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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
Pentecost 14
September 3, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, I find it interesting that within our human culture there has been a strong fascination with zombies and vampires and mummies, and other such creatures.

Creatures that are “deceased” but behave as if they are alive.

Creatures that were once human but have transformed into what are called the undead.

Yes, our human culture seems to have quite a fascination with these creatures.

And so we have stories like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

We have movies like *The Mummy*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Zombieland*, and *The Lost Boys*.

We have television shows like *The Walking Dead*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to name just a few.

But, why...why all this fascination with the undead?

I mean, it appears quite macabre to be fascinated with such creatures.

But, maybe, just maybe the fascination says something about the human psyche.

Maybe the creation of all these vampire, zombie, and mummy tales, these tales of the crypt, maybe these tales actually say something about human beings.

For instance, the existence of these stories may have something to do with the human struggle to make sense of our own mortality.

Maybe that is why so many are drawn to these stories about the undead, because humanity is grappling with the question of life after death.

But this fascination with vampires, mummies, and zombies...

This fascination with such creatures is also a fascination with creatures who are but a shadow of their former humanity...

And so, maybe this fascination with the undead has something to do with how we see ourselves as humans, or should I say how we see ourselves as something less than human.

And it is this phenomenon that I want to focus on today—this idea of being less than human.

For I do believe that we humans don't always know what to make of ourselves as humans.

Indeed, we humans often DEHUMANIZE other people, that is, we often see and often describe other people as less than human.

Indeed, we humans do not have a good track record when it comes to seeing other people as human beings.

In fact, it was written at one time into *The Constitution of the United States* that people of African descent were only 3/5's human.

And there was a time in this country when Native Americans were described as savages, and in particular the enlightened Native American, the Native American who was civilized was still only called the "noble savage," still seen then as something less than fully human.

And we don't have to tax our brains much to think of all the pejorative terms that have been used to describe the various ethnic groups that have emigrated to this country.

No, we don't have a good track record.

Furthermore, we can think of all the acts of genocide that has marred the history of humanity, where one group of people decided it was necessary to eradicate another group of people.

The Holocaust where Nazis killed millions of Jews as well as Roma, Slavs, and homosexuals, the physically disabled, and religious dissenters, which took place from 1939 to 1945.

The Rwandan Massacre where extremist Hutu groups killed between 800,000 to 1 million people, predominantly Tutsi in only 100 days in the year 1994.

The Khmer Rouge (KA-meer roozh) Killing Fields in Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge took over the government in 1976, and evacuated Cambodian cities and forced these residents to labor without adequate food and rest.

And if a person could not keep up with their work, they were executed in so called “killing fields.” Subsequently, between 1.7 and 2 million Cambodians were killed from 1976 to 1980.

These are just a few genocides from history.

We could also mention Stalin’s Ukrainian Famine, a program of forcibly induced mass starvation that committed entire Ukrainian populations to a slow death.

We could also mention Mao Zedong’s (MOW Ze-dong) Regime, during which 40 to 70 million people were terminated.

Yes, it is hard to fathom the atrocities that one portion of the human species has perpetrated upon another portion of the human species, which has occurred over and over again on this one lonely blue planet that courses through the dark expanse of space.

Yes, think of all the dehumanizing acts that have happened during this planet’s history, during our human history.

PAUSE

No, humanity does not have a very good track record when it comes to people seeing other people as human.

Anything but. Most of the time, we seem to see other people as less than human, and subsequently treat other people in the most inhumane way, often outright killing other people.

And so maybe that accounts for the tales of vampires, zombies, and mummies—that we are trying to grapple with this is idea of creatures that are seen as less than human.

PAUSE

And what is most striking is that even our Lord Jesus apparently was not immune to dehumanizing others.

Two Sundays ago, we witnessed our Lord Jesus address people who were not of Jewish descent as “dogs.”

And this week we observe our Lord describing Peter as something less than human when he calls him “Satan.”

Now, we might argue that “Satan” as a term is not derogatory, not dehumanizing.

After all Satan simply means “Adversary,” one who opposes another.

And that is after all what Peter does in this text.

But whereas we might be inclined to say Jesus does not dehumanize Peter, I believe we are splitting hairs, because Peter is labeled by Jesus, is demeaned by Jesus.

But Peter in truth has demeaned himself, by opposing Jesus.

Peter shows his sinful self, by opposing God’s will in Jesus Christ.

And in that act of opposition, we see that sin works to dehumanize Peter.

Jesus then is just pointing it out.

