

“Preaching in Hell”

I'm really not counting, my computer does it for me, but I will be getting married here 76 days from now. My computer also is counting the number of days until I retire. However it doesn't count the days till my 60th birthday. There is something in me that just doesn't want to be constantly reminded.

It turns out that my birthday is the same day that the DVD for Twilight is being released. I actually went to see the movie, which also made me feel my advancing years. Not so much because of the content of the movie, but because eighty percent of the audience were twelve year old girls.

I went to the movie because I am intrigued with stories of vampires. From Bram Stoker's 1897 novel "Dracula" to Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles"—I have read them all. I did not know that the "Twilight Series" was an adolescent chic flick. But it is much more than that—it addresses the angst of anyone whose body is suddenly maturing, whether it is a twelve-year-old girl or a sixty-year-old male. These stories address feelings that cannot be described in ordinary language and so tales of horror and fantasy must be used.

A little United Church girl goes with her mother to the Anglican Church. As they prepare to receive communion, the mother is concerned that the daughter not be shocked by the taste of wine, so she whispers to her "You need to know that we will be drinking the real thing." "Oh," says the girl her eyes suddenly wide open, "you mean real blood?"

One hundred and three years ago Bram Stoker wrote the classic vampire novel Dracula. It is the story of betrayal by the church, the all-consuming passion of erotic love, a horror story of hope.

Francis Ford Coppola's movie version begins in the year 1491 with Dracula is a leader of the Order of the Dragon whose sworn duty is to protect the church from the invading infidels. Soon after his betrothal he goes

to war and defeats the enemy. But the enemy sends a note to the castle informing his bride that he was killed in battle. She, in despair, cries out "My prince is dead. All is lost without him. May God unite us in heaven." She then throws herself off the castle wall into the river below.

Dracula returns to find her dead and is informed by the priests of the church "she has taken her own life, her soul cannot be saved, she is damned, it is God's law." Dracula cries out "Is this God's reward for defending God's church. Then I renounce God." He throws his spear at the cross that contains the bread host—the Body of Christ—blood pours out and Dracula exclaims, "the blood is the life and it shall be mine. I shall rise from the dead and revenge her death with all the powers of darkness."

He drinks the blood and becomes one of the undead. His only hope is that he will love again. It is a novel about the horror of love and the horror of the holy. Whether it is consuming love or holiness, in the horror genre there is no difference, we are at first captivated, even enchanted by these conditions.

The horror story is first concerned with the arrogance of those who believe they have absolute control and understanding. It is directed against the clergy and the scientists who view the world in absolutist terms rather than with a sense of exploration and wonderment. The Dracula story is not simply about a monster; it is about the mysterious force that permits monstrosities. It is about religious cults that take away individual freedom and responsibility, that suck the life out of their devotees. It is about science that considers itself above and apart from the moral and ethical consequences of research.

Ernest Becker, who has written extensively about the nature of evil, says that "the religious geniuses of

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history have argued that to be really submissive means to be submissive to the highest power, the true infinity, the absolute—and not to any human substitutes, lovers, leaders, nations-states.” Horror addresses the paradox of life in that we want to be united with infinity and yet if we try to be infinite in body or time we will be consumed by it. We want to be totally in love and yet if we are totally consumed we lose it because we lose ourselves.

Our scripture readings that we heard today deal with these paradoxes and use tales of horror and fantasy to name the hopes and fears that cannot be described in any other way.

So the story is told that God got so mad one day that he decided to destroy all living creatures on the earth. And so God did, except for two of every species and eight humans. We of course have Disneyfied the story and only tell our children and ourselves the cute story of animals walking in two by two, having a sea cruise ride for forty days, a dove coming and a rainbow appearing in the sky.

The real tale begins like this. “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” (Genesis 6:4-7 NRSV)

So why is there evil in the world? It’s the fault of the Nephilim, thought to be fallen angels and/or giants. Or (and this is risky) there is evil in the world because women, not only ate the fruit of the forbidden tree but wanted to have immortal children and so mated with fallen angels. Not too far from a vampire tale.

The gospel stories are different than vampire stories. And Jesus is a different kind of Lord, than Lord Dracula. The vampire takes life, Jesus gives it. The vampire takes blood, Jesus gives it. Not so that we may become vam-

pires, but rather that we may know eternal life. Life, where God hangs up his weapons of war (that is what the rainbow is). Life, where Jesus in the wilderness tames the wild beasts and is served by angels. Life, where as the letter of Peter says, good news is preached even to those in hell.

So, unlike the vampire love that swallows up its victims, God’s love does not consume, it empowers people to be lovers even in a world that seems so frightening and filled with horror. Our hope is not in the powers of this world. Our hope is only in God, who cannot be defined or confined, but invites us to live life in wonderment, exploration and love. That is how God in Christ reigns. Thanks be to God.