**Hellbound**

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*Welcome one another as God as welcomed you.*

**Romans 15:7**

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

**Hebrews 13: 2**

I was 13 and all things God. As in, I just wanted more and more of God in my life. I couldn’t get enough of God. As a good child of Lutherans, I had weekly confirmation classes followed by church choir practice, and Luther League activities on the weekends, but they weren’t enough. I was always hungry for God.

So, when the local evangelicals sponsored a multi-evening Christian Crusade with the great unknown Canadian prophet-preacher Barry Moore, I was in. More God was just a short bike ride away at the old armory—home of junior-senior proms, native american pow-wows, and antique car shows.

After Barry preached, he issued an invitation to “come forward and give your life to Jesus” the choir began to sing “Just As I Am” softly as Barry continued speaking. As a born and bred Lutheran, I had never experienced anything like this—we did NOT do this at my church. As people came forward, my heart started to beat faster and faster, and before I knew it, an invisible rope tugged me to the front, too. Preacher Barry led us in the “Sinners Prayer” so we could invite Jesus into our hearts together. Then we were whisked backstage and paired with a counselor. My counselor gave me a bible that I tried to give back (I already had one at home) and she was so happy that I was saved.

Saved from what, I wondered?

I was already baptized and knew that I belonged to God, but apparently that night I was also saved from the fires of hell.

Who knew I was hell bound?

Despite that confusing counseling backstage at the armory, I pedaled my bike down main street in the twilight, with the lightest, most joyful feeling I ever remembered having.

Being saved was GREAT!

Plus, I was no longer hell bound.

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However, unwed mother Vianne Rocher was. The movie Chocolat opens with Vianne and her daughter Anouk dressed in scarlet red capes, mysteriously arriving on the North wind to a tradition-bound village in France. Within days, she opens an beautiful chocolate shop, right across the square from the Catholic church, DURING LENT.

She is paid a visit by the mayor of the town, Comte Reynaud, the self-appointed and self-righteous morality police. He is appalled by the presence of Vianne and Anouk, who are only interested in listening to the beauty of pealing church bells, but not in what is happening inside the church.

Reynoud sets the moral tone for the whole village. He even writes the sermons for the young priest, Father Henri, smugly mouthing every word of Father Henri’s homilies during Mass. What’s more, he expects the townsfolk to not fraternize with Vianne nor patronize her chocolate shop. Vianne’s very presence as a confident, pagan woman is a threat to the established order of right and wrong that Reynaud has carefully curated through the years. Vianne is the archetypical “scarlet woman”—-definitely hell bound.

And yet, it is the townspeople and Reynaud himself who are bound by a hell created by a mis-interpretation of the moral theology of their church.

A woman is expected to stay with her abusive husband.

A lonely man is in love with a widow of 20 years, but has no courage to tell her.

A grandmother is estranged from her grandson and his mother, because she is independent and a bad influence.

A married couple exist in a passion-starved relationship.

Even Reynaud has chinks in his armor, the absence of a wife who is supposedly in Venice, but clearly has left him.

Their piety is correct according to the moral code of the village, but their wounded lives are isolated and depressing, a living hell of emptiness. Indeed, talk about hell bound!

It is only a matter of time that Vianne’s sinful chocolate shop becomes a source of healing for the townspeople. In fact, it becomes manna from heaven. Even though they have repeatedly snubbed her, she warmly invites them into the shop. Vianne has a special way of “seeing” people, intuitively understanding what they need. Each person is offered a unique chocolate that acts as conduit of healing. One chocolate candy seems to work like a love potion, reawakening the passion of the loveless marriage. Another inspires courage in the lonely man, who finds it within himself to talk to the widow, and even the grandmother “melts” under the spell of divine hot chocolate, ending her anger towards her daughter, and reuniting with her grandson. Vianne helps them confront their inner conflicts, whether it's facing past trauma, expressing hidden desires, or finding courage to change.

