

Big Miracle (2012)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V -1; L -1; S/N -2. Running time: 1 hour 47 min.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Ephesians 4:25-27

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:12-14

Based on real events that transpired in 1988 in Barrow, Alaska, Director Ken Kwapis' film might be the best feel good movie of the season—especially for families teaching their children about conserving the environment. The script is adapted by screenwriters Jack Amiel and Michael Begle from Tom Rose's book *Freeing the Whales: How the World Created the World's Greatest Non-Event*.

Rachel makes first contact with a whale.

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The chain of events which draws the attention of the world

away from the Cold War begins with Adam Carlson (John Krasinski), a TV reporter from Anchorage who is sent to Barrow to dredge up a number of human interest stories, such as his take on a local restaurant billing itself as "The World's Northernmost Mexican Restaurant." During his stay there he becomes close to an Inuit boy Nathan, (Ahmaogak Sweeney), the grandson of Malik (John Pingayak), an Eskimo elder trying to maintain and teach the traditional ways of his people. The movie begins with Malik and crew taking Nathan out in their small boat in search of whales. It is Nathan who then narrates the rest of the film.

Adam, who is ambitious to work for a larger station in "the south 48," is about to end his stay when he spots something in the distance. He and Nathan go to a large hole in the ice and discover that two large California gray whales and a small one are surfacing continually and blowing the spray which had caught the reporter's eye. The creatures are five miles from the open sea, apparently caught by the quick freeze that had come early. This is too far for them to be able to swim without surfacing for air—and it will not be long before this breathing hole is frozen over, despite the efforts of the whales—their soft heads are bruised and bleeding from their bumping up against the ice.

Adam's video and commentary are quickly sent to his station in Anchorage, and then across the continent in New York a news editor picks it up and runs it in an open spot on Tom Brokaw's NBC Nightly News. Quickly the story is taken up by Peter Jennings on ABC and Dan Rather on CBS. Almost immediately journalists from newspapers, magazines, and television from all over the world head for Barrow. Thus about everyone becomes concerned over the plight of the vulnerable whales, especially when it is learned that the smaller one is a baby.

This is when and where the story really gets interesting and becomes a delightful film for peacemakers. The title of the film can be taken in two ways: first, meaning that it will

take a miracle to enable the whales to reach the open sea five miles away; and secondly, the miracle of a crew of people so adamantly opposed to, even hating, one another, finding a way of working together to "save the whales." Starting chronologically, there is Adam who is interested in the whales only as a means of advancing his career. Then there is young Nathan who sees the event in commercial terms, selling cardboard sheets at gouging prices to journalists to keep their feet from freezing due to their long periods of standing on the ice. Greenpeace staffer Rachel Kramer (Drew Barrymore) arrives, seeing the whales as a means of spreading her concern for the environment. She tries to talk the Governor into calling out the National Guard and sending them to Barrow with equipment for breaking through the ice. He at first shrugs her off, only coming around when he sees this as a good way to garner some favorable publicity. Malik and his Inuit tribal members have the most straightforward take on the whales—food. Their hunting had not gone so well during the summer, so, even though the whales are a different species from their usual fare, they want to harvest the creatures.

The most ominous party to join what becomes a rescue team is J.W. McGraw (Ted Danson), the rapacious CEO of a big oil company that has been vying for the right to drill for oil in the region. He also shrugs off the story at first, the plight of three whales being of no interest whatever. But then his wife Ruth (Kathy Baker) does two neat things—she gets word to Rachel that the company has a huge barge that might be able to crush a path through the ice, if it can be towed to Barrow, several hundred miles away; and second, she plants the idea in McGraw's mind that coming to the assistance of the whales could really refurbish his tarnished public image. He agrees to pay the costs of the rescue and to allow the National Guard helicopters to try to tow the barge to Barrow.

