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Preaching Hope:
Young Adult Fantasy and Science Fiction as Conversation Partners with Scripture

by

KATHLEEN MONSON LUTES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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2020

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ABSTRACT

*Young Adult Fantasy and Science Fiction as a Conversation Partner
with Scripture: Preaching Hope*

by

Kathleen Monson Lutes

Young adult science fiction and fantasy as a conversation partner with scripture, particularly but not limited to apocalypse, revelation, and end-times, for the purposes of preaching God's love and hope in a chaotic world. Included in this conversation is *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *Divergent* trilogy, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Last Battle*, and *Warm Bodies*. The dominant themes discussed are prophecy, sin/evil/repentance, resistance, and the Great Battle. This work provides a voice for preaching difficult themes, including end-times, in a world of fear and darkness. It particularly offers an example for preaching the timelessness of Advent and the end-times Advent points to.

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In great thanksgiving for Cohort Omega. For my husband Rick who supports and loves me while thinking I am crazy, and who is my partner in this call and in this life. For Tom and Willie, for whom I would give my life, and for Amanda and Maren, who love them. For my mom who listened to me when, at eight years old, I declared I would become a priest. For the people of Trinity Episcopal Church and St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, who put up with my delight in books.

“A story where myth, fantasy, fairy tale, or science fiction explore and ask questions moves beyond pragmatic dailiness to wonder. Rather than taking the child away from the real world, such stories are preparation for living in the real world with courage and expectancy.”

Madeleine L'Engle

Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art

“The world that birthed that story is long gone, all its people are dead, but it continues to touch the present and future because someone cared enough about that world to keep it. To put it in words. To remember it.”

spoken by Perry in *Warm Bodies* by Isaac Marion

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Narrative and story shape and ultimately transform an individual. The story people tell of their lives shapes and forms what subsequently happens. Each narrative is different, as each life is different. And yet, we have the power to tell our story as one of pain and suffering, or a series of bad choices or happenstance, or a capricious nature resulting in a horrendous life. This is a story that may be marked by violence and death. But we also have the power to tell our story as one of good fortune, or hard work, bringing about material wealth and earthly happiness. And, of course, there are a multitude of shades of gray that represent all the stories in between.

Biblical preaching is telling the story of God's presence in this world, on this earth. And specifically, Christian preaching reveals the good news and grace of incarnation, God with us; the story of creation, blessing, sin, incarnation, liberation, repentance, forgiveness, and new life. Finding a place in that story, locating ourselves in the narrative, redefines the story of our lives. Where there was pain, we find joy. Where there was destruction, we find new life. Where there was hate, we find love. Where there was death, we find life.

And there are many, many competing narratives. As preachers, we say with our words and our lives that the story of God who is with us is the authoritative narrative. We say that this narrative not only is authoritative, it is transformational. We attest to the grace by which God saves us from ourselves. This story gives us the vision to see

outward and beyond. As Martin Luther described, a life lived “inward” for oneself rather than “outward” for God and others, is a life destined for destruction. We attest to the liberation that only the God who is in our midst can provide, lifting us out of the pit. We are emptied, so that we may be filled with spirit. We declare that God who walks by our sides, whose very body is broken for us, fills us and raises us to new life.

But narratives do not have to compete. Narratives may converse and, in the conversation, illumine and enlighten one another. The imagination that conceives the otherworlds of young adult fantasy and science fiction dystopian and eucatastrophic stories is not unlike the imagination that bows before the mystery of God. Dystopian fiction imagines great suffering or injustice in a postapocalyptic world. *Eucatastrophe* is a word coined by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Eucatastrophe is the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears, produced by a sudden glimpse of Truth. The Resurrection was the greatest “eucatastrophe” possible in the greatest Fairy Story, producing Christian joy that is so like sorrow since it comes from the place where Joy and Sorrow are at one and reconciled.¹

In the genre of dystopia and eucatastrophe, the authors build worlds of possibility. The characters that are created respond to the trials and tribulations set before them in that created world. These are worlds of fiction, and yet in the imagination of the writer and the reader new possibilities are worked out. Characters meet challenges with courage and bravery; they also fall and fail. Worlds that are created are violent and dangerous, filled with battles of power and control.

