

# The Monster Within

TEXT: Romans 7:14-24

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on November 12, 2023*

*The Empire Strikes Back*, the second Star Wars film in the franchise, hit theaters the year I graduated from college. It was in that episode that we first met Yoda, the Jedi master who instructs the young Luke Skywalker in using the Force that flows within him. The training takes place in a swamp, where Yoda put him through many physical and mental challenges. At the end of the day, they stop near a large, dead tree. Luke says, “There’s something not right here...I feel cold, death.”

Yoda points his stick to a dark, foggy cave, formed by the deep roots of the dead tree, and says, “That place is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go.”

“What’s in there?” Luke asks. Yoda responds, “Only what you take with you.” Luke starts to strap on his weapons and Yoda continues, “Your weapons...you will not need them.” Luke takes them anyway and goes in, lowering himself through the roots into the mire below. Soon we hear the machine breathing of Darth Vader, who appears quickly. They each draw their lightsabers. Nothing is said, and in a few quick strokes, Luke decapitates Vader, whose helmeted head rolls to one side.

As the camera focuses there, the outer helmet explodes to reveal the face inside; and it’s the face of young Luke himself. Luke is a combination of baffled and horrified, as is the audience, as we both realize that we have witnessed, not a real battle, but a kinetic vision that is somehow part of Luke’s training with Yoda.

At 21 years old, I had no mental map to help me make sense of that scene inside the cave. It was years before I even began to understand what that encounter meant. Of course, part of its meaning is revealed at the end of the film as we learn that Darth Vader is Luke’s father. But there was more to the scene than foreshadowing that surprise in the plot. The severed helmet of Darth Vader doesn’t turn into Luke’s father’s face. It turns into Luke’s own face. What? Online forums were full of fans trying to puzzle it out.

As I look back now, over 40 years and quite a few additional Star Wars movies later, I see that the entire Star Wars franchise explores the theme of how dangerous it is to think that monsters are somehow “other.” We see many, many “others” in Star Wars—creatures from other worlds who might be friendly, dangerous, or neutral in terms of their behavior and intentions. You can pull up a stool at the Cantina and have a planetary brew with all of them.

But the series revolves around the conflicts both between and within *human* characters, showing us in mythic language that monsters have their origins within us. All of us.

Luke has to enter the cave before he can fight the real Darth Vader, not to learn to better wield his lightsaber, and not even to prepare him for the possibility that there might be a family connection to his enemy. The message that Luke needed to absorb was that, without having full awareness of his own nature, he could easily *become* Darth Vader. The danger lay not without, but within.

The thing that could save Luke from his father’s fate was not his skill with a weapon, but his ability to remain in control of his choices. Yoda told Luke he would not need a weapon in the cave. He took one anyway and killed Vader, only to discover that, in doing so, he had become the monster and had killed himself. Test failed.

George Lucas didn’t invent the idea that people could turn into monsters; it’s been around in monster lore for millennia, from the werewolves of Europe to the Windigo of Central Canada to transformations pictured in Paleolithic caves in France proclaiming that normal people can become monsters.

But we don’t need mythology or horror stories to tell us that. Apart from those who do monstrous things because of brain abnormalities or other kinds of illness, psychological studies have shown us that even when test subjects are screened to make sure that no one in the study is a closet psychopath or sadist, normal, decent people can turn into monsters in very short order when the circumstances are right.

In 1961 at Yale, it only took a few minutes for Stanley Milgram to convince decent men between 20-50 years old to administer what the test subjects believed to be fatal electric shocks to someone in another room. They were “just following orders,” and continued to do so despite hearing cries of pain and screams and then silence from the other room. Some did so nervously, but when the authority figure beside them told them to do it, the overwhelming majority did.

A decade later, at Stanford, the US Office of Naval Research funded a study that put college students—again, carefully screened—into a role-playing exercise where the students were randomly divided into prison guards and prisoners. The study was supposed to last two weeks to measure the effects of role-playing, labeling, and social expectations on behavior. But the abuse of the student “prisoners” grew so extreme that they had to end the experiment after just six days. Three of the “prisoners” were so traumatized after just four days that they were released from the experiment.

