the streets. In the end, this film is a tribute to the sustaining power of love.

The film has caused a lot of controversy, especially in India. Many leaders of that nation resent their underbelly being put on display for the

whole world to see. They would prefer, naturally, films depicting the rise of the middle class in India. After all, in the last decade India no longer goes to the world with cap in hand for foreign aid. Rather, the world is coming to India for its technological prowess in the computer industry and its relatively cheap labour. Many did not appreciate the film for this reason.

Anirudh Krishna is a professor at Duke University in the Sanford Institute of Public Policy. He has done extensive research examining the dynamics behind poverty. What he discovered is that in India, a rising tide is not lifting all boats. It's lifting the yachts and leaving behind the vast majority to swim for their lives. Those who do get out of poverty, technically defined, end up moving not very far out of poverty. They become street vendors, chauffeurs, maids, itinerant repairmen, and day labourers. He randomly interviewed 150 software engineers in Bangalore. Tellingly, not one was born into a poor household.

The same is true generally among developing nations. World Bank figures show that, between 1981 and 2005, the number of people living in acute poverty (below \$1.25 per day) fell by 500 million worldwide. That's the good news. But over the same period, the number people living on

between \$1.25 and \$2.00 increased by 600 million. In 24 years, the extremely poor were lifted into the status of the very poor.

These have been the same 24 years that saw a shift toward neo-conservative economic policy, based in the ideological commitment to a belief that an unregulated market economy will be the salvation of humanity. The current economic global crisis reveals that this slavish adherence to neoconservative economic ideology will not save us, and that unregulated markets are set up to serve the interests of Wall Street primarily.

While Wall Street alchemists create phantom wealth from derivatives trading and mortgage-backed assets and other schemes too complicated for Main Street to understand – because they are disconnected from real wealth – the developing world has seen only modest improvements. So, one criticism leveled at *Slumdog* is that it is “poverty porn.” It titillates and comforts the Western imagination with a rags-to-riches story, and even gives us a fairy tale ending. In so doing, it glosses over the intransigence of poverty and our complicity in supporting economic policies that perpetuate the condition. We get to watch, voyeuristically, as the shadow-side of the whole affair remains unexamined.

That’s the critique of the film. But Professor Anirudh Krishna has a different take on it. He thinks that it’s a story of a young man making good

against all the odds. “It’s possible to overcome the handicaps of birth and circumstance, the film says. Despair is unwarranted.” (*The Real Slumdog Message*, The Globe and Mail, Wednesday, February 18, 2009) But, and it’s an important “but”, he goes on to say, this is only true if the poor are given access to equal opportunity. “The talent in poor communities is abundant but needs to be connected with better opportunities – this resonates with people worldwide”.

After seeing *Slumdog* I came to the conclusion that it was a fairy tale. As with most fairy tales, it does have a feel-good ending. But then I realized that I was being too simplistic. The film is very un-fairylike in many respects – more like a Grimms Brothers fairy tale in the way it has conveys the tragic. It’s covers the full range of literary genres. I recalled that almost 15 years ago I read a book by Frederick Buechner, written primarily for preachers, called *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy-Tale*. The book was transformative for me.

*Slumdog*, like the gospel itself, is tragedy, comedy, and fairy-tale. The reason I chose to preach about it on Palm Sunday, perhaps the most dramatic Sunday of the year, is that *Slumdog Millionaire* is nothing if not dramatic. The gospel, of course, is artificially divided up into little Sunday readings for our convenience, but at best it would be read in one sitting. We would read of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but we would keep reading as the sky turns dark and Jesus

ends up on a cross. We wouldn't stop there, however. We'd read the accounts of how the disciples experienced that Christ was somehow alive in their midst, giving them instructions for how to carry on. And the point Buechner makes so forcefully is that when we tell the gospel as *only* tragedy, or *only* comedy, or *only fairy tale*, we are not telling the truth. We need all three to get at the truth.

*Slumdog Millionaire* depicts a tragic reality: a billion people on this planet continue to live in poverty; there are men who still today enslave young girls and boys to serve their selfish ends, who blind young boys if it will bring in more begging money; the truth is that young men who live without hope do join gangs and turn to crime and violence if it's their only shot at getting a piece of the pie; a financial system disconnected from real wealth, from real people, from community, from the wellbeing of the planet has been running our lives for 20 years. The film rubs our face in the tragic dimension of the truth.

