Barbarians at the Gate

TEXT: Luke 10:25-37

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 22, 2023

I want to be clear that my decision to do a sermon series on monsters this fall was not a call to the universe to send more monstrous events to the world. You can stop, okay? I have enough material. And yet, here we are. But one of the things about monsters that I highlighted in the first week of this series is that monsters are not unique to certain times and places. The things that give rise to the creation of monsters are deep-seated human instincts and impulses and therefore continue to crop up wherever and whenever people are found.

Monster stories themselves are always some version of a monster lurking for a time in some hidden place on the edge of civilization. They live at the bottom of lakes or oceans, out in the swamps, deep in caves, in the darkest forests, at the edge of the world, in the far reaches of space. And then something happens that brings them out of hiding, filled with rage, and our stories show them expressing that rage in gruesome, destructive ways—coming out of hiding and becoming a threat to human society.

And while it is almost always the brave hero who goes out to save the world when the monster strikes; during the more peaceful times, it is the figure of the wise elder, the crone, the shaman, the oracle, the prophet, who keeps the monster stories alive. That's not to keep people scared, but to keep people vigilant. Prophets remind us that monsters are never truly conquered, because their origins are within the human psyche.

The prophet also has a keen eye for another character in most monster lore, the trickster. Coyote serves that role in Native American stories; it's Loki, the god of chaos, in Norse legends; in Chinese culture it's the monkey king; in Greek mythology it is Hermes, who invented lying. More modern examples are the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland or the wizard in the Wizard of Oz.

The trickster figure is always a master of disguise, keeps their own counsel, and serves their own desires. The trickster sometimes lies outright, but more frequently tells only half-truths. In both cases, the intent is to deceive for a self-serving interest. You might be helped by their deception or you might be hunted to extinction; but in both cases it's about them, not about you. If it serves their ends to help you, you benefit; but next week the opposite could be the case.

To make things even more complicated, sometimes the trickster lies about the existence of the monster itself. Having a monster in your back pocket can be handy if you need to scare people into doing what you want. In the Bible, this happens at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

The Hebrews have lived in Egypt in peace for centuries, with Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, having played an indispensable role in the Egyptian court, even saving Egypt from famine back in the day. But as Exodus begins, we hear the ominous words in Exodus 1:8, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

All this new king could see was that an immigrant population was about to outnumber native Egyptians, and Pharaoh believed that was a threat to his power. His own insecurity rose up to create a monster. It also created the remedy, which he explained to his people in a half-truth.

Pharaoh points out that native Egyptians are now in the minority. True. But then he tacks on a lie that he just pulls out of thin air. "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, **in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us** and escape from the land."

Without oppression will the Hebrews continue to increase? Yes. Will they leave Egypt? Who knows? Maybe, if it suits them. But they've lived in Egypt hundreds of years now. And if you don't want them there, why would you care if they left? Lots of red flags here. But the big and destructive lie is saying that just because they have a different ancestry, the Hebrews would be turncoats and fight with the enemy, should war come to Egypt.

There is zero evidence for that charge. But fear shuts down our ability to think with any kind of nuance, Pharaoh's lie works, and the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt begins. Pharaoh set up four monstrous centuries of slavery by deceiving the Egyptian people. Their Israelite neighbors were innocent of Pharaoh's charges. But, once the

violence started, once a people came to view themselves as superior and others as somehow worthy of abuse, every year, every decade, every century that it went on made the monstrous cycle harder even to see, let alone to break.

Worse, enslaving peaceful citizens because of an ancestral difference set up the likelihood that both populations would internalize the false idea that there is somehow a hierarchy of persons—that some people are biologically superior or inferior to others. Once the Israelites are freed by Moses, the laws given to the Israelites during their 40 years sojourn in the desert attack that false notion head on.

Not only in the Ten Commandments, but in many of the other laws we find in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, the Israelites are told in no uncertain terms that they need to remember the injustice they were subjected to in Egypt and not let it happen to others on their watch. Leviticus 19:33 says, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Crystal clear.

