

Oh, God! (1977)

I am reprinting this review of a delightful old film because the theme of the rejection of God's messenger goes well with the Lectionary text—Mark 6:1-13—for July 5, 2015.

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 38 min. Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 0; Language 1 ; Sex/Nudity 1. Our star rating (1-5): 5

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful.

The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.

Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.

I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted";

I said in my consternation, "Everyone is a liar."

Psalm 116:5-11

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

And he marveled because of their unbelief.

Mark 4:6

Both Jerry and his wife think the note from God is a friend's

hoax when they read it.

All pictures (c) 1977 Warner Brothers

Many people were put off by the title of Carl Reiner's film when it was released in 1977. Most were soon put to ease when they saw the story unfold about God trying to reassure an anxious humanity (it was the height of the Cold War) that things would turn out all right if they would have faith and do the right thing.

In the film, God's means of conveying the message was troubling to most, a mild mannered assistant produce manager, very much like "the simple" of Psalm 116. Claiming that God took the form of an old man wearing sneakers whenever they met—how could anyone accept that? Jerry, as played by John Denver, had trouble himself at first believing that the old man, ably portrayed by George Burns, was really God. Nor was it any easier accepting his call to go and tell others. Wouldn't they think he was crazy?

Yes, they would. Jerry's own wife and children think he has gone off the deep end. When he manages to get on the Dinah Shore Show, he is held up to ridicule. The TV anchors and pundits have a field day with him. And a panel of famous theologians and a TV evangelist are unconvinced when they interrogate him. God, however, is fed up with the smug, less than honest evangelist, so he has Jerry go to one of his televised services and attack him. This leads to a court case against Jerry, initiated by the evangelist and his attorney. Again, Jerry is held up to ridicule, but this time, if the judge does not accept Jerry's claims, there will be a costly penalty. The trial reaches its climax, with Jerry calling one witness (against the judge's advice Jerry serves as his own attorney).

Jerry calls as his witness, and he pauses for a dramatic instant, "God." Everyone looks back at the double-door of the

courtroom. Nothing happens. There is a snicker among the crowd, but the judge is clearly not amused. Jerry argues that there was a moment when everyone must have expected someone, a brief instant when belief and doubt co-existed in their minds, because they all looked back at the doors. Thus he should be given the benefit of the doubt, and the case against him dismissed, he argues. The judge is not only not convinced; he is tempted to cite Jerry for contempt of court!

And then the doors do open, and in walks the old man in sneakers, just as Jerry had described him, claiming to be God. God accepts the oath, swearing "so help me, Me," and then proceeds to affirm both Jerry's message and his goodness.

When the evangelist's lawyer tries to question God, he is told, "Sit down, Sonny!" The camera pointedly shows us the court recorder starting a tape recorder, as well as typing every word being spoken. After his brief testimony in which God again reassures humanity that they will be fine if they believe and do right (and he also does a card trick for the judge!), he walks down the aisle and exits through the doors.

A buzz spreads through the startled people in the courtroom. Only Jerry, and at last his wife who had questioned his sanity, are calm and pleased at what has transpired. The judge orders the plaintiff and the defendant into his chamber to discuss the case. He confesses that he is not sure what happened, especially when the court recorder cannot find any of the words of God on the tape and the typed transcript. We can hear during the playback the questions and remarks of all the humans, but where God supposedly spoke there is only silence. A check of the paper transcript also reveals only blank spaces at those places where God's words should have been. The evangelist and his lawyer claim that this must all be a hoax or a hallucination. Jerry tells them that God had told him such would happen, that God cannot be captured or enclosed physically, that he came in human form only to

accommodate our limited senses. His accusers refuse to accept this, of course. The judge, saying that they will probably never know what really happened in that courtroom, dismisses the case, and Jerry walks out a free man, both he and his wife believing that they had indeed encountered the living God.

I really enjoyed Avery Corman's novel, on which the film is based, but it ends before God walks through the courtroom doors. Thus, when the film continued, I thought, "Oh no, here goes Hollywood, messing up a good novel—they couldn't just end the film here. They had to prove to everyone that it was really God whom Jerry had met." This feeling of disappointment continued—until the scene in the judge's chambers, when no physical evidence could be provided for God's presence. The people had only the evidence of their own senses, and they responded according to the nature of their character. The evangelist with his fake faith, so smug with his belief in a god made in the image of himself, refused to credit his own eyes and ears. The skeptical judge was at least open, but still not convinced. Only Jerry and his wife truly believed and left the courtroom changed by the experience.

The filmmakers accepted Avery Corman's thesis that there is always ambiguity in faith, that the believer must choose whether or not to believe. The scriptwriter took the novelist's biblical understanding a step further, showing us that God cannot be pinned down by our modern devices. God is far too "big" and tenuous (spiritual) for tape recorders, or any other technological device, by which we attempt to capture "Reality." Thus *Oh, God!* stands in opposition to the many biblical spectacles, such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, in which miracles are objectified for all to see and be convinced of God's presence. The film seems to start out that way, with God acceding to Jerry's request for a miracle to prove that he is really God: God causes it to rain inside Jerry's car, while the sun is shining outside—but this is a private experience just for Jerry. Others, such as the

traffic cop who stops him, could interpret the water as having been left over from a car wash through which he must have driven with his windows open.

Oh, God! reminds us that although “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” we must still choose to accept an experience, and that different people, such as those in the judge’s chambers, will react to a faith encounter in different ways, some accepting, and others rejecting the validity of the experience.

This review is taken from the longer feature “Praying the Movies” that appeared in the Oct. 2000 issue of Visual Parables.