

## **“The Stories We Tell”**

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### **Opening Words**

by Rev. Scott Tayler

We gather as a house of stories.

As we learn of those who have gone before,

the way in front of us becomes more clear.

As we weave together the tales of who we are,

our loneliness lessens and the web of our oneness is revealed.

As listen deeply in those times of tender trust,

we descend into the longings and learnings, hopes and fears,

of the humanity we share.

Beneath the wells from which we drink,

there is a deeper well that feeds them all.

Come, let us tell each other tales of our thirst.

Let us drink from the stories that sustain us all.

### **Reading**

From *Why the World Doesn't End* by Michael Meade

Myths and stories used to be an essential part of the education of young people under the understanding that stories help each person make sense of life in general and of the struggles of their life in particular. It is natural for young people to get in trouble and feel at risk, for they must risk themselves in order to learn what story is trying to live through them. Modern youth grow up in a world that is itself at risk, and they increasingly ask

whether the world might come to an end in their lifetime. Whether it be educated youth considering the dangers of global warming and climate change, less privileged ones who feel the bite of poverty and the growing disparity between rich and poor, or those exposed to the increased threats of violence and extremism modern youth grow up amidst threats of natural disaster and nightmares of terrorism, and they cannot help but doubt the future of the world. Young people, who are supposed to be “the future of the world”, can find themselves fearing that the world has very little future to offer to them. What kind of story are we living in when young people ask those who are older whether the world will continue or not?

### **Sermon/Homily**

Our spiritual theme for this month is Story, which is a theme dear to my heart. I know the power of storytelling, and enjoy my role as a storyteller for this congregation. Stories help us make meaning of it all.

Michael Meade, in his book *Why the World Doesn't End*, writes that “Stories are the oldest school for humankind; a living school where the only entry requirements are an active imagination, some capacity to feel one’s own feelings, and a willingness to approach the world as a place of wonder and revelation. Stories are the imaginal, timeless base of the world, the “once upon a time”, living literature that underlies and secretly unifies everything. People feel more whole when listening to a story and feel most at odds when there is no myth to make sense of life’s intricate and necessary dramas.”

Stories help us feel whole. Stories organize events into a beginning, a middle, and an end. The stories that we tell shape the reality that we experience, and vice versa. Stories shape us.

#### 1. Stories I grew up with

I grew up, a child of the 1980’s, with many epic science fiction stories. There was the grand mythic tale of Star Wars, and the hopeful optimism of Star Trek. And there were

many stories of post-apocalyptic life, such as Mad Max. I also grew up reading a great deal of science fiction, with a good amount of dystopian and post-apocalyptic works.

## 2. The impact of those stories

These stories shaped me and the meaning making I did. My imagination was caught by the idea of end times, and it seemed logical that the apocalypse could be near. The constant threat of nuclear war was still with us, and I could imagine myself having to live out some sort of post-apocalyptic battle scenario.

One of the stories that I most bought into was that the world would descend into chaos and only a few humans would survive, left to battle over scarce resources. Mine was not a vision born of religious fundamentalism, but the secular stories I consumed were soaked in the same stuff.

In my late teens I became a bit of a survivalist, buying rather silly weapons like blowdart guns and crossbows and keeping a stock of non-perishable foods in my bedroom and a “go bag” packed at all times. I was very concerned with my own survival if things went bad.

## 3. The story that changed my life

Then there came a book that changed my whole life. And it wasn't a masterpiece or anything – it was just the story I needed to hear in order to find my way into my own story. The book in question was *The Postman* by David Brin. The plot of the book, which bears no resemblance at all to the plot of the movie that was made later – don't watch that - follows the adventures of a lone traveler in a post apocalyptic world who just happens to find an old postal truck. To stay warm, he takes the postal uniform and some of the mail, and later on when he encounters a village he scams them into thinking that he is a representative of the new American government, getting the mail service back up and running.

