

On the day of our baptism, we are brought into the Church and receive a special blessing where we believe the virtues of faith, hope and love are given to us in a unique way. Odds are you don't remember the day of your baptism. But as we look back on the days since then, hopefully we can say we've grown as a person. The issue is that it's easy to wax and wane in the faith, but ultimately we have to make a choice to affirm the promises of our baptism and take responsibility for our faith, making the choice for God. The good news is that through all of this, God is loving and patient, always waiting and knowing that the faith can take time to mature. But we also have to open our eyes to see the gifts God shares with us, and develop those gifts in our souls and the souls of one another so that the wheat can grow.

Aaron Wolf is a filmmaker who lives in LA. And not too long ago, he did a documentary on the rebuilding one of the oldest synagogues in LA where he had first learned the faith as a child. But at a deeper level, it was also part of his own faith journey that, much like the wheat in the Gospel today, gradually grew, but required the sifting out of the weeds.

This documentary he says began during one of the lowest points in his life. Aaron was in his rabbi's office at the synagogue where he'd grown up and where his beloved grandfather, Alfred Wolf, had been a senior rabbi decades earlier.

Aaron had so many cherished memories of the place. Wilshire Boulevard Temple is a landmark synagogue in the heart of Los Angeles where stars and studio moguls worshipped during Hollywood's golden age. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a historic address there.

Aaron spent his childhood worshipping under the sanctuary's soaring 10-story dome and scampering upstairs from Hebrew class to his grandfather's office, where they'd play games or he'd enthrall Aaron with one of his wise stories. The synagogue was showing its age by that time, and the congregation was dwindling, but Aaron was too young to notice. He was always happy there.

Flash forward 20 years, and Aaron was no longer happy. He was nearing 30, a professional filmmaker. A few weeks earlier, just a month before his

wedding, Aaron and his fiancée had abruptly broken up. He was crushed and bewildered.

The whole reason he was back at the synagogue after years of lapsed membership was his approaching marriage. Like so many young people, he'd abandoned his faith in college. Yes, he treasured his Jewish upbringing. But at that point to Aaron, God and worship seemed like relics from childhood.

Aaron poured out his heart to Rabbi Leder. He consoled him and tried to help him understand that, though today felt awful, it wouldn't always feel this way.

He was meeting with him in his spacious office, with its fireplace and beautiful, if worn, wood-paneled walls, when he said something unexpected.

"I have an idea that might take your mind off your romantic troubles. As you know, we're about to start a big renovation project here. The temple is falling apart. I'm sure you've seen the tarp we put up in the sanctuary to

catch the plaster falling from the dome. Hebrew-school classes are shrinking. People have even advised us to sell the campus to one of the big Korean churches in this neighborhood.”

He looked at Aaron intently. “We are not going to sell. We are going to save this place and reinvent it as a vital place of Jewish community. It’s going to cost more than a hundred million dollars, but we’re going to do it right. What if you and your film company documented the process, making a few online videos for us to keep donors abreast of our progress? You seem to have enjoyed being back here. This would give you a reason to stick around.”

Aaron wasn’t sure how to respond. His company mostly made narrative and commercial films, not documentaries. It seemed like a huge responsibility. But then something struck Aaron. Rabbi Leder was right. He had enjoyed being back at the temple. Anticipating marriage and kids had changed his thinking about faith.

Aaron didn’t necessarily want to become a regular worshipper. But he didn’t want to lose touch with his spiritual heritage either. And yes, he

thought, the rabbi was right, making a new kind of film would distract him from his heartbreak.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll give it a try.”

Soon Aaron was setting up interviews and documenting the start of renovation. He quickly realized that he would have to film more than construction. The temple’s legacy was at stake. And this meant talking to the people who’s faith had grown because of what had happened to them at the synagogue.

Aaron talked with temple leaders and learned about the synagogue’s history. It was Los Angeles’s first Jewish congregation, founded in 1862 as Congregation B’nai B’rith (“Children of the Covenant”), with a handful of families, when L.A. was just a small frontier town. The original building was designed to look like a church, to deflect anti-Semitism.

The congregation grew until, by the 1920s, temple leaders realized that the city’s Jewish population was moving west, closer to the movie studios that were making Hollywood a household name.

The current temple was dedicated in 1929. It featured the lavish domed sanctuary, along with black marble, gold inlay, and murals commissioned by the Warner brothers who had founded the iconic film studio.

For decades, the temple was nationally prominent, the hub of Jewish Hollywood. But beginning in the 1980s, just as Aaron began attending as a kid, decline set in. L.A.'s Jews moved out to the suburbs. The neighborhood around the temple got rougher.

