

The Woodsman (2004)

Rated R Our content rating V-2; L-4; S/N-7

O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—

those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies

Psalms 139:19-22

Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.

1 John 2:9

Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

2 Peter 1:4-7

Just as I admired Tom Hanks for *The Woodsman* taking on the difficult role of an HIV-infected gay man, so my admiration for Kevin Bacon has increased greatly because of *The Woodsman*. If homosexuals are loathed by a small segment of our society, virtually everyone is filled with disgust by the

crimes of pedophiles. In prisons even murderers and rapists feel superior to them. Mr. Bacon plays Walter, just starting a new life after serving twelve years for sexually molesting several young girls. His brother has persuaded a friend to hire him at his lumberyard and woodworking plant, Walter being a skilled craftsman.

The only apartment Walter can find is located across the street from a grade school, which will become a source of continual temptation to him. At work the receptionist Mary-Kay (Eve) tries to befriend him during their lunch break, but he rebuffs her. Bad move, because this leads her to wonder about his past, so that she begins searching on the Internet for information about him. At first Walter's only visitors to his sparse apartment are his brother-in-law Carlos (Benjamin Bratt) and Sgt. Lucas (Mos Def). Carlos updates Walter on his sister, who will have nothing to do with him, and their daughter. We gather that his niece was one of his victims, hence the sister's refusal to see him again. Sgt. Lucas drops by unannounced because there has been a child molestation in the area, and of course, every parolee with a sexual misconduct record is a suspect. The policeman makes little effort from the very first visit to hide his contempt for Walter and all of "his kind."

The only non-clerical female worker at the lumberyard is forklift operator Vickie (Kyra Sedgwick), often the object of sexual harassment by her lusty co-workers. After one such incident, Walter asks her how she is. Although passing off his sympathetic gesture at the time, she later approaches him, obviously open for a date. He resists at first, but then does take her out. Sensing by his reticence some problem, she asks

him why he had been sent to prison, but he refuses to answer. Only after some time of sharing bed and breakfast does he finally tell her his secret. She is true to her assertion that she is not easily shocked.

The other major person in Walter's life is the therapist whom he visits reluctantly. Resisting his friendliness and suggestions, he eventually accepts his suggestion that he keep a journal. It is through these sessions and the journal entries that we gain at least some entrance into Walter's tormented mind. He gazes each day out the window at the children playing in the schoolyard and emerging at the end of the day to go home. He notices a young man hanging around each day, eventually approaching a child and offering candy. Walter is all too aware of the man's motives.

Walter commutes to work on a bus, and frequently sees a pretty little girl closer to the front. One day he follows her, getting off at the same stop. In the most uncomfortable sequence of the entire movie, we follow his attempts over a several day period to befriend her. She loves to watch birds through the binoculars she carries, and reveals that her name is Robin (Hannah Pilkes). Both get a laugh out of this. Eventually Walter invites her to sit on his lap. She refuses at first, but then consents. Both he and she are saved only by her tears. Walter coaxes out of her the admission that her father has been issuing her the same invitation. Now aware of what is going on in the supposed sanctuary of her home, Walter draws back, deeply touched by her blemished innocence and trust. Although there is more to the story, this incredibly acted scene becomes the focal point of the film, offering a faint ray of hope that Walter, while never cured, might nonetheless be able to rally against the demonic urges within himself.

It seems incredible that this is the first film by director Nicole Kassell, who co-wrote the script with Steven Fechter, based on his insightful play. She neither justifies nor

condemns Walter, but tells his story in a simple and straightforward way. Christians often say that “we must hate the sin but love the sinner,” but child molestation so arouses such a deep disgust within us that we find this dictum all but impossible to follow in the case of pedophiles. The film does not deal with issues of registration of pedophiles and other restrictions placed on them by a society justifiably fearful of what they might do when released from prison. It simply shows us the humanity of one offender, who although filled with a lust that can turn him into a monster, is still a human being, a potential child of God. We can hope that someday Walter will come to know the One who was a friend of outcasts and sinners, for he will need all the spiritual aid he can find to live free of his demons.

For Reflection and discussion (Contains some spoilers, so you might want to wait until you have seen the film before reading on.)

1) How do you feel about pedophiles? Does Sgt. Lucas’ scornful description of Walter as “scum” seem fitting? What do you make of the policeman’s reference to the tale of Little Red Riding Hood? How does this give the film its name?

2) How does the filmmaker bring out the gentler, human side of Walter? (Such as his putting up a bird feeder? His concern over Vickie’s being harassed? His worry over the young man’s seduction of the schoolboys?)

3) Jesus is shown in the gospels as a friend “of outcasts and sinners.” Do you think his acceptance would extend even to the Walters of our day? Why or why not?

4) How is the therapist’s suggestion that Walter keep a journal a good one? What can it do for him?

5) Do you think Mary-Kaye is justified in checking into Walter’s past? In distributing the flyers revealing his crime? What about her statement that the other workers have the right

to know? How can the right to privacy and the public's right to know be balanced in such situations—or can they be?

6) How is what happens to Walter as a result of Mary-Kaye's act typical of society's reaction? Can this really help "solve" the problem of sexual offenders living in our midst? How are the Psalmist's words about evildoers descriptive of those who attacked Walter? Can you think of anything that the church might do to deal with such situations?

7) What do you think of Walter's beating up the young man who has been seducing the boys? How is this about the same as what his co-workers did to him? And yet, what does it suggest about Walter's progress in dealing with his demons? How does this seem to affect the police officer?

8) What other signs of hope do you see at the end of the film? Walter says that he feels "Okay," but do you think he is really? How is his new acceptance of himself but the first step in a long process? Would you say that the title "the Woodsman" can now be applied to Walter, based on the incident with Robin? What do you hope he might do about her situation—but do you think he will, given his own situation? (Of course, many of us like everything neatly resolved in our movies, but is the filmmaker wiser not to do so here?)

9) What do you think of the use of the song "His Eye is on the Sparrow" during the closing credits? What might this reveal about the filmmaker's view of Walter and perhaps of what he still needs in his long journey toward wholeness and health?