

Homily – Fan Fiction

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There is a newish genre of fiction that you may never have heard of before. We have all heard of science fiction and romance. We know mystery and thrillers, but now there is a newer genre called fan fiction.

Fan fiction plays into our desire to know more about a story or character than has been shared by the original creator and author. Fan fiction often provides answers to questions that have been left open ended or unanswered, and it fulfills the desire to continue a journey with a fictional character with whom we have developed a deep connection.

This newish genre started to become popular because of Star Trek. Trekkies wanted to know more about their favorite characters like Captain Kirk or Mr. Spock from the original Star Trek series or Mr. Data and Deana Troy in Star Trek the Next Generation. Fans wanted to imagine what would happen if the logical Mr. Spock met or even had a relationship with the empathic Deana Troy.

Often fan fiction is not written or even blessed by the original creator or author. Some discourage it, while other authors embrace it. George Lucas seems to limit but not prohibit fan fiction for the Star Wars characters, while Stephanie Myers uses her own web site to encourage well-done fan fiction for her Twilight characters.

Fan fiction may be a newish genre, but it has roots in much older writings. For many centuries Hebrew scholars have created stories to fill in the gaps in what Christians call the Old Testament. The Midrash is a large collection of stories written by Jewish rabbinic sages that are used to teach the meaning of difficult passages and concepts. Like fan fiction it connects and extends different parts of Hebrew scripture. The Midrash stories are meant to help people draw closer to God. One of my favorite examples is the story about what happened to Adam and Eve when they were booted from the Garden of Eden. The sages say they lived in a cave outside the Garden and spent the rest of their lives trying to get back into the Garden. There is some wisdom in these stories that help draw us into healthy relationship with God and with one another.

Throughout the centuries Christians have also created stories that fill in some of the gaps in the Bible. Many of these stories cluster around the second coming of Jesus and what some call the end times. Before we look at this Christian fan fiction let us review this end times concept.

The tradition in the early church in the decades after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was that the second coming of Jesus was imminent. Thus, some developed the attitude that they did not need to take care of things for the end was about to happen. As Jews and even more so as Christians life in the Roman Empire was tough, and devoted followers of Jesus wanted relief from their difficult lives.

In his letters, Paul admonishes the early church to keep going and not just sit back and wait for the second coming of Jesus. We usually associate cults with the immediate return of Jesus, but even in the time of the Apostle Paul many hoped for an end. And, when your story is a very short future then this colors the way you live. People and communities grow towards the future they envision for themselves. When there is no future then growth and even daily life come to a halt.

Now, let me define three concepts that are related to the end times.

The first definition is for eschatology. There is a whole branch of theology that grapples with the last days of both humanity and the universe itself.

According to Wikipedia, "Eschatology is a part of theology concerned with what are believed to be the final events of history, or the ultimate destiny of humanity. This concept is commonly referred to as the "end of the world" or "end time." The end of the world can be seen optimistically or pessimistically and some views on eschatology include varying degrees of destruction. Eschatology is also the part of theology that deals with our beliefs about heaven and hell.

The second definition that I want to share is for Apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is a form or genre of writing that was popular from about two hundred years before Jesus to about two hundred years afterwards. It is a form of literature that comes out of deep pain and suffering and it used vivid language to point to a time in which all will be made right. Suffering will end and peaceful, joyous living will begin. There is a lot of symbolism in Apocalyptic writings. The Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament Revelation of John are two significant examples. Snippets of Apocalyptic writing creep into other books of the Bible including the Gospels.

So, eschatology is a branch of theology and Apocalyptic is a form or genre of writing.

The third term is prophecy. Our modern day definition of prophecy is to predict the future, often a gloomy future filled with doom. Whether it is an economist or an ecologist or even a crystal ball reader, a prophet predicts the future.

There is also a more enduring definition of prophecy that is to call people back into healthy relationships with God. This is the type of prophecy that is done by many of

the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos. People have turned to false gods and turned away from the real and living God, and a prophet calls out people and societies for this misguided behavior, and encourages people to pay attention to God.

So, we have three words that are related to one another, and three definitions that are related to today's Gospel passage from Luke.

One of the commentaries that I reviewed for this sermon said that today's Gospel passages "is very complicated and one of the most difficult parts of the gospel tradition to interpret. There are almost as many interpretations of it as there are heads that think about it."

"Jesus said, 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'"

And as I already said, "there are almost as many interpretations of it as there are heads that think about it." And for me, this passage raises a lot of questions.

What are the signs? Did they relate to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD or are they other things that have already happened?

Or, are these signs things that will happen in the future? If they are in the future are they in ten years, five hundred years or ten thousand years?

Has the Son of Man already come again and we missed it?

Do we need to be fearful of the signs and of the coming of the Son of Man? Or, should we be joyful?

Should we stand up and raise our heads now in anticipation of the signs and the coming or should we wait to do that?

These are just a few of the questions that come to mind. The passage is quite complex, and it is related to Eschatology, Apocalyptic and prophecy.

This gets us back to fan fiction and the Jewish Midrash.

Passages like the one we have today and the concepts of Eschatology, Apocalyptic and prophecy are complex enough that throughout the centuries, Christian writers and scholars have attempted to help dig through them by adding, and supplementing them. In the same way that fan fiction continues the stories of Star Trek, Dante continues and builds out the stories of hell, purgatory, and heaven with the Divine Comedy.

Or, in the nineteenth century, Cyrus Scofield wrote the Scofield Reference Bible to synchronize and connect all of the various parts of the Bible that might have any reference to end times. He created a new story to help Christians understand a potential future for the universe. He created fan fiction about the second coming of Jesus.

Or, more recently Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins wrote the Left Behind series. These best selling books bring to life the ideas of the rapture and the anti-Christ in ways that have almost replaced the complex ideas in the Bible.

These examples of Christian fan fiction seem to have the same intent as the Jewish Midrash. They extend the stories and make new connections so that we can think through complex topics. They try to explain why our lived lives don't match up to some of the things written in the Bible. They help us meet a deep desire to see into the future and have answers about the things to come in our lives and things that are yet to come in the ongoing life of humanity.

However, Christian fan fiction becomes a hindrance to faith and spirituality when it is based on fear rather than love. And, I am sorry to say that much of our fan fiction about the end times is based in fear.

This past week after I completed my workout, I went into the locker room at my gym, and a couple men were having a discussion about the horrors of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris. It is a topic that I have been hearing about here at St. Barnabas as well. However, the overheard conversation in the locker room took an odd course.

At one point one of the men declared, "You know it has gotten bad enough that we just have to go back and make sure that we watch out for our own." Watch out for our own.

He then continued and said, "All of this is in the Bible. You know that red-letter stuff in the Bible. It talks about the end times. All of the awful stuff right now makes me feel like we are in those end times. And watch out."

The use of this fan fiction has gotten out of hand. The beauty and comfort we are supposed to get from these parts of the Bible have been co-opted by fear and pain.

We need to help people move from fear to love, and we need to make sure that our fan fiction does the same. We need stories that help set us free from some of the dead images of the future that have a vengeful and violent god. We need to be careful to ensure we have stories that point to our living and loving God. We have a God of grace, and that grace is evident through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a grace that will set us free for a beautiful future. This is the future we can envision for ourselves, for our communities and for humanity as a whole.

Advent is a four-week season in which we prepare for our annual observance of the birth of Jesus. This year as we prepare let us jettison some of the fan fiction that leads us away from a living and loving God. Instead of pretending that we have filled in the gaps of the Bible with new truths let us remember that some things are still a mystery.