"The Way Back" starring Jim Sturgess, Ed Harris, Colin Farrell, 2010, PG-13, 133 minutes

Major themes:

- Siberian gulag
- Escape
- Walking
- Suffering
- Survival
- Kindness
- Teamwork
- Desperation
- Freedom
- Forgiveness

Major characters:

- Janusz (Polish army officer)
- Mr. Smith (American engineer)
- Khabarov (Russian actor)
- Valka (Russian criminal / gambler)
- Tomasz (Polish pastry chef / artist)
- Voss (Latvian priest)
- Kazik (Polish suffering from night blindness)
- Zoran (Yugoslav accountant)
- Irena (Polish teenager)

Background info:

- The film is inspired by the memoir of Slavomir Rawicz depicting his escape from a Siberian gulag and subsequent 4000-mile walk to freedom in India. Incredibly popular, it sold over 500,000 copies and is credited with inspiring many explorers. However, in 2006 the BBC unearthed records that showed he could not have done what he claimed.
- The film begins: "*In 1941 three men walked out of the Himalayas into India. They had survived a 4000 mile walk to freedom. This film is dedicated to them.*" This is accurate and based on historical evidence, but those 3 men were not Slavomir Rawicz or others from his largely fictitious escape story. The BBC reported in 2010 that they learned of a British intelligence officer who said he had interviewed a group of haggard men in Calcutta in 1942 – a group of men who had escaped from Siberia and then walked all the way to India, including a Polish engineer. These stories were far from conclusive proof, but for director and co-writer, Peter Weir, they convinced him: '*There was enough for me to say that three men had come out of the Himalayas, and that's how I dedicate my film, to these unknown survivors. And then I proceed with essentially a fictional film.*' This is why the film's title and characters differ from the book's. Peter Weir included the experiences of a French adventurer who did the walk described in Slavomir Rawicz's book. He became a technical advisor for the film production. Peter Weir recollected: "*Cyril Delafosse-Guiramand, late 30s, French. He works in the IT industry but his hobby is walking. He was inspired by the book and sometime after 2000 he undertook the walk . . . he advised us . . . he coached the actors and then was with us every day.*"
- When told he should be grateful, Valka says: "Gratitude is for dogs!" Stalin said a very similar thing: "*Gratitude is a sickness suffered by dogs.*"
- Early in the film, as the prisoners are marched up to the front gate of the Gulag prison camp, a slogan written in Russian Cyrillic letters is translated as, "*Labor in the USSR is a matter of honor, a matter of valor and heroism.*"
- The actress who played Irena celebrated her 16th birthday during filming.

Scriptures:

Galatians 5:1 (The Message) – "*Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.*"

1 Peter 2:19 – 21 (NLT) – "*For God is pleased with you when you do what you know is right and patiently endure unfair treatment. Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you. For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.*"

Matthew 6:14 – 15 (NIV) – "*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*"

Colossians 3:12 – 15 (The Message) – "*So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness.*"

Psalm 79:8 – 9 (NLT) – "*Do not hold us guilty for the sins of our ancestors! Let your compassion quickly meet our needs, for we are on the brink of despair. Help us, O God of our salvation! Help us for the glory of your name. Save us and forgive our sins for the honor of your name.*"

2 John 1:6 (NIV) – "*And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.*"

Discussion points:

1. What did you notice that helped ease the suffering of another in this film?

2. The characters in this film were threatened on all sides. Which threat did you find to be the most disturbing, and why?

3. What would you be willing to do in pursuit of freedom?

4. Which character did you most relate to, and why?

5. How did the shared struggles of each member of the walking group bring them closer together?

6. Although the desire for freedom was a strong motivation for the long walk, what else helped a character to persevere?

7. Which survival technique was most memorable to you? (e.g. shelter during snowstorm, the importance of having a knife, eye shields, sticking together, taking advantage of other animals' food, shoes, water, paying attention to weather / environment, soap, sun protection, positive attitude, mosquito protection, shadow tip navigation)