

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 made-up stories that help draw us into healthy relationship with God, others, and self.

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. So, they wanted Jesus to come again, and fix everything.

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. This concept is commonly referred to as the "end of the world" or "end time." 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 the term prophecy. With this definition, to be a prophet 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 this passage as there are heads that think about it.” And for me, this passage raises a lot of questions.

What are the signs? Are they a foretelling of 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 our future? If they are in the future are they in ten years, five hundred years or ten thousand years?

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

And, here is a perplexing question. Has the Son of Man already come again and we missed it?

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 Christian fan fiction. Bible 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.

And, 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 took a sentence from here and another from there, and 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.

And, more recently Timothy 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 Bible. Let me say that again. For some the Left Behind series has replaced 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 on fear. The beauty and comfort we are supposed to get from these parts of the Bible have been co-opted by fear and pain.

But remember, we have a God of love who never stops loving us. We were created in love. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all about love. God's continuing work in the universe is all about bringing things together in love. We were created in the image of God and our spiritual lives are all about connecting in love to God, others, and self.

In today's reading, Jesus is not intending to scare us. Instead, he is giving us a message of hope. It is a message that says that after the upheavals of life there will be new beginnings. And Jesus is not telling us about the final ending of all. Instead, he is telling us that there are always many endings that are followed by new life. This is a message of hope that was true two thousand years ago, and it is a message of hope that is relevant for us today. Covid left us feeling out of control, but we adapt and figure out ways to keep each other safe. The Omicron variant is making us wonder what is next, but we must never fall back on the messages of the world that bring fear. We need to help people move from fear to love, and we need to make sure that our fan fiction does the same. 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, which starts today, 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. We have a God of hope, joy, love, and mercy. Let your life reflect this love out into the world.