

A Hundred Midnights

(c) 2018

FADE IN:

EXT. SWAMP - CHURCH - DAY

A one-story structure stands on pilings amid cypress trees and tangled understory. An old Sunkist crate lies by the front door. A sign reads:

Holiness Redeemer Baptist Church.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The CONGREGATION, all dressed in black, fill the pews. The windows are closed.

PREACHER JAMES (62), draped in a black robe, stands near a casket on two sawhorses.

Beside him, MAE (6), sits in a chair, hands in her lap. A white bandana covers her eyes.

PREACHER JAMES

As far as the eye of God could see,
darkness covered everything, darker
than a hundred midnights.

CONGREGATION

Yes, it was, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES

This dear child...

He gestures toward Mae.

PREACHER JAMES

Has God's eyes!

The congregation murmurs affirmation.

PREACHER JAMES

God was lonely in the darkness. He
said, I'll make me a world! And
when he did, he said, That's good!

CONGREGATION

Yes.

PREACHER JAMES

But God was still lonely. He's
said, I'll make me a man! And when
he did, he said, That's good!

He raises a palm for silence. He turns to the casket.

PREACHER JAMES
 God did not make this man.
 (pauses)
 Breathe him in, dearest brothers
 and sisters, breathe him in.

He takes a long, deep breath.

The congregation inhales, exhales. Coughs, gagging sounds fill the chapel. A WOMAN (80s) leans forward, vomits against the back of the pew ahead.

PREACHER JAMES
 No, not this man, husband of our
 beloved Henriette, this child's
 mother. Not this man, who...
 (pauses)
 You know I must tell it, speak it.

CONGREGATION
 Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES
 He rendered Henriette's flesh and
 poured it into Ruffin's Pond.

The congregation cries out.

PREACHER JAMES
 This man, father to our dear Mae,
 whose eyes he smote with...
 (pause)
 You know I must tell it, speak it.

CONGREGATION
 Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES
 He smote her eyes with drain
 cleaner and oatmeal.

CONGREGATION
 Ohhhh, ohhhh, Lord, noooo.

PREACHER JAMES
 But, oh, he was not finished with
 his child. He was not finished.

He moves behind Mae, puts a hand on each shoulder. She shifts in the chair.

PREACHER JAMES

He put this blinded child in the trunk of his car and drove toward Ruffin's Pond. What dwelled in his heart is too terrible know.

CONGREGATION

Nooo. Oh, no.

With a handkerchief, he wipes his brow, his mouth.

PREACHER JAMES

But God knew, God could see, God saw this child, blinded and bound.

CONGREGATION

Oh, yes!

PREACHER JAMES

With His holy hand he flung the car against the darkness, against the biggest cypress tree on that road.

(pauses)

You know the one.

CONGREGATION

Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES

Oh, yes, he smote this man, this man made not by God, and he spared this dear girl. Then God smiled, and the light broke.

The preacher nods toward a back pew.

Two MEN (20s) rise and exit.

PREACHER JAMES

We gather, now, not to speak this man's name, not now or ever, but to banish his darkness.

The two men re-enter, walk to the front. One carries the Sunkist crate, the other a hammer and can of nails.

PREACHER JAMES

We feel it! We smell it!

One of the men opens the casket.

The CORPSE, naked, covered in dried blood, stares out.

Preacher James unties Mae's bandana and helps her stand.

PREACHER JAMES

Can you see, my dear?

She blinks, her eyes filmy, red. She shakes her head. He leads her to the casket.

PREACHER JAMES

Verily, we send this man into oblivion, darker than a hundred midnights, yes, but we do not send him alone. We cannot, we dare not.

CONGREGATION

Nooo.

PREACHER JAMES

He must have a shepherd on this journey, oh, God.

The other man pulls taut a rope that extends from inside the crate. He opens the top, lifts out a cottonmouth snake.

The snake fights to free its head from the rope, but the man drops it in the casket and slams down the lid. The other man nails it shut.

PREACHER JAMES

And the darkness rolled up on one side, and the light stood shining on the other, and God said, That's good!

CONGREGATION

That's good.

PREACHER JAMES

Let us pray in silence.

The snake thrashes inside the casket.

Mae covers her ears, then her eyes. She bursts into tears. With hands extended, she embraces the casket.

Her voice wails, rises, reverberates:

MAE

Oh, Daddy!

FADE OUT.