

Sermon, October 29, 2023

Genesis 1:26-31
"Frankenstein"

I begin this morning with a little bit of family history. In 1635, Richard Westcott landed in Salem, Massachusetts, and soon married Joanna (last name unknown) and moved to the colony of Wethersfield, CT. Richard died in 1651, and Joanna would marry a man named Nathaniel Baldwin. This is why she was no doubt the Goody Baldwin who testified against Goody Knapp in her witch trial. Goody Knapp was eventually convicted and hung.

Then, in 1692, a young servant girl named Catherine Branch was working in the home of Daniel Westcott (the son of Richard and Joanna), when she fell and had what today would be diagnosed as an attack of epilepsy, but in the superstitious atmosphere of the day she was thought to be the victim of witchcraft. A woman named Mercy Disborogh was accused of being the guilty one and was put through the tests for witchcraft. She was convicted, but eventually released on a technicality. I recently posted a longer version of this story on Facebook, because I wanted, although a few hundred years late, to apologize on behalf of my family for their participation in the Connecticut Witch Trials.

Looking back, we now know that there was a real belief in evil witchcraft in the 17th century, but that the trials in Salem and Connecticut really were not about witchcraft, but about family squabbles, animosities, and hate - things that always lead to pain, suffering, and tragedy.

This brings me to Frankenstein. We undoubtedly remember the 1931 classic starring Boris Karloff as the flat topped, neck bolted monster. Recently I have been reading Mary Shelley's novel from 1818 and find only a slight resemblance between the creature in her novel and the Karloff character. Both are hideous to look at, but that's where the resemblance ends. Whereas the film character only grunts and growls, the creature in Shelley's novel not only speaks, but is very articulate- even eloquent in some parts. In one long portion of the book, he goes on to describe how he came to be the way he is, and laments what he has experienced; being abused or run from by some people for no other reason than his ugliness. In one part he catches his reflection in a pool of water and is even repulsed by his own appearance. He also talks about the great loneliness he feels. All this eventually turns him into a vicious killer.

This all raises several questions. First, who is the real monster in the story? Is it the creature who was brought into the world by no choice of his own, or is it, in fact, Victor Frankenstein, who chose to play God and create life - and who allowed a young woman to be convicted and executed rather than reveal that the creature he created was the actual murderer. Or was it the people who turned on the creature simply because of his looks and the fact that he was different than themselves?

These are also pertinent questions for today when we think of things such as the recent attack upon Israel, when murderous hatreds arise against the other - that is, against those who are different from ourselves, whether it be based on race, ethnicity, politics, or religion - or a total misunderstanding about who and what the other is - unconsciously or otherwise. This is a very diverse world. Always has been, always will be. But there will never be peace on earth until we accept that fact and strive for greater unity.

Bringing it closer to home, think in terms of the tragedy in Lewiston, Maine, and the many other mass shootings that this country has suffered. How often is the shooter described as someone who, like the Frankenstein creature, feels like an outsider and lonely, pushed aside by others, and as a result turns resentful and hateful of others, and even self-loathing, which then translates into violence. This in no way excuses such murderous acts, but it does give us insight into how such heinous things can come about. Following Jesus's example, we have to be more loving and compassionate towards those who are different and pushed aside, hoping that it might reduce the number of such tragedies. As the French say, "Vivi la difference!"

There's another issue that arises in the novel. In Shelley's day there was a fear that the pursuit of knowledge could be dangerous. This was probably a backlash against the Enlightenment that was focused on just that. Today, we may not be afraid of the pursuit of knowledge, but it does raise an important philosophical question. Should we do something just because we can? The first thing that comes to mind is the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Even Einstein and Oppenheimer wrestled with that question.

Or, what about artificial intelligence? Certainly, it has its positive applications, but it may become imperative that we develop regulations on its use before it can turn into something horrible and dangerous!

In today's reading, God brings into the world "the breath of life". Victor Frankenstein took it upon himself to do the same and gave birth to something both tragic and horrible. Mary Shelley's great novel speaks to our own generation and sets before us important issues that we must heed lest we ourselves create out of control monsters! Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we have gathered this morning for worship and to praise your holy name. We thank you for the blessings of this day and look to you in your Son Jesus to guide us in ways that are pleasing to you. As you gave unto this world the breath of life, we ask, as well, that through your Holy Spirit we experience the breath of New Life.

We live in a world filled with trouble, Lord. It is filled with prejudices and hatred that lead to so much senseless violence. Your Son said, "Blessed are the peace makers". Teach us how to be just that speaking out against evil and injustice. As we approach Halloween, we remember the innocents accused, convicted, and executed for witchcraft. May they rest in peace and help us to overcome all that leads to such unjust tragedy.

This morning we pray for peace in the Middle East, and in Ukraine - we commend to you those who died in Lewiston, and pray for the healing of the wounded, and comfort those loved ones left behind. Amen.

This week we look to All Saints' Day, and remember members, friends, and relatives who have crossed over into your loving arms, Lord, and we remember all that they have meant to us as individuals and as faithful servants of yours within this congregation. Ease our sorrow at our loss and lift us up by our memories of them. We remember to you...

Bob McQuad, Beverly Morris, Barbara Peters, David Desmond, June Carlson, Marion Shover, Mildred Kolb, Hank and Dottie Slauson, Mike Collins, Eric Fogarty

And we lift to you all those in years gone by who have filled our lives with love and laughter.
Amen.