¹ Christopher Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, vol. <https://www.hoopladigital.com/play/12015733> (Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), Letter 89.

The imagination that finds illumination in these stories is not unlike the imagination that sees, feels, and embraces the truth of bread that becomes body and wine that becomes blood. And using this hermeneutic in preaching may be the vehicle by which some listeners may identify their own journey of transformation. Although these books are set in futuristic worlds and otherworlds, they invite readers to grapple with contemporary problems and social ills in much the same way that canonical literature does.

The shape of the Hebrew and Christian sacred story provides the theological themes for consideration. These biblical themes of creation, blessing, sin, incarnation, repentance, forgiveness, and new life may be traced through the lives of the characters and the worlds they populate. The characters populating the narratives I have chosen show forth the messiness and muckiness of world-building and world-living within their narratives. And these characters show forth the experience and the struggle of making sense of pain and suffering, violence and destruction. Whether or not the struggle is successful, it results in self-reflection arced toward transformation. There are questions of meaning: Why are we here? To whom are we related? What is our purpose, or is there a purpose? What is evil? What is death? What is forgiveness, redemption, resurrection, or new creation?

In Genesis, humankind is the apex of creation, the purpose for which all other things are made. And it is not merely Earth that was created for humankind but the entire universe, for the process that culminated in human creation occurs at the beginning of all things. God calls all of creation good. Creation, the formation of Earth, is largely a preamble to the creation of humanity. The world-building of science fiction imagines

various creation possibilities: What if creation is not good? What if the goodness of creation includes talking animals that embody compassion and justice? What if the goodness of creation exists on other planets, in other systems? What if creation is not linear—with a beginning, a middle, and an end? What if creation is fallen? These questions plus the world-building of the stories make space for the reader to connect to the biblical story. The focus is on dystopian stories and eucatastrophic stories, as these may help the reader and the hearer of preaching form an imagination that makes room for hope. At the trailhead, there are themes to be aware of, to observe, so that on the journey to the fulfillment of all things, we may pay attention and know where the signposts are.

In the Hebrew and Christian narrative, God declares creation good, and God blesses creation. And humans and humanity turn away from God almost immediately and continually throughout the story. Adam and Eve are seduced into thinking they know more than their Creator God; they think they are in control. Sarah lost patience with God while waiting for the promised son who would fulfill God's promise to her and Abraham to be the parents of nations. David turned from God because he could; he was king, who could stop him? Moses killed in a justifiable outrage when his own people were in slavery. When the showdown with the Baal worshipers so angered King Ahab and his wife Jezebel that she vowed to see him dead, Elijah couldn't abide, and he ran into the wilderness. Jonah, when called by God, ran as fast as he could in the other direction. Peter both loved, loved, loved Jesus and denied, denied, denied Jesus. Paul persecuted those who followed Jesus, until he himself was converted. Judas was the betrayer. These are all biblical characters who are flawed. Whether it is pride, control, distrust, or a multitude of other temptations and seductions, each one of them turns away from God.

It is this turning away from God that results in broken relationships and in death, destruction and disorder. It is this turning away from God that results in the rending of the fabric of the society. Turning away from God happens with individuals, with families, and with communities, cultures, and worlds. Moreover, it is believing oneself better than God, or more powerful than God, or outside of God's order that results in chaos and disorder. We move from safety to disorder and back again, from wholeness of relationship to broken relationship to healing. Exodus and exile. Kings and rulers. Empire. Worlds that rely on humanity's frailness rather than God's order. This is also the stuff of science fiction and fantasy: this is where these questions of meaning get asked and answered.

Hebrew and Christian scripture show us what happens when we turn our backs on God and on God's creation, this earth. When humanity turns its back on God, a familiar pattern emerges: This pattern shows us what happens when humanity turns its back on God. Relationships are broken. Societies are broken resulting in war, outrage, and genocide. The natural world is broken when humans do not care for the air and the land and the animals on it, resulting in devastating storms and fires. But war and destruction, even genocide, are not the end of the story.