They are saved. Because that is what healing is—a holy salvation that feels heaven sent.

Some pastors (ahem) always want to find a Christ figure in every novel or story or movie we watch. Vianne is a compelling Christ figure. She is wrapped in all of the things that no one would expect God to look like—unwed, immoral, pagan woman. And yet she is the conduit of salvation that opens the floodgates of love that have been repressed in this small village for far too long.

But, there is more. I find Vianne a mesmerizing image of Christ because she too is in need of healing. This in no way diminishes her gifts of healing, this in no way undermines her mystical way of connecting to the deepest part of her customers, this is no way makes her weak or incapable or inauthentic. It makes her human.

In the movie, we glimpse the wounded parts of Vianne. At one point where she barges into Reynaud’s office, clearly hurt by his incessant tearing down her reputation among the other townsfolk. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?” she demands. He remains unmoved.

In spite of her success in the town, when the north wind returns, Vianne decides she cannot win against Reynaud, and decides to move on, to run away as she always has. Anouk, now attached to the town, refuses to go, and during a tantrum, she knocks over urn containing Vianne’s mother’s ashes, scattering them over the floor.

Vianne’s inner turmoil is palpable.

And yet, this is the inflection point in her journey.

The conflict with her daughter helps her mine her own courage, helps her to face her fears and acknowledge her own pain.

She comes to realize the embrace and celebration of her presence by the townsfolk is the ballast that steadies her. Because of this, she is able to release her past by properly scattering her mother’s ashes, and acceptance of who she is—not bound for hell, not bound by hell on earth, but one heaven sent. She is saved from her inner demons.

Even God needs saving. I keep wandering back to our Creation story in Genesis. I can’t help but wonder if part of the meaning of that story is that God needed healing from isolation, and so created the world to be in community. Jesus, throughout the gospels surrounds himself with community, and it is clear he was in hell when he was abandoned and isolated on the cross.

This is good news for us.

Because like Vianne, we each have mystical energy within us to offer the saving grace of healing to this world.

And like Vianne, we each bear the scars and pain of life that tempt us to withdraw from the love and care offered to us.

We are weak and wounded and wonderful healers.

We each experience being hell bound here on earth.

But, at the very heart of who we are, we are heaven sent.

May we know this about one another and ourselves.

It is our very salvation.

Amen.

**SOURCES**

Majorie Steele, *Chocolat is a Timeless and Rare Depiction of the Shaman’s Journey: Even Shamans Must Find Healing*, Medium, March 25, 2019 <https://cosgrrrl.com/chocolat-is-a-timeless-and-rare-depiction-of-the-shamans-journey-262f925d2348>

Roger Ebert, *Review of Chocolat*, December 22, 2000, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/chocolat-2000>

**READINGS**

**Romans 15:7**

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**Chocolates** by Louis Simpson  
  
Once some people were visiting Chekhov.  
While they made remarks about his genius  
the Master fidgeted. Finally  
he said, "Do you like chocolates?"  
  
They were astonished, and silent.  
He repeated the question,  
whereupon one lady plucked up her courage  
and murmured shyly, "Yes."  
  
"Tell me," he said, leaning forward,  
light glinting from his spectacles,  
"what kind? The light, sweet chocolate  
or the dark, bitter kind?"  
  
The conversation became general  
They spoke of cherry centers,  
of almonds and Brazil nuts.  
Losing their inhibitions  
they interrupted one another.  
For people may not know what they think  
about politics in the Balkans,  
or the vexed question of men and women,  
  
but everyone has a definite opinion  
about the flavor of shredded coconut.  
Finally someone spoke of chocolates filled with liqueur,  
and everyone, even the author of Uncle Vanya,  
was at a loss for words.  
  
As they were leaving he stood by the door  
and took their hands.  
  
                                In the coach returning to Petersburg  
they agreed that it had been a most  
unusual conversation.