There is in truth something to be said that in our present state, we as sinful human beings are not exactly what God had intended us to be.

Indeed, we exist in a fallen state. We are tainted by sin because of humanity’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve took fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

We are not the intended human creatures God had made, because we over and over again oppose God’s will.

And so that is why Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17, talks about human beings becoming a “new creation.”

Yes, we could say that we are less than the humans God originally envisioned us to be.

And again, maybe this is why we have such a fascination with vampires, zombies, and mummies, why we have such a fascination with everything that is undead, that which is not quite human.

Maybe through all these books, and movies, and TV programs humanity is trying to work out its sense of self.

I wonder. But then, what does it mean to be human?

PAUSE

Now, I would answer that question by drawing our attention to what is my most favorite scene in all of Shakespeare's writings.

It is a scene that appears in Shakespeare's play entitled *The Tempest*.

It is a scene I have talked about before in sermons, in Bible Studies.

And this scene is a scene I come back to time and time again.

In Act 5, scene 1, the spirit named Ariel is talking with Prospero.

Prospero here is about to exact his revenge upon his brother Antonio and two others who have betrayed him, who have usurped Prospero's power, and have sent him (Prospero) and his daughter out to sea to die.

This all took place earlier in the story.

But through Prospero's magical power and his servant spirit Ariel, Prospero has caused a storm to shipwreck his enemies on the same island on which he himself was marooned.

And so, now Prospero is able to bring his revenge upon his brother and the co-conspirators.

It is the story Cain and Abel, right

And in Act 5, scene 1, Prospero asks the spirit Ariel to give him an update on his prisoners.

And Ariel tells Prospero that the shipwrecked group is a pitiable sight, but Ariel says that if he Prospero were to see them, his feelings of revenge would become tender and compassionate.

To which Prospero says, “Dost thou thinks so spirit?”

In other words, “What do you know of it, Spirit? Were you betrayed by your brother? Was your position usurped? Were you sent out onto the sea to die, your daughter as well sent out onto sea to die? Dost thou think my feelings of revenge could be tempered by the sight of them?”

And Ariel responds, “Mine would, sir, if I were human.”

And there we have Shakespeare’s definition of what it is to be human.

It is to be merciful, even in the midst of our instinct for revenge.

PAUSE

In a performance of *The Tempest* whereby Patrick Stewart (of *Star Trek* fame) played Prospero, Stewart paused an inordinate amount of time after Ariel’s words.

It may have been the longest pause in theater when an actor actually hadn’t forgotten his line.

It was a pause, of course, for dramatic effect. A pause to allow the moment to sink in for the audience.

Because Ariel’s statement “I would, sir, if I were human,” does indeed persuade the character Prospero to change his mind and not exact his revenge.

Instead of exacting his revenge, Prospero releases his brother Antonio and the other conspirators.

PAUSE

In our gospel reading today, Peter is that character Prospero.

Peter wants Jesus to rise up and defeat the Roman occupiers who are in the Jewish homeland.

Peter wants his revenge upon the Romans, and wants Jesus to destroy them—that is the unspoken truth in this text.

And Jesus calls him on it—“Get behind me, Satan. You, Peter, are less than human—because like Prospero you are motivated by revenge. For God desires mercy from us his human creatures, not revenge.”

Revenge, or more specifically justice, is of God's purview, not humanity's.

This is what God tells us in the story of Cain and Abel, when God places a mark on Cain to protect him from those seeking revenge for Abel's death.

And this is also what Jesus tells us in our gospel, "The Son of Man, when he comes in his glory, will repay everyone for what has been done."

This is what the apostle Paul tells us in our text from Romans, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

So, God is the one who metes out justice, particularly death sentences—not us.

We are called upon to be merciful, and in that way, we cling to our humanity.

And so where does that leave us with the tales of the crypt—those stories about vampires, zombies, and mummies.

Well, they challenge us so that we don't become like them, like the less than human, because if we have ever noticed most vampires, zombies, and mummies seemed to be disgruntled to say the least, and are bent on attacking humans, as if some underlying revenge is at work in them.

Again, I think that says a lot about the human psyche where we when we are disgruntled, we feel vengeful, and want to lash back at others.

It would be nice actually to have tales about kind vampires, compassionate zombies, and caring mummies.

Because then maybe we ourselves would realize that we should be that way, too.

Short of that, we do have the examples of Ariel calling out Prospero, and Jesus calling out Peter—to be merciful.

Yes, that is the lesson for today and everyday, to be merciful, refrain from revenge, and so then live into the fullness of what God had intended you and I to be as God's human creatures.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.