

MOVING MOUNTAINS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 17:14-20

There is a particular movie that if I am flipping channels and this movie is on, then I will stop and watch it for a while. It's a guilty pleasure because this movie is pretty terrible but still fun to watch. The film in question is called *Armageddon*. And it is so bad that the late critic Roger Ebert called it, "an assault on the eyes, the ears, the brain, common sense, and the human desire to be entertained. No matter what they're charging to get in, it's worth more to get out."¹ Nevertheless, the film was the second highest grossing movie of 1998, behind *Titanic*.

The premise of the movie is simple. A giant asteroid the size of Texas is hurtling towards Earth. When it hits, it will eradicate all life on the planet. So, NASA hatches a plan. They hire Bruce Willis who is an expert in drilling oil wells to fly in the space shuttle with his crew of roughnecks and land on this asteroid and drill a hole in said asteroid and drop a nuclear bomb into that hole. They are to get away and detonate the bomb which will split the rock into two parts while the Earth flies between them.

It sounds kind of silly when I say it out loud.

As you can guess, things don't go according to plan. People are killed, shuttles explode, the laws of physics are tossed out the window. In the end, Earth is saved at the very, very, very last second, and some guy gets a girl.

I would tell you this premise is completely far-fetched, but in a moment of life imitating art, NASA just did this. On September 26—13 days ago—NASA intentionally crashed a spaceship into an asteroid in order to save the Earth. In all fairness, Earth was in no danger from this particular asteroid. NASA just wanted to see if they could do it. And they did. It's the first mission of their planetary defense program.

In 1996, astronomers discovered an asteroid in orbit around the Sun. The orbit of this asteroid brings it close enough to be classified as a Near Earth Object. This particular asteroid is roughly one-half mile wide. Several years after its discovery, astronomers learned it had a moonlet—a smaller body in orbit. Because of this, the larger asteroid was then named *Didymos*, the Greek word for twin. The smaller body, which is only about 560 feet across, was called *Dimorphos*. It is almost exactly the size of the Bridgestone Arena in Nashville.

¹ <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/armageddon-1998>

To be clear, neither of these bodies pose any danger to Earth. They exist in their own happy little orbits out in space. In fact, there are no known threats to Earth by any asteroid at this time. However, that is probably what the dinosaurs thought 66 million years ago when a large object slammed into the Yucatan Peninsula obliterating 75% of all life on Earth.²

Anyway, the folks at NASA decided that they needed to learn how to protect Earth in case we do discover a threatening asteroid. So, they proposed the DART mission. DART stands for Dual Asteroid Redirection Test. The purpose of this \$300 million DART mission was to see if they could nudge an asteroid, to change its trajectory. Nuclear bombs make for good movies, but in real life it's not a great idea because when you blow up an asteroid you end up with a lot of little fragment asteroids coming at you. It's best to keep your asteroid in one piece and just push it out of the way. The DART mission was designed to see if we could do that to see if we could alter the trajectory of the Dimorphos asteroid.

So, last November, NASA fired a rocket from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. On this rocket was the DART spacecraft. The DART spacecraft is basically a cube that is four feet on each side. Once in space, it unfurled two 28 foot solar panels. DART's primary payload is a high-resolution video camera used to send images back to Earth. The mass of the spacecraft is about 1260 pounds. DART also carries a smaller satellite to be deployed 15 days before its impact to help guide DART to the crash site.

The engineer overseeing the mission likens DART to throwing a tennis ball at a 747. But if that tennis ball is going fast enough, it will nudge the 747. And that was the hope here. At impact, DART would be traveling 3.8 miles per second.

So, Monday a week ago, at 6:00 PM, I sat in my kitchen at a computer, watching the final few moments of the DART mission. There was a video feed from the camera on the spacecraft as it flew closer and closer to the Dimorphos asteroid. It was sending an image about every 3 seconds. Finally, the image of the asteroid filled the screen, and then there was nothing. The ship had been destroyed as it crashed into the asteroid exactly as planned.