That verse is a bookend for Leviticus 19:18, which says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

Those two verses from Leviticus are what Jesus pulls together in Luke 10 when a religious scholar asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus has the man answer his own question, which the man does readily by reciting the command to love God with all his heart, soul, and strength and his neighbor as himself. Jesus gives him an A on the quiz. Yup, that's it. Do that and you will live. But the man won't move on without more information.

But who is my neighbor? He likely wanted a loophole in the law, but in his defense, Leviticus 19:18 does at least appear to limit "neighbor" to your own people. There's a chance the man honestly wanted to clear that up. Jesus still wants him to answer his own question, though, so Jesus puts the message of Leviticus 19:33, which is clear to include the foreigner in the definition of neighbor, into a story, which we've come to call the story of the Good Samaritan.

Today the story is so embedded in our culture that we often miss its punch. We correctly equate "Good Samaritan" with acts of kindness; but what we often miss is how offensive it was for Jesus, a Jewish man, to use this story to explain Jewish law to another Jewish scholar. When Jesus picked a Samaritan to be the hero, and picked several Jewish leaders to be callous and self-absorbed; Jesus was lifting up a despised population.

The phrase "Good Samaritan" would have been an oxymoron to every Jew within earshot. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was already centuries old by the time of Jesus and created a chasm of disgust and hatred that divided their respective peoples physically, religiously, socially, and emotionally. Sometimes when I've used this story, I've re-written it to change the parties from Jews and Samaritans to whatever population is currently despised by my audience at the time to better illustrate the punch.

But right at this moment, all we need to know about this story is that Samaria is, today, the West Bank. It is Palestinian territory. The story takes place on the road that runs south from Jerusalem to Jericho—a road that begins in today's Israeli territory and ends in Palestinian territory. In today's geography and politics, it's the story of the "Good Palestinian."

When I went to the prayer service at Temple Shir-Tikvah right after the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas, they were able to hold the reality of "Good Palestinians" in their hearts and prayers. I heard it; and I shared it.

But not many can hold that line, especially when there are those dedicated to making it as hard as possible to see those different from us as being also precious in God's sight. A landlord outside of Chicago was made so fearful of Palestinians by the tricksters he listened to on talk radio that he went to the door of one of his tenants and brutally stabbed a Palestinian mother 26 times before stabbing and killing her precious six-year-old boy. That man would have been so offended by Jesus' story of the Good Palestinian that he would have joined the "Crucify him!" crowd during Holy Week. And he is not alone.

In Luke 10, Jesus told *that* story to *that* man to shake him up—to make him realize that gaining eternal life was not a matter of being part of some superior ethnicity or religion. It was about the ability to love your enemies—love, not as a warm, fuzzy feeling; but love as the concrete action of giving aid to anyone who is suffering.

That's the entire gospel in just twelve verses of Luke 10. The man's initial question was not "who is my neighbor?" That was the follow up. The question that started it all was "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Loving God by extending care and mercy equally to all was the answer. If we did but that, everything else falls into place: Peace. Justice. Mercy. Humility. Life.

Obviously, we haven't found that to be easy. There could have been a different story about the man who was mugged and left for dead in the road. We were given just the examples of two who passed by with indifference and the one who stopped to help. In another setting Jesus might have told a story about someone who came on the scene, saw the man in the ditch was still alive, noticed he was of a different race or ethnicity or religion, and kicked him in the head until he died.

We might then have seen the dead man's relatives stop looking for the robbers and hunt down the one who killed him in cold blood. When they caught him, they might have been enraged enough to not only kill but torture him first. And that would have set off the attacker's family, because after all, the man in the ditch was part of a group that had burned their homes and sacked their city. He was not innocent. Soon there is war; more torture, more killing, more trauma, until the monster comes to destroy all in its path. Welcome to 2023.

It's easy to sit in comfort and say we would be different. Don't be so sure. In August of 1990, I was still married and living just outside Gainesville, Florida, where my husband was a professor at the university and where I worked at the bookstore across the street.

