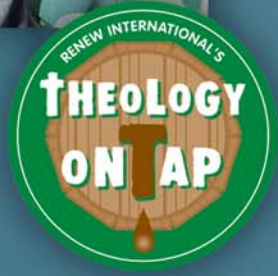




LUKE WILSON RADHA MITCHELL GEORGE LOPEZ
WITH CHERYL HINES AND ADRIANA BARRAZA
A MARK PELLINGTON FILM

HENRY POOLE IS HERE

Discussion GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Faith and its effects are treated fairly widely throughout pop culture, but rarely does a film address it so directly as in *Henry Poole is Here*. We can have faith in a number of different things—God, religion, relationships, an image that appears on a wall—for a variety of different reasons. It is sometimes difficult to determine what we truly believe, the reasons behind our belief, and most importantly how our belief changes us. Henry is still unsure of what has happened to him and why, leaving him (and us) with more questions than answers.

“What now?” Dawn asks Henry, just before the credits roll. RENEW International has created this discussion guide to ask the same question of us. *What now?* In what do we have faith and why? How are we to live because of this faith?

Each section of this discussion guide looks at one of the themes in *Henry Poole is Here*. The sections include an excerpt from Christian Scriptures that pertains to the theme, a brief reflection, and some questions to guide your group’s conversation.



Pain to Joy: Experiencing the Paschal Mystery



SCRIPTURE: JOHN 16:20-22

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

REFLECTION

This Scripture from John’s Gospel is unambiguous: you will weep and mourn, especially when you love. Jesus was preparing his friends for his death. It’s not going to be easy. The first part of *Henry Poole is Here* echoes this sentiment by revealing the pain of its three main characters. Even before Henry’s diagnosis, we know that he had a trying childhood. As he matured, though we know little about his adult life, it seems as though it was a life accompanied by unhappiness. When he goes home, he recollects, “This is the last place I remember being happy.” Henry’s neighbor, Esperanza, describes her life as lonely and filled with sadness, before she met Leo. We hear his other neighbor, Dawn, crying on her daughter’s recording. True to what Jesus says to his disciples, it’s a fact, life will be painful.

Do we give into this pain that can lead to a life without hope? Or do we choose to accept our grief as part of life, and look deeper? Is joy something that we conjure from within? Or is it inevitably linked to our external circumstances?

Henry's diagnosis sends him into despair, "waiting for the end." Yet, his relationship with Dawn allows him to wake up thinking about something other than his death. This does not make him a puppet subject to his circumstances, however. He still has a choice to make. Which way does he go?

In the midst of pain, it is usually difficult to be hopeful, even when Jesus himself tells us that our grief will turn to joy. Patience, the supermarket clerk, addresses this dilemma, as she concludes that "Sometimes you have to be sad to remind yourself you're alive." Some of the most memorable moments of life occur in the midst of anxiety or pain. In light of this, it is worth remembering the the context in which Jesus spoke these words: during the final meal between Jesus and his friends, one of the most celebrated moments in the history of our tradition—just before pain was most definitely turned to joy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Can people choose to be joyful? Why or why not?
2. Have I ever chosen to go through something "painful" precisely because of a greater "joy" or good I expect it to bring?
3. How have external circumstances affected my life? What are the changes that I need to make in order to better my life? To come to terms with pain that I have kept from turning to joy?



Stucco Job or Face of God: The Place of Divine Providence

SCRIPTURE: WISDOM 14:1-5

*One preparing to sail and about to voyage
over raging waves
calls upon a piece of wood more fragile
than the ship that carries him.
For it was desire for gain that planned that vessel,
and wisdom was the artisan who built it;
but it is your providence, O Father,
that steers its course,
because you have given it a path in the sea,
and a safe way through the waves,
showing that you can save from every danger,
so that even a person who lacks skill
may put to sea.
It is your will that works of your wisdom
should not be without effect;
therefore people trust their lives
even to the smallest piece of wood,
and passing through the billows on a raft
they come safely to land.*

SIRACH (ECCLESIASTICUS) 15:15-17

*If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.*

REFLECTION

Henry Poole is Here offers a glimpse into the lives of neighbors in a small town in California: a cast of characters ranging from the unconvinced realist to the blind faithful. They all have a part to play. What, though, is God's role in all of this? It's a question that's not easily answered, though attempts are made by the various characters in the story.

As one can see from the Scripture above, our Tradition can offer us mixed signals about the role God plays in our own story. Does God “steer our course” or are we left to choose to keep the commandments? Or is it something in between?

To illustrate this time-tested debate, we are invited to compare and contrast two characters: Henry and his resolute neighbor, Esperanza. Note, though, even when you look at these characters individually, paradoxes emerge. Esperanza, stubborn in her assertion that everything happens for a reason, seems to have no reason for the sudden death of her boyfriend, Leo. Henry, understandably obstinate in the face of Esperanza’s faith, meets and presumably falls in love with Dawn in what some would call a providential situation.



The question of divine providence becomes exacerbated by the image on Henry’s wall. Its mysterious power is, as Dawn says, difficult to ignore. Henry and Esperanza, at times however, ignore each other. In some respects, Esperanza wants to circumnavigate Henry’s life experience in order to come into contact with the image. The image itself is the “answer to her prayers,” and, as such, is a symbol of divine providence. This image supplants almost anything—even Henry’s wish that people cease visiting the wall. For Henry, life is a series of random occurrences, with little to no place for divine providence. The image challenges his experience of life. Instead of living with this challenge, he destroys the thing that poses it.



These characters’ perspectives are representative of the range of belief in God’s interplay with humanity. How do we view the role of divine providence in the events of our lives? Do we ignore, or even try to destroy, the challenges that are presented to us through others’ experiences?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What experiences in my life have led me to believe in a God who is actively working in the world? How did these experiences affect me?
2. When have I experienced the seeming absence of God? How have I responded? Why?
3. How can I raise my own awareness of other experiences that are vastly different from my own?

Faith: A Communal Experience

SCRIPTURE: MARK 2:1-5

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it,

they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

REFLECTION

One of the strengths of *Henry Poole is Here* is its depiction of a diversity of faith experiences. Esperanza's particular approach to faith is hopeful—looking for and believing in an external sign from God. Patience views faith as a choice that one makes that has the power to change situations—to turn Russians away from vodka, to move one through the hard times to the good, to even do away with the need for glasses. The film even depicts the Church as a people who seek healing through faith in an image that has mysteriously appeared on Henry's wall.

Henry is portrayed as the man without faith. He has no hope in a God that saves, especially in light of his diagnosis. He knows the end of his life on this earth is near, so what's the point of believing in anything?

The passage from Mark is unusual. Often, Jesus is remembered as saying to those he healed that their faith was the reason for their cure, much like the faith of Patience in this movie. The paralytic in this story, however, does nothing to warrant healing. It is on the strength of the faith of his friends that Jesus offers the paralytic spiritual and physical healing. These friends had such persistent faith and love that they even poked a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus is teaching. Is this not similar to the persistent faith of both Patience and Esperanza?



The faith that most influences Henry's healing is offered by Dawn. Hers is a faith in love and in the present moment. We might recall that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16b). It is this faith that begins to change Henry. Dawn's faith helps him to take up his mat and walk. His relationship with Dawn and Millie demonstrates that faith is not only a personal choice, but a communal experience.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you think that Henry's faith was restored? If so, what were the reasons for this restoration? If not, why not?
2. What are the different approaches to faith that I see in those around me? How would I describe my own approach to faith? The different approaches to faith I have had in my life?
3. Who in my life has shown me a persistent faith? In what ways has the strength of others' faith made up for the weaknesses of mine?

