

Film Night by Jon Gauger

Attending Sunday morning church as a kid, there were no more magical words than these: “Be sure to come back for our evening service tonight when we’ll be showing a wonderful Christian film.”

Ahh...film night. Back then, we didn’t use the word, “movie” as it was somehow tainted with the dirt of Hollywood. But a “film”—that was something that decent evangelical folks could show in church.

Film night always began with singing at least one or two hymns. Jumping right into the movie would be neither Christian nor proper. I was certain there had to be a Bible verse that forbade it. But finally came the words we were all waiting for: “Could someone please get the lights.”

And what happened? Nothing. Not for a good 30 seconds. Then someone would conclude that *no* one had been assigned to turn off the lights—despite the fact that it was film night. So a brave church member—or maybe an off-duty usher would waddle up to the wall switches and start flipping them: Tish...Tish ...Tish. Off went the lights. But...for some reason, there was always one last bank of lights—right over the choir loft—that never seemed to go off. Finally, after a long delay—and a few lights going on and off....TISH...the last light went off and a grand darkness blanketed the room.

Then came the mechanical whir of sprockets twirling spools of celluloid, and the countdown appearing on screen. Booop...booop...booop. We were now on the edge of our seats. The light went out.

And the glorious soundtrack was finally heard—often an orchestra—maybe a solo French Horn. For some reason, it always seemed to be infected with that dopey, lilting sound.

Then came the first fabulous images on the screen and we were enraptured as the narrator began...

“From the days of his first missionary journey... (and here’s where the trouble began) ...the apostle Paul was uniquely and divinely appointed for ministry to the Gentiles

Here, the bizarre sounding audio track abruptly stopped. As it did so, an enormous orange ball exploded onto the screen. A new planet? No—just the stuck film frame melting in the heat of the bulb. It, too, faded quickly as an unintended blackness settled over the congregation.

Endangered church services have always needed heroes. And who better than the song leader to stage a glorious rescue. With smile in place and a thumb in his hymnal, he knew just where we could turn for a song that would...ur...give the A-V guy some time to make a splice and clear the jam.

I remember film night at church. And though there's a fondness in my heart born of nostalgia, I'm grateful for the strides the church has taken in media competence. We plan better, think more carefully and in general, do a pretty reliable job at showing people stuff on the screen. Film night has gone side. But what should never go away, is our passion to show and tell stories of God at work

Remembering film night—and still puzzling over those light switches--I'm Jon Gauger for PTA.