

The Faith-Based Movie of the Year: 'Harriet'

Christian filmmakers brought several inspirational messages to movie theaters in 2019, including *Breakthrough*, *Overcomer* and *Unplanned*. But my favorite faith-based film of the year was not produced by a Christian company for Christian audiences. *Harriet*, the first film ever made about abolitionist leader Harriet Tubman, will end up being my favorite movie of the year.

From the moment we are introduced to Tubman on the Maryland farm where she was a slave in 1849, we see her brave determination. When it becomes obvious that her owner plans to sell her down South, she does the unthinkable—she escapes in the night and walks 100 miles to Pennsylvania to become a free woman.

In Philadelphia she finds support from other abolitionists and becomes what locals in Maryland began to call “Moses”—a daring slave liberator who wades across rivers, carries a loaded gun and risks her life to bring hundreds of slaves north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

It's sad that it took this long for someone to make a film about Tubman. Her work with the Underground Railroad made her one of the most famous women in American history. Yet I'm actually glad we waited until 2019 for director Kasi Lemmons to take on this project, because she did a masterful job of portraying Tubman's vibrant faith as well as the faith of so many slaves who trusted God to end their misery.

In one key scene, Tubman tells the son of her owner: “God don't mean people to own people.” This defiant woman, who stood only 5 feet tall, wasn't afraid to look evil straight in the eye and confront it.

Tubman's struggle is depicted in the film as a series of prayers. On the night she flees from her Maryland overlords, she stops to see Rev. Green (Vondie Curtis-Hall), a pastor who prays for her safety. When she gets near the Pennsylvania border she finds protection from a compassionate Quaker. And she often hears God speaking directly to her about which path to take or which road to avoid.

History confirms that Tubman suffered from a brain injury that she sustained when a slave owner accidentally hit her in the head with an iron weight. The wound caused periodic fainting spells. In the film, as in real life, Tubman often felt God was speaking to her during her unconscious moments. Apparently she relied on the Holy Spirit's supernatural gifts to guide her mission.

Actress and singer Cynthia Erivo was perfectly cast in the role of Tubman, and she will most likely get an Oscar nomination for her work. (She already received a Golden Globe nomination for best actress in a drama.) Not only does Erivo accurately portray the gutsy conviction of a national hero, but she sings many of the same haunting African American spirituals that Tubman would have used to signal to slaves that it was time to run north.

The original song "Stand Up," performed by Erivo, has already been nominated for a Golden Globe. With soulful passion she sings: "I'm gonna stand up / take my people with me / together we are going / to a brand new home / far across the river / I hear freedom calling / calling me to answer / gonna keep on keepin' on / I can feel it in my bones."

The worship songs of slaves provide much of the soundtrack for the film. In one scene, Rev. Green leads a group of slaves in "Hold On," which calls on believers to "hold on to the plow." Other tunes such as "Go Down Moses," "Wade in the Water" and "Goodbye Song" show how slaves found comfort in the earliest forms of gospel music.

Some people have criticized *Harriet* because it doesn't show the bloody brutality of slavery. But director Lemmons has said in interviews that she wanted to make a film about freedom, not slavery. There is enough violence in the film to get it a PG-13 rating (we see the scars on the backs of slaves, and some abusive treatment), but instead of gore and screams we see Tubman's conviction to stop injustice. I'm glad the violence is downplayed so that younger audiences can watch the film without it triggering nightmares.

"I would give every last drop of blood in my veins until this monster called slavery is dead," Tubman says near the end of the film.

The best thing about *Harriet* is that this woman is not a comic-book superhero like Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel. She was a real person. She was a justice warrior in her day who fought for women's suffrage after the Civil War ended. Hopefully her life story will inspire a whole new generation of justice warriors to trust God and to follow His voice.

Harriet is rated PG-13 for some violence and coarse language, including some racial slurs. {eoa}