There are more personages: Colonel Scott Boyer (Dermot Mulroney) is the chief pilot of the two National Guard

helicopters dispatched to tow the company barge. He sees the mission at first just as a difficult assignment. Also, one of the influx of outsiders is the attractive reporter from Los Angeles Jill Jerald (Kristen Bell), viewing the assignment as a career move to gain national recognition. And in Washington DC Kelly Meyers, a political aide in Ronald Reagan's White House (Vinessa Shaw) realizes that this is a good way for the President, and for his Vice President running for the Presidency, to refurbish their bleak image on the environment.

This at first results in just a congratulatory phone call that Reagan makes to Col. Boyer—and which, at the President end is videotaped for public consumption. But then, when towing the barge becomes impossible, and the freezing of the ice increases at an alarming rate, the President reluctantly brings in Gorbachev because a large Soviet ice breaker is cruising not far away in the Bering Sea.

At a time when our society is so divided that the political process in Washington and many state capitals seems totally gridlocked, it is refreshing to see such a film as this affirming that people at war with one another can learn to work together. The more they see of the whales, the more each character begins to lay aside his/her own agenda and see the bigger picture—and also the humanity in the opponent they once demonized. After observing how much energy and money the now genuinely concerned McGraw puts into the rescue effort, Rachel manages to say to him, "It's hard to hate you now." They part with intentions to "disagree agreeably." Rachel also, when she attends an Inuit tribal council meeting, comes to understand their perspective on whales as necessary for their survival. And Malik, who brings a spiritual approach to the venture, realizes that despite aspects of the majority culture that he does not like, but which attracts his grandson, his tribe will have to adjust to change in their part of the world.

There is a good deal of Hollywood romance (Adam and Rachel

were once a pair, and now there is a triangle with Jill) and considerable fish out of water humor at the expense of the outsiders (very similar to that in the TV series Northern Exposure), but this does not detract from the serious environmental and reconciliation/cooperation themes. Indeed the image that came to my mind at the uplifting conclusion of the film was one of Edward Hick's paintings "The Peaceable Kingdom" in which off to the side of a large scene of predator and grass-eating animals lying down together is depicted William Penn signing a peace treaty with the Native Americans. It is good that there was a time in which such a fanciful image of shalom actually took place, way up in the frozen north of Barrow, Alaska where warm hearts overcame the coldness of the wars between people and two nations.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. List the various characters and their competing interests in the whales: Adam Nathan Malik and the Inuit Rachel The Gov. of Alaska McGraw Ruth McGraw Jill Jerard The Colonel Kelly Meyers Pres. Reagan
2. How do each regard some of the others at the beginning of the story? At what points do they begin to change? How does a face to face relationship help?
3. How is their changing their view of others similar to the conversion experience described by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:16-18?
4. What relevancy do you see that the above two quotations from the New Testament Epistles have to the story?
5. Have you changed a once negative view you held of someone to a more positive one? What helped bring about such a change? How does our society's penchant for labeling people impede our relationships? For instance, when we call each other radical socialists or right-wing conservatives, what images arise in us? What are some other labels that get in the way?

6. In the film how are the two partners in Minnesota with their new de-icer device depicted? Remind you of the two brothers in the cranberry commercial? Thus, how are they at first received by the team at the breathing hole? How is this often the way we deal with people whom we underestimate?

7. How does the film show that seeing and accepting a larger picture or goal can enable us to lay aside our narrower agendas and pitch in to work together?

8. The film gives just the briefest of pictures of the Inuit culture under pressure. How do we see Nathan affected by this and pulled in opposite directions? What negative aspect of our culture do we see the boy succumbing to, amusingly perhaps, but not really in the long run were he to continue down that path. How is the grandfather Malik a good influence on him; and how does Malik himself change during the story?

9. How do the Americans and the Soviets come to a better understanding of each other? What ramifications followed 1988, such as in the two once competing space programs?

10. If this is a group discussion, show a picture of one of the versions of Edward Hicks painting "The Peaceable Kingdom." What better way was he trying to suggest to Americans during the early 19th century? It might be fun to have the group identify a film character with one of the animals in the painting. Also, of course, discuss what the film and painting might teach us today, at the personal and national/international levels.