The first thing all of this teaches us is that, yes, people can—and regularly do—turn into monsters. It’s not a modern development; it’s a truth captured in both story and real-life observation across time and culture. Further, those transformations don’t *just* happen to “bad” people, or mentally ill people, or people who were themselves abused or traumatized as children—any and all people are capable of horrible things.

We’re especially bad at recognizing this in the church. There is no religion on the planet that hasn’t seen its adherents turn into monsters. Many lay the blame for that on religion itself and believe we can eradicate monsters from the world if we get rid of all religion. Certainly, critics of religion have many examples to draw from to make their case.

It’s true that the corporate nature of religion can easily take an individual monster and let it metastasize throughout the body to become a destroyer of worlds. But the same happens when a monstrous individual is elevated to lead a different corporate entity—a nation or an empire or a trillion-dollar business, irrespective of whether or not they practice a religion.

We keep making the mistake of thinking that the monster is somehow “other,” that it’s to be found “out there,” that it lies within bad people, not good people; and, if it emerges, it’s proof only that the person is a hypocrite; that the pastor or priest who ended up abusing children was not a “real Christian,” for example. “Real” Christians would not do such things, as if faith is a magical elixir that makes us immune from our worst impulses.

That is exactly the trap that allows the monster inside to take hold; our belief that we are good and therefore it couldn’t happen to us. Even the most devout, sincere Christian does not have some kind of magical immunity, and believing we do leaves a wide opening for the monster within to emerge. Turning into a monster is a possibility for every human, including every one of us in this room. We deny that possibility at our peril.

We don’t have to look far to discover that in ourselves. Every time we struggle to do the right thing; every time we kick ourselves and say, “Why did I say that? I know better,” we have a chance to recognize that the reason we struggle is because there’s a part of us that finds it easier or more satisfying to do the wrong thing, even when we know it will cause trouble. If that inner monster didn’t exist, we wouldn’t find doing the right thing hard. It’s even in our language. What’s another term for jealousy? The green-eyed monster.

Our individual monsters have differing characteristics, just as we have different personalities. We struggle with different things and under different circumstances. But all of us have some areas of life where we find it harder to do what we know is good, helpful, and right.

This is exactly the struggle that St. Paul is dealing with in the passage from Romans 7 that Cathy read earlier. He wrestles with his dilemma openly, for all of us to see. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate...I can will what I want, but I cannot do it.” Paul’s inner monster is trying to gain the upper hand.

Paul is one of the most strong-willed characters in the entire Bible. He perseveres through hardships that turn back all others. He follows his mission through any and all obstacles, despite deprivation, threats, prison, and right up to his execution by one of history’s monsters, the Roman emperor Nero. If doing the right thing were simply a matter of willpower, Paul would be perfect. Few are the people with more willpower than Paul.

But even with all of that; even with a dramatic and life-altering conversion and hearing the voice of Jesus himself, even when teaching and whole-heartedly believing in the way of the cross, Paul is still unable to do the things he knows he should. And he shares it with the whole church in Rome in this letter because he knows he's not the only one.

He is telling the Roman church the same truth that Luke was meant to learn in the cave—there is a monster looking for opportunities to emerge in all of us. Darth Vader was once a kindly father named Anakin Skywalker. Being a person of faith, or containing the power of the Jedi, does not grant some kind of magical immunity from sin—even monstrous sin. Keeping the monster in check is not a matter of mustering more willpower or more firepower.

We'll talk more about what it does take next week, but that won't help unless we first muster the courage to enter the cave and come to grips with the fact that neither the kingdom of God nor the monster is out there. They both lie, side by side—saint and sinner, hero and monster—within us. Which of those things becomes manifest in our outward lives is our choice—day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Luke doesn't notice the cave until the intensity of the day is done. As he starts to wind down, he notices that something is off. If we're willing to look for our own cave, we need only to take a quiet moment to notice the inner struggle to which Paul gives voice, in whatever form that takes in us, and then sit with it a bit, unarmed. "Oh, my goodness, that was a really ugly thought I just had," can be the beginning of salvation.