God forgives and God comes into the midst of humanity. God calls humanity back to Godself, away from all of the turning away from God and from others, all of the gazing into ourselves and not out at the blessedness of God's creation, all of the mistakes, the missing the mark, the brokenness of humanity and of creation. God forgives and shows forth love that is in the flesh, love that shows the way.

Jesus is God incarnate, God with us, love that takes on flesh to show us the way is Jesus. In this is the truth and in this is the reality. Here is also the muckiness and messiness of being human. How does one speak of incarnation? The gospel writer John tells us,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1–5 NRSV)

John shows humanity what relationship looks like; what love looks like. Madeleine L'Engle, in *Bright Evening Star*, writes of incarnation:

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with all his love into the womb of a young girl, and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy?²

The arc of the biblical story reaches toward relationship with God and pauses here in incarnation, in showing forth how God reaches toward humanity in the flesh of Jesus. And it is incarnation that makes wholeness, healing, re-order, and new life even possible. It is Love that takes on flesh and makes us human. And in incarnation, humanity breathes a new breath. Life in its wholeness becomes possible, redemption and resurrection are made real, and joy, maybe not happiness but joy, is affected.

The same theological themes that are part of the arc of sacred scripture also appear in science fiction and fantasy: creation, blessing, incarnation, sin, repentance, forgiveness, redemption and resurrection. These are the themes that are present in the

² Madeleine L'Engle, *Bright Evening Star: Mysteries of the Incarnation* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018), 8.

otherworld-making of this genre of storytelling. And the questions of meaning that are raised in this genre are present in the biblical narrative. The problem is that so much of our popular culture is not informed by the biblical narrative and does not turn to the biblical narrative when asking these questions of life and death, these questions of meaning; instead, people turn to narratives that insist on materialism, consumerism, superficiality, or selfish relationships. There is value in the conversation between the biblical narrative and, in this particular case, the narratives of apocalypse and the dystopian and eucatastrophic narratives of popular culture. That value is in the imaginative inquiry that is at the core of a robust engagement of scripture and a robust engagement of science fiction and fantasy. At that intersection is fruitful conversation that leads the preacher to theological reflection resulting in the ability to address the darkness and chaos of present times in ways that resonate with and inspire the listener.

History shows us that human beings throughout time have asked these questions of meaning. Culture shows us that there are multiple narratives through which people identify. Since at least the 1960's, western culture began to rebel and question conventional moral thinking and the narrative of salvation contained in scripture. Various sectors of society—academics, youth, intellectuals, even religious people—were deconstructing historic sources of moral thinking. Multiple psychological and spiritual disciplines began taking shape. Rules that western culture lived by were discarded, and in their place was experiment: drugs, relationships, community. The biblical narrative became less authoritative, even irrelevant. The youth of those years are now the grandparents of the present. Now it is their children and grandchildren who are looking

for narratives to build their lives around, resulting in a proliferation of competing narratives.

But the biblical narrative must continue to be told. God's activity and love is not dependent on us, but that does not diminish the necessity to preach the truth of God in the flesh, God's transformational love, the good news. Our churches are becoming less and less populated, and the story of God's activity in the life of God's people is not being heard, creating a void into which alternative narratives are told. But there is a way to tell the biblical narrative, specifically the hard stories of apocalypse and end-times, by pointing readers and listeners—not just young adults but people of all ages in our congregations and beyond—to the life-giving reality of God in the flesh, the God who in Jesus died and was resurrected. The conversation between otherworld-building storytelling and the world of God's kingdom both captures the imagination of the preacher and the listener and offers the preacher another way into the truth of God's story.