It's a fantastical science fiction story, but in another way it's a story of ordinary people coming together to take care of each other, and to rebuild connections and

communities. And when I read it, I came to a new idea, an idea that I'd rather not survive through competition and dog-eat-dog struggle. The new story of my life was how do we take care of each other, and how can there be enough for everyone even when times get hard. That has been the story I've shaped my life around ever since. And it all started with a pulp paperback novel.

#### 4. The power of stories

The stories we tell can comfort, inspire, frighten, amuse, and inform us. Stories can divide us or they can be big enough to bring us all together. And the right stories can help us imagine a new reality, and make it so. Stories have the power to shake things up, through the power of imagination. Author Ursula K le Guin says:

“Storytelling is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. Having that real though limited power to put established institutions into question, imaginative literature has also the responsibility of power. The storyteller is the truth-teller... We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable. “

Stories are imaginative exercises, helping us understand what is, and more importantly, what might be. It matters what kind of stories we tell and what kind of stories we hear, as stories shape the way we interact with each other and the world around us.

#### 5. Science fiction as imagining justice

And storying isn't just the work of professional authors and storytellers. It's also present in the work of organizers striving for justice. It's present anytime someone describes a possible future, as organizer Adrienne marie brown explains in her book *Emergent Strategy*:

a. “all organizing is science fiction, by which we mean that social justice work is about creating systems of justice and equity in the future, creating conditions that we have never experienced.”

b. “I would call our work to change the world “science fictional behavior” – being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations. We are excited by what we can create, we believe it is possible to create the next world. We believe.” Adrienne marie brown

We can all engage in this “science fictional behavior”, crafting a future we want to see come true.

## 6. The current story as apocalypse

Currently, the story of the future that many of us see is a pretty bleak picture. It’s understandable. We’ve been living through a global pandemic, mass extinctions of species, climate change, mass incarceration and police violence, and increasing levels of economic inequality. It’s pretty well summarized by a headline in the edition of the UU World that arrived in my mailbox last week: “The Last Twelve Months Have Felt Like the End of the World”.

This is a story of apocalypse, a storyline that has been around for as long as people have been telling stories. We see signs of impending or current disaster, and weave a tale of how everything will end. This story might shape us to be preppers, like my teenage self was, or to give up hope.

But there is another meaning of “apocalypse”, from the Greek roots, that means for something to be revealed or uncovered. The visions of apocalypse reveal something to us. These stories point to our fears and to current injustices.

And really, each story of an apocalypse is also a story of new beginnings. What might be revealed as possible if we looked to our stories? What new beginnings do they reveal?

Michael Meade puts it this way in *Why the World Doesn't End*: “The world as we know it has ended many times only to begin again. When the end seems near, seemingly small changes and little redemptions can shift the underlying patterns of both nature and culture. When the world around us seems about to collapse, the threads of renewal are nearby. When the world seems old with worry, ancient ideas are also near and trying to become known again. Despite feeling overwhelmed by the dramas and challenges of change, our hands are never far from finding again the old practices of being agents of creation.”

## 7. Imagining a new story

So here is our task, to retell the story and find the threads of renewal, the opportunities to be agents of creation. We can tell stories of hope, of possibility, of change. We can tell a story of the future that is big enough for all of us.

And it's important that all of us, of all ages, take on the task of storying. This is no time to place the whole burden of being the hope for the future on young people. They need us to live a story now that gives them hope for the future.

Telling these stories now will lead us to live them out, crafting new ways of being that embody more justice and more care for this earth. If we can imagine it, we can be guided by it. We can engage in science fictional behavior, as Adrienne marie brown says in *Emergent Strategy*:

- a. “science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world.”

Using our imaginations, we can create a new world, one with healthcare and housing for all, one where we carefully steward the earth and its precious life giving resources, one where we find ways of maintaining community safety without abusive policing or mass incarceration.

That is the story I would like to tell. If this is a story of The End, may it be an end to racism and an end to extractive and abusive capitalism. If it is a story of new beginnings, may it be a future with justice and care for all.

Imagine the possibilities. What would your story tell? What stories are just waiting to be made real through your life? Let us all engage in some mighty science fictional behavior, and create a future together. Let us live into new stories.

May it be so.