Across that month, four students at the University of Florida and one at nearby Santa Fe Community College were brutally murdered by a serial killer named Danny Rolling. It was a terrifying time. The young children of a friend from church stopped eating their breakfast because of all the talk of a *serial* killer. We laughed even then, but it was no joke. They were young and scared and couldn't understand. We moved in groups. We had secret knocks to identify ourselves when visiting friends.

Then our church organist and her husband, who I refer to as my Florida parents, got the call. Their niece, Christa Hoyt, was a victim—the student at Santa Fe. Worse, the brutality of her murder was so sadistic and twisted that it was her story that dominated the news. It was Christa's body bag that her parents and Pete and Dorothy had to see in news clips coming out of her apartment again and again and again on every channel.

You can look her up to find the details; I won't traumatize you with them here, except to say that, after beheading her, he put her head on a bookcase and moved the bookcase to face the door, setting the gruesome scene to inflict as much terror as possible to whomever next opened the door.

Danny Rolling was captured and executed by the State of Florida in 2006. I sat with Pete and Dorothy through it all. I sat with my own opposition to the death penalty on one shoulder—which is the formal position of the United Methodist Church, by the way—and my relief that he was no longer on this earth on the other. And I had never met Christa. I had only known the terror of being daily at the university where a serial killer was targeting young women.

Pete and Dorothy, as her aunt and uncle, had much deeper trauma, grief, and rage to process, thoughts too dark to name as they walked with Christa's mother, who wrestled with whether or not to see her daughter's body, or, later, to go to the trial and be exposed to the pictures.

Trust me when I say that you do not know what you would do until you find yourself in a similar situation and feel the trauma seep into your cells. Were Pete not a quadriplegic, I am 1000% sure he would have picked up a rifle the very night of Christa's murder and headed for Gainesville. And, had he done that, it would not have helped. It would not have helped him; it would not have helped the family; it could not have brought Christa back; and it would not have helped the world understand that returning violence for violence does not, and cannot, lead to peace. And yet, all who knew Pete would have understood if he had found Danny Rolling wounded in a ditch and kicked him dead.

I don't know how you stop the cycle of terror and vengeance, once it has begun, let alone once it has been perpetuated for literally thousands of years as is the case in the Middle East. People are broken by trauma in myriad ways, and we are now learning that the trauma can be passed from generation to generation through our genes.

Intellectually knowing that violence begets more violence doesn't make us immune from the rage and fear when it happens to us and our loved ones. And those feelings open us to manipulation by whatever trickster decides to direct our rage against innocents for their own ends. We can unwittingly become the very monster we decry, all while believing ourselves to be the heroes.

What the right policy is for warring governments once the atrocities are in full swing; I have no clue. But I am crystal clear about what Jesus' policy is when you find even a sworn enemy lying wounded in a ditch. You stop and render medical, logistical, and financial assistance; and then you come back later to make sure they're doing okay and help more if needed. Not a single soul is more or less deserving than another. That is by no means easy, and we believe it would be easy for us at our peril. But it is clear.

Don't expect that to be a popular position. But that's what Jesus taught; that's what Jesus lived; and the central symbol of our faith reminds us that Jesus absorbed the world's violence into himself and then took it into the grave, so that we might have a chance to start again.

So maybe Christians not yet in the monster's grasp can start there. We can love Jesus. Since Jesus loves us, we can draw the circle a bit wider to include ourselves. And if we really love ourselves, we'll have less baggage to project out onto others and can draw the circle wider still. We can be kind.

Our circle might bump up against trouble here and there. It could take some time—years even—to get over a particular bias; to expose the lie of a trickster who keeps whispering, "but not them," to expand our circle further. It might begin to look less like a circle and more like a Salvador Dali painting.

We might have to retell the Good Samaritan story with some different characters to refocus ourselves. But it remains the call of Christ. Want eternal life? Want to keep the monsters quiet and content? Want God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven? Keep expanding the circle. Love your neighbor. Love the alien in your land. Be kind. Amen.