Most importantly, this is where hope can be found. Hope for a world in distress, a world in chaos, a world in which people abuse one another. Hope is necessary for humanity to be healed and brought into union with God. End-times or apocalypse is not about fear of hell, or even fear of hell on earth as some scenarios describe, but is about God's purposes of healing and wholeness. In *Surprised by Hope*, N. T. Wright argues that

heaven and hell are not, so to speak, what the whole game is about. This is one of the central surprises in the Christian hope. The whole point of my argument so far is that the question of what happens to me after death is *not* the major, central, framing question that centuries of theological tradition have supposed. The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, regularly insists that the major, central,

framing question is that of God's purpose of rescue and re-creation for the whole world, the entire cosmos.³

N. T. Wright points us in the direction of one of the purposes of Revelation. God will dwell with mortals; God will bring all creation into unity and healing. The purpose of this project is to show that where dystopian and eucatastrophic world-building and storytelling intersects with scripture, especially in the stories of end-times, there is a conversation that enlivens the imagination and may spur transformation and give hope in a chaotic world.

³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 184.

CHAPTER 2

HOPE IN WORLDS OF DESTRUCTION

The category of literature called science fiction/fantasy—and in the postmodern world a very clear subdivision is dystopian storytelling—is seeing huge gains in readership, especially in the youth and young adult category.¹ This is happening because the writers of this type of fiction create and explore new worlds, experimenting with creation, relationship, life, and death. In science fiction/fantasy writing and world-making, all of life’s questions may be asked: Why are we here? To whom are we related? What is our purpose, or is there a purpose? What is death? What is new creation? What is resurrection? And what does life after destruction look like? In this fiction, all ideas may be explored, because there are no right or wrong worlds. These worlds of science fiction/fantasy are expansive and imaginative. They offer the reader opportunities to imagine being someone else in another world, offering a type of mind experiment in which they work out the person and identity they want to be in the world they actually occupy. This exploration is useful for the engagement of ideas that are often fearful, as we wonder about life and death, life after death, and the life of our planet after death. The otherworldly narrative is useful for exercising an apocalyptic imagination, eventually

¹ “Young Adult Book Sales Up 22% in First Three-Quarters of 2014 | Time,” accessed January 28, 2019, <http://time.com/3636601/young-adult-book-sales-2014/>.

creating the bridge to identify ourselves in the biblical narrative and reject the otherworldly narrative.

Apocalyptic literature spans Jewish and Christian scripture. It shares common themes throughout, including Daniel in the Hebrew Bible and Revelation in the Christian scriptures. Additionally, apocalyptic literature includes 1 Enoch, 2 and 3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Apocalypse of Peter. Apocalyptic literature generally is a literary genre that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. It often takes narrative form, employs esoteric language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the end of time events as imminent.

Most of the Christian apocalyptic narrative is contained in The Book of Revelation. However, The Little Apocalypse, a sermon by Jesus in Matthew chapters 24–25 with parallels in Mark chapter 13 and Luke chapter 21, foretells the imminence of collective tribulation and chastisement before the coming of the “Son of Man” who will “sit upon the throne of his glory” and separate “the sheep from the goats.”

This paper concentrates on John’s Revelation in conversation with dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling. The conversation between dystopias and Revelation is fruitful in its themes, images, and sensibilities. Dystopian otherworlds set up cataclysmic events, caused by totalitarian and over-reaching government, persecution, climate degradation, or disease. The Revelation to John is an answer in apocalyptic terms to the needs of the church in time of persecution, as it awaits the end-time expected in the near future. Dystopia is an answer most often in apocalyptic terms to the needs of people to try to control their environment, or to rise above the degradation inflicted by a totalitarian

regime, or even to resist a world that seems evil. The images or visions are similar. And, lastly, in Christian scripture, the starting point of hope is the saving act of God in Jesus, the slain lamb, bringing about the reign of God. Dystopian stories turn to eucatastrophe with the sacrificial love of the protagonist.

John's Revelation inspires the followers of Jesus to persevere in the reality of persecution. John's Revelation inspires the followers of Jesus to hope. This is the connection to and the location of conversation between dystopian and eucatastrophe and scripture. As Revelation inspires the followers of Jesus to persevere and to resist an empire of persecution and terrorism, dystopia and eucatastrophe show the reader what an otherworld of persecution, oppression, violence, catastrophe, or disaster looks like. And in the intersection of scripture and science fiction and fantasy, particularly the stories of end-times and apocalypse, dystopian fiction or eucatastrophic fiction, we find opportunities for preaching that locate us in a world of hope. The preacher who stirs the imaginations of those who are listening, catapults those listeners into a whole new way of considering their world—a way that is filled with hope and the possibility of new life in Christ.

Some attribute to Karl Barth, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Meaning, I believe, that the Bible and the newspaper are conversation partners, and that conversation results in theological reflection and interpretation that is fruitful for preaching. Using that principle and using these fictional stories instead of the newspaper, I will enter into conversation between these fictional stories and scripture.

The dystopian fiction by Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, and by Veronica Roth, *Divergent*, *Insurgent*, and *Allegiant*, present otherworlds that are filled with violence and fear perpetrated by empires. These stories portray both the worlds and the people who populate them in chaos and disarray. They are stories that include violence perpetrated against innocent people and violence in order to save oneself. They are stories of destruction, hate, and vengeance. In these ways they are stories that show humanity at its very worst and most violent. But there is also hope in these stories. Hope in the midst of violence. Hope in the midst of destruction. Hope that arises out of love for one another, hope that arises out of sacrificial love, hope that understands the fullness of life, death, and new life. This is the point of intersection and of conversation.

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle, *The Last Battle* by C. S. Lewis, and a zombie story of surprising compassion and insight into the changing world and possible end-times scenario, *Warm Bodies* by Isaac Marion, are stories of otherworld-building where the worlds are in chaos and disarray. These stories are examples of *eucatastrophe*, stories of pain and sorrow, tragedy and violence, that turn to joy and hope. This is the crux of the conversation. In our society in which love is obsessive, self-serving, and narcissistic, the idea of love that puts the well-being of the other over the happiness of self is novel. Each of these stories show characters wrestling with love that gives up power for the other. Each of these stories produces a glimpse of truth, the truth of sacrificial love and new life. Each of these stories is about impending and inevitable death, and in worlds that are created to bring death violently, ultimately the response is love—love of friend, love of neighbor, love that creates a new reality.

The Apocalyptic Imagination

There is a contemporary concern, evidenced by the proliferation of dystopian fiction in response to the ongoing crisis of the present/future order of things. Some examples include the spreading of the policies of surveillance, the widening gap between social strata, and environmental concerns.² Additionally, there are technological advances, artificial intelligence, materialism, and intellectualism. Dystopian fiction constructs worlds that are built on fear of the other, fear of those who are different, fear of destruction, fear of death. These are worlds in which boundary delineations exist so that differences are kept clear, and breeches of those boundaries are punishable by violence and death. In these worlds, citizens fear empire or hierarchy. Sometimes empire fears its own citizens. And today's world often looks a lot like the end. It looks like a world where it seems like nothing worse can possibly happen, a world where people are doing things that create chaos, a world that seems very much like the one described in apocalyptic scripture such as Revelation. The apocalyptic imagination formed and informed by scripture allows us to live in a world that could possibly be the fulfillment of this age and, at the same time, continue to have hope in a way that counters what we might be experiencing in our lives.

Apocalypse, or sometimes revelation, may be translated "lifting of the veil." According to Bruce W. Scott in *When Time Ends*, "To understand Jesus' first-century message, it is necessary to lift several veils, such as the yawning distance of two thousand

² Andrei Simut, "Dystopian Geographies in The Year of the Flood and Hunger Games," accessed July 8, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/10019177/Dystopian_Geographies_in_The_Year_of_the_Flood_and_Hunger_Games.

years of history, the alien cultural inheritance most Americans bring to the Mediterranean experience of their writers, and the strange rhetoric of apocalyptic thought.”³

Preaching the conversation between apocalypse or revelation in scripture and the genre of dystopian and