And so it is with the gospel. The story of Jesus is set in the context of the Roman Empire. He belongs to a conquered nation and a conquered people. The truth is that Jesus spent most of his time with the slumdogs of the world, because these were the people who most needed hope. To miss this economic and political context of Jesus' ministry is to jump too quickly to fairy tale endings, or to metaphysical middle-class applications of the gospel. For Jesus, before truth was anything else it was physical

poverty, disease, and injustice. As we approach Good Friday, the tragic dimension of life comes to the fore. Before it conveys any other truth, the gospel does not flinch from the message that as a species we turn our backs on those God sends to make us whole, and yet we passionately pursue that which will end in death and destruction. Jesus was crucified.

But that is not the whole story. The comic dimension of the film is the unlikely premise that a young boy from the slums manages to become a national TV star for a nation, and thereby become a sacrament of hope for the downtrodden. His success signals to the masses that if they were just given a shot, they too could be winners. In one early scene, a film star comes to visit the slum where Jamil lives. The star arrives when Jamil is sitting in the outhouse. As a practical joke, his friend locks him in, so he can't get to the star. But Jamil makes a decision to jump down five feet into the filth of the open pit below rather than miss the opportunity to meet the star. Dripping in filth, Jamil gets the autograph he wanted so desperately, unaware that he, himself, is destined for stardom.

The gospel reading this morning similarly reflects the comic unlikelihood of a backwater peasant from Nazareth, making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the people lining the streets proclaiming him to be their Savior – not Caesar, not the high priests, but rather Jesus – of Nazareth! The preposterous possibility is that God would do anything to get to us. In

Jesus, God jumps into the stench and mess we've made of things – just to get to us! We were made for love and God will do anything to get the message across. The comedy is that God thinks we are stars. Jesus, as God incarnate, comes riding on a donkey, into our broken hearts on Palm Sunday, to lift us up and make us whole! That is our preposterous, even comedic claim. We line the streets, and join all the other fools for Christ, shouting “Hosannas!” God loves us and the guy on the donkey dragging his feet in the dust is our proof!

As it turns out, the reason that Jamil wanted to get on the show was not for the money. As a very young boy, he gave his heart to a young girl from whom he had been separated by circumstances beyond his control. But he never gave up hope that he would find her and be reunited. He got on the show in the hope that she would see him on TV and find him. This is the fairy tale theme of the film. Against all odds, the two of them are indeed reunited. It's their destiny. It is played up with Bollywood Flair and choreographed dance. We leave the film actually feeling good – despite the graphic violence, the crushing poverty, and the evil that is depicted. But the fairy tale ending is no denial of these realities. Rather it is an affirmation that all of this takes place within the context of a world that is created for love. Beneath the apparent randomness and chaos of life's tragedies, there is a divine synchronicity, a deeper pattern that serves love's purposes. Fate gives ways to divine destiny. While it is most often

not evident to us, hope will eventually reveal the outline of a higher purpose.

So it is with the gospel story. The story of God is a love story in the end: not a denial of reality, not an escape from reality. Jesus was crucified and will be crucified again. But Easter is the fairy tale ending, an affirmation that the Heart of Reality is in love with all creation, including you and me. All creation will be raised up to glory. We are destined for love. And every now and then we get glimpses of this love in the midst of our brokenness. These glimpses always *feel* like a reunion, although truth be known we can never be separated from this Love. Even crucifixion is a painful expression of God's love, the arms of God stretching around and redeeming even our violent natures.

Jamil is stumped by the very last question. The rules of the game allow him to make one call for help. He dials his brother's cell phone number. His brother has taken a darker path of gangs. But in the end, he sacrifices himself in order to free the young woman Jamil has always loved from her evil husband. Before his death, Jamil's brother gives her the keys to his car where he has left his cell phone. She is the one who answers the phone call and she is the one who has the answer to the million-dollar question. Love alone holds the answer.

Of course, the real million-dollar question is not the one the game show host asked Jamil. We're all on the hot seat and the question put to each of us is: “Do you believe that love is

our destiny?" What *Slumdog Millionaire* and the gospel story affirm is that love really does make the world go around and will always find us if we're looking

for it, because Love is looking for us. To know this is to possess true wealth. Turns out we're all winners in the end.