Photos from the Hebrew school showed gradually diminishing classes, until just a few kids were being confirmed each year. Aaron's family probably wouldn't have attended the temple if his grandfather hadn't been a rabbi there.

In recent years, though, the neighborhood had changed yet again to become a magnet for Korean immigrants and young hipsters—including young Jewish families. Aaron filmed the construction, but by that point he knew the building wasn't the whole story.

Wherever he went with his camera, people talked not about architecture but about their lives at the temple. Their faith. Their memories. Their family history. A past president of the congregation told Aaron about how he fainted at his own wedding and how his grandfather, who was officiating, caught him.

A longtime member opened a photo album for Aaron in her living room. Every milestone in her life seemed to involve the temple. She too had known and loved his grandfather. Aaron could hardly keep track of how many lives this grand place of worship had touched. The building, he realized, mattered only insofar as it drew people together.

The reality of the place was the relationships it fostered. And the countless ways people experienced God during Friday prayers, at High Holiday services, in Hebrew school, even at the Jewish summer sleepaway camp his grandfather had founded in Malibu, the first of its kind in the western United States.

All of this got Aaron to thinking about his own faith journey. How long had it been since he'd thought seriously about God, he wondered. By the time he

started college, he naïvely considered himself too worldly for faith. But things had happened since then. A few years earlier, he'd been staying over at a friend's when he woke up in the middle of the night and felt a powerful urge to get back to his parents 'house right away.

He could neither explain nor resist the urge. Alone on the road, he began thinking about death and he felt very frightened. Then, out of nowhere, a strange calm came over him and he thought of his grandparents. He pulled into the driveway at home and saw the lights on.

His mom and younger sister were inside, crying. His grandfather had had a stroke and died—right at the moment Aaron felt that sudden calm in the car.

He hardly told a soul about that experience. Now, interviewing people for what was growing into a full-length film, Aaron realized what a strong force faith was in people's lives. Was it strong like that for him though? He thought back to his most formative faith experiences.

He'd experienced God more indirectly, often through his grandfather.

He wasn't just the wise, vigorous man who'd taken Aaron on hikes and played games with him in his office. He'd shown Aaron what it looked like to love people well. To take care of countless souls gathered together in the temple he helped to lead.

One day, Aaron turned his camera on himself and began telling his own story. How he had grown up at the temple, always sitting with his family in Row H of the sanctuary, on the left-hand side. How he'd gone through Hebrew school. Been a counselor at the temple sleepaway camp. Then gradually abandoned his faith.

"I took this place for granted," he said. Now he couldn't imagine my life without it.

The renovation took nearly five years. The entire inside of the sanctuary was taken apart and rebuilt. The Hebrew school was overhauled. Work began on a new cultural center. The decrepit classrooms where he'd learned Bible stories got sleek rows of computers and brightly colored desks and chairs.

A historical exhibit was installed outside the sanctuary, with photos of past members—Louis B. Mayer, Jack Benny—and even a counselor’s red jacket from the camp. The project was a huge gamble. What if all those millions were spent and no one came?

Well, they came. Today, attendance is up and High Holiday services are full. The early-childhood program is growing. There is a rooftop sports complex. Neighborhood people of all faiths and ethnicities come for help at the social-services center. Everyone is welcome.

One of the new members is Aaron. Or maybe a better way to put it is he’s a returning member. He pledges regularly and is there for every High Holiday service. Since his film was completed and he began showing it to audiences, the temple has become a second home to him, as he speaks at screenings and gives tours to people who’ve seen it.

The film is called *Restoring Tomorrow*. It has been shown at film festivals and theaters, and later was on PBS, Netflix and Amazon.

What the film has done is helped the seeds to grow in other's souls too. Aaron screened it for an audience that included members of an African-American church in L.A., and afterward church members came to him with tears in their eyes, saying that the movie made them even more determined to ensure the survival of their own house of worship.

The film ends with Aaron sitting in his family's row in the sanctuary. He explains to the camera what the temple means to him now, how important it is that this place—indeed, all such holy places—be preserved and handed on to future generations.

The camera cranes up until it's almost at the ceiling, taking in the sanctuary, filling the viewer with the same sense of religious awe he gets every time he comes there.

He closes by saying the film's title, says it all. The temple has been restored for tomorrow. And so has Aaron.

Like Aaron, we all have to ultimately make a choice. And also like Aaron, we can help others make the choice as well to deepen their faith.

