

Grand Canyon (1991)

From Feb. 1992 VP.

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 49 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 6; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them

Psalm 8:3-4

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s great "I have a dream" speech still thrills us each time we hear it in January. But it also can make us wince when we see what has happened to this nation since those hopeful days of the summer 1963. Director-writer-producer Lawrence Kasdan's fine visual parable can be viewed as a poignant and wry commentary on the gap between the dream and the reality of America in the 1990's. He and his script co-writer wife Meg have a fine eye for details of urban life—such as the street people, a man holding a sign begging for work, a woman trying to scrub blood off the sidewalk, the traffic jams, angry epithets of drivers, and much more.

All ten of the characters in the film are disturbed about their lives. Mack (Kevin Kline) is unhappy with his law practice and restless in his marriage. His wife Claire (Mary McDonnell), overwhelmed by the misery of the world, sees little sense in it. Mack's secretary Dee is terribly lonely

and in love with him. Deborah lives in the ghetto, constantly in fear for the lives of her two children, especially for her son.

Yet in the midst of all this darkness moments of grace keep happening: Mack is saved from a gang of toughs by Simon (Danny Glover), the driver of the tow truck Mack had called when his car broke down in the ghetto. Out of this a friendship grows with far reaching consequences. Claire, while jogging, finds a baby and takes it home, not calling the police but preferring to wait until nightfall when Mack returns from work. Even their friend Davis (Steve Martin), producer of violent exploitation films, decides to make quality films after he is shot by a robber (a temporary decision, unfortunately – he enjoys money too much).

Some of the scenes are funny, others very sad, especially those involving Otis, Simon's teenage nephew who runs with a gang and believes that he will not live to be twenty-five. Los Angeles itself, in a way, is part of the cast, dark and menacing when we are at the house of Simon's Sister, with its barred windows – and neat and orderly in the white section where Mack and Claire live in a lovely house. We are reminded that it is no longer angels that hover over the city named after them: the roar of police helicopters is heard day and night, calling to mind scenes from *Boyz N the Hood*.

The film's title comes from Simon's Wordsworthian philosophy. He describes the Grand Canyon to Mack, marveling at its age: "When you sit on the edge of it, you realize what a joke we all are." For him this sense of transcendence is enough to keep him going, and it is something which he believes should be shared. In the modern City of the Angels the church apparently fails to attract or convey this sense of awe and transcendence to any of the people in the story. Simon sees little Good News, though his friendship with Mack becomes a faint reflection of it. One can hope that they will come to The Psalmist's knowledge of the Maker of the Grand Canyon. A

good film for church groups to see & discuss!

TEACHING/PREACHING MOMENTS:

Mack's car breaking down in a warehouse section of the city, his phone failing him, his hike to find a phone booth, and a carload of Black teenagers menacing him just as Simon drives up in his tow truck. Simon, like a Black Gandhi, sizing up the situation as he gets out of the truck (rather than driving on by to avoid danger), negotiating with the gang leader for permission to go about his job, and then driving away with Mack and his car, free of any attack by the would-be robbers.

Mack telling Simon about the stranger who pulled him back from the path of a bus and his sense that she was "sent to me." His desire not to let Simon "slip by" like that rescuer without a more tangible expression of thanks.

Claire talking with Mack about her finding the baby and Simon rescuing him. She sees these as miracles: "What if these are miracles, Mack? What if we have trouble recognizing miracles because we haven't had experience with them?" Viewers could discuss their concept of miracle

Mack giving his son Roberto a driving lesson. When the boy almost causes a crash while attempting a left-turn, what does his scared father do? How is his reaction a "moment of grace"?

Note: One of my most comprehensive sets of discussion guides for this film is contained in my book *Films and Faith: 40 Discussion Guides* For info on the book's availability contact me at myparables2@gmail.com.