Having grown up with NASA, I have a tendency to take their projects for granted. They put people on the moon; they put rovers on Mars; they've sent craft to the edge of the solar system. They do all these incredible things and they do them well. So, crashing a small spacecraft into an asteroid doesn't sound all that impressive. But it should be. It is astonishing that they pulled this off. They fired a rocket into orbit that launched a spacecraft that traveled seven million miles to hit a small rock which was orbiting a larger rock.

² On a side note, a paper was published just this week that speculates that the impact of that asteroid created a tsunami that was 2.5 miles high.

Imagine that I handed you a .22 caliber rifle along with a box of ammo. I then placed an apple on a fence post 30 feet away and told you to shoot it. That is not a hard shot and you would likely hit the apple before you ran out of ammo.

Now, imagine that I handed you the gun and then set you on a galloping horse, and I placed the apple a mile away on a row boat that was floating down the rapids of a river. And then I gave you just one bullet and told you to hit the apple. It is a miracle that that little spacecraft hit that rock.

But this is where I'm going with this. Imagine the faith that it took to even conceive of the DART mission. And by faith, I mean the faith that the engineers and scientists had in themselves, their abilities, their experience, their knowledge, and their science. They believed in what they wanted to do.

But here's my point. What if we, as Christians, placed that same level of faith, not in ourselves, but in God? What could we accomplish then? Anything.

Our scripture reading for today is a simple story of an exorcism. Here we read that a father approaches Jesus and kneels down and asks for mercy for his son who suffers from some ailment, probably epilepsy. The boy's seizures often cause him to fall into the cooking fire or into a water trough. The boy is always in danger of injuring himself. Imagine how terrifying that must have been for his parents. The father goes on to explain that he brought the boy to Jesus' disciples, but they could not cure him.

Jesus listens to the father; he sighs and he speaks. And what he says is not directed to the father, but more in general to the people present and to the disciples. Jesus echoes the words of Moses³ when he says, *You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?* He is clearly frustrated. He has already given the disciples the power to do miracles. He has shown that miracles are possible. So, where is their faith?

Jesus instructs the father bring the boy to him, and Jesus heals him. Afterward, the disciples approach Jesus and ask why they could not help the boy. And Jesus says to them, *Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.*

Here, Jesus contrasts the disciples' "little faith" to "mustard seed faith." Jesus has already established that mustard seeds are extraordinarily small, and yet they grow to become significant plants. Little faith, on the other hand, is not a lack of faith, but instead it is a distracted faith, a faith that is easily sidelined, a faith that misses its target. Little faith is the faith that starts out strong but is easily discouraged. Little faith wants to feed the hungry, but gets distracted at how many

³ Deuteronomy 32:5

people continue to be hungry. Little faith wants to shelter the homeless, but also complains that the homeless are not adequately appreciative of what's been done for them. Little faith wants to celebrate God's kingdom, but grumbles it is too hard to find.

Mustard seed faith, on the other hand, starts out small, but it perseveres, and it grows and becomes a shelter for others. Mustard seed faith stays focused. Mustard seed faith, though tiny, can move mountains, it can nudge asteroids, it can usher in God's kingdom, it can change the world.

Faith is a gift from God. Faith offers us the connection to God that transforms our lives. Faith is not belief in God. For example, I can believe, but still have little faith. Faith, as we read in the book of Hebrews, *...is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Faith is the certainty that God is always with us, that God does not waver, that loves us. I believe in God and I have faith that God is with me.

I will admit that sometimes my faith wavers and becomes "little." "Where is God?" I ask. "Is God with me?" And when that happens, I know to lean on others for their faith. So, I turn to you, to my family, to my colleagues. I allow their faith to shelter me like a great mustard tree until my own faith has grown stronger.

So, was the DART mission successful? Yes, they hit the objective like a bullseye. Did it move the asteroid? We don't know yet. It will take a couple of weeks to gather the data. But I have faith.