Christ is the sower and the field represents the world. The good seed is the seed that Christ sows and the wheat is the good harvest that good seed gives rise to, the people who accept the word of God. On the other hand the bad seed is that sown by the devil. In the world, and in our souls because of the impacts of original sin and life, both grow together. But we are given a choice - will we follow Christ, or his enemy? We need to come to terms with there being a judgment too, for as Johnny Cash said, the man will eventually come around. And we will be judged on how we have followed God in our lives.

At first glance, this might be a little disconcerting. Because I know I certainly try my best to choose God. But as a human, I sin. I struggle in my faith at times. Like Aaron who went through his own faith struggles when his relationship ended just a month before the wedding day, my faith is also challenged when I see what is going on in the world, or when I've dealt with things like being called to meet the police at the house of a teenager who took his life, or anointed a 16 year old dying of cancer. Why are there things like Covid, cancer? Why so much hate and division in the world? I do not have all the answers. And often I may fall into the same sins I

confessed. But the key is to refocus and ask ourselves where am I going. Ultimately I cannot see the final destination. But I need to trust that God will ultimately get me there by seeking him out. I haven't been to LA let alone Wilshire Boulevard Temple, but like Aaron I have looked up at the dome of the cathedral and been in awe at the beauty, but also the sense of peace, which reminds me God is in control. On my ordination day as I lay on the floor, I was reminded that my whole life must be a surrender to God. And we have to do that too. To make a choice to grow in faith; to trust in God; to seek Him out; to seek out His mercy; to talk to Him, and come to know Him on a deeper level. To ask ourselves how am I following Him? Am I ignoring things in my life I know I need to change? Am I spending too much time away from Him and putting prayer on the back burner? Am I giving up on Him when the chips in life are down? Jesus, the Son, was certainly challenged in his faith in the Father's Plan in the Garden, but ultimately He always trusted, and so must we through the good and bad in our lives.

Second though, patience is so important. Note that the weed in question, most likely darnel which in it's early stages of growth is difficult to distinguish from wheat. It takes time for both to mature to tell which is which. So the parable advocates waiting for the harvest to separate the

wheat and darnel, the good and the bad. God was waiting for Aaron when he returned to the synagogue and God is waiting for us too. God will not judge us until it is absolutely clear what we have chosen for ourselves. So we need to be patient when we are struggling with our faith, or with making bad decisions and also try to be patient with others, knowing that when we see loved ones making a bad decision, it could just be they need a little more time for the wheat to grow.

Third, with this patience, we also trust God will be merciful. Nothing is hidden from Christ's judgment - all that we have done, it is laid on the table. But it is a judgment of mercy. God sees the entire picture of our souls, and ultimately when we die if there is still some bad seeds that have germinated, God will finally remove them once and for all. As we go through life when we fall, it's so important to remember that God's love is always there for us to forgive us, and to set us free.

Lastly, how do we help one another to reach their harvest? For Aaron, it was through that film he made. God gives us many opportunities to share the Good News of the kingdom of heaven. From our families to our circles of friends to people we meet, each of us has the opportunity to be an

evangelist. Like Aarons grandfather, who knew his grandson, we can bring people to the faith. Jesus knew His followers; and we need to do that too. We need to get to know the people around us and learn how to speak their language and reach out to them, and not be fearful of helping them remove the bad seeds from their souls through loving fraternal correction, while at the same time helping the good seeds to go through affirmation, praying with them, and not keeping our faith hidden.

A good friend sent me a poem called “Riveted” he reads frequently. It goes like this:

It is possible that things will not get better
than they are now, or have been known to be.
It is possible that we are past the middle now.
It is possible that we have crossed the great water
without knowing it, and stand now on the other side.
Yes: I think that we have crossed it. Now
we are being given tickets, and they are not
tickets to the show we had been thinking of,
but to a different show, clearly inferior.
Check again: it is our own name on the envelope.
The tickets are to that other show.
It is possible that we will walk out of the darkened hall
without waiting for the last act: people do.
Some people do. But it is probable
that we will stay seated in our narrow seats
all through the tedious denouement
to the unsurprising end—riveted, as it were;
spellbound by our own imperfect lives
because they are lives,
and because they are ours.

God has given us tickets to something incredible. But in our lives, he has already given us something incredible, here and now. What a gift we are given. So let us chose God, for He has chosen us, knowing some bad seed we can eliminate, other bad seed just seems to grow and grow in our lives, in the lives of others and in the world. But let's not leave our seat or the garden, but rather renew our commitment to our God who will help us reap an abundant harvest if only we listen to Him.