My first cave moment came a decade after I had witnessed Luke's on the big screen. I was 31 years old. My husband had just filed for divorce so that he could be with another woman, and I was dizzy with emotion, questions, and a need to address some very practical problems very quickly. Added to all of that, I felt constrained by things my faith taught me I should and shouldn't do in response. I felt trapped by those "shoulds," angry at a lot of people and things, and scared for my future.

I still remember exactly where I was sitting when it dawned on me that, while I had some difficult problems to solve, I was not, in fact, trapped. I still had choices in how I would respond, even though I wasn't fond of my options. And then, up from the very depths of my psyche came the thought, "Well, actually, I could kill him. I could easily go out, buy a gun, and kill him."

"Wait, what?" I was aghast. "That's not who I am; that's the opposite of who I am! Where. Did. That. Thought. Come. From?"

"There's something not right here," I thought. I'd seen Star Wars a bazillion times by then, so the answer naturally followed: "That place is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go."

Unlike Luke, however, I followed Yoda's advice to enter unarmed. I was already too broken to put up a defense, too strained from the effort of trying to save a marriage that could not be saved. Will this forbidding cave be my undoing? Maybe. That would be fine, too. I remembered learning from a criminal psychology book that murder was an extroverted suicide. I went in. And down.

And there at the bottom, I met the monster who was suggesting I betray everything I stood for and believed. "You could kill him," it said again. "That is a real choice you have." If I had allowed smoking, it would have lit up a cigar. "Sure," I said. "But it's not the only choice I have; and it's not the choice I want to make. First off, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in prison. I've already got enough problems. But also, that's not the kind of person I want to be.

"I became a Christian intentionally, because I believe the values of Jesus are ultimately the best way to live. 'Thou shalt not kill' is right up there on the list. I have freely chosen to bind myself to those values."

"Okay," said the monster. "Just checking." And it was over. I came out of the cave exhausted, but newly liberated—hopeful, even. I was still the actor in my own life. I was not trapped; I could choose.

If I had gone into that cave with a weapon—to find the monster and beat it back, or, if I had refused to engage it at all—I would still have been trapped and angry, and the monster would have found other destructive ways to

emerge in my life. But I had nothing else to lose at that point, so I looked it straight in the eye and explained to it—and therefore to myself—that I was choosing the response that matched my faith. From that minute onward, I was able to make other good choices in that bad situation without feeling resentful or trapped.

Entering the cave to meet our inner monster feels terrifying, especially if we have been taught to see people as either all good or all bad. In that worldview, admitting that the darker impulses are actually part of us would make us a “bad” person, which our psyche can’t handle.

The problems with that binary belief are at the heart of the horror story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The good Dr. Jekyll is so ashamed of the vice he finds inside himself that he develops a façade. He lives a good life in public and indulges his vices in private. But the fear of having his evil side discovered and his reputation ruined leads him to develop a potion to physically switch himself back and forth from the upstanding Dr. Jekyll to the violent and evil Mr. Hyde.

Allowing and even enabling Mr. Hyde to emerge in public, in a different form from Dr. Jekyll, allows the evil Mr. Hyde to grow more powerful. Finally, the day comes when the potion no longer works and Dr. Jekyll can’t change back to his good self. The jig is up; Mr. Hyde is in full control. But because they are, in fact, the same person, the only option left for what is now the inner Dr. Jekyll is to direct his shame in full force at Mr. Hyde, turning his murderous impulses on himself in suicide. The body of Mr. Hyde is found wearing the clothing of Dr. Jekyll, the good doctor nothing more than a crumbled façade.

Hardly a day goes by in today’s news that we don’t read of public figures from clergy to CEOs to politicians, who bring ruin upon themselves through exactly that process. Like Dr. Jekyll, they have a public persona that can’t bear the shame of facing their shadow side. So, they wall it off, where it grows until they can’t contain it anymore. And then we all suffer in the wreckage of what their Mr. Hyde has unleashed. Eventually, it becomes their ruin as well.

We’ll look at Paul’s solution to his Romans 7 problem in depth next week. But, for today, I offer a poem called *The Guest House*, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi. Rumi’s wisdom describes what the cave encounter can look like, once we learn not to fear what we might find inside.

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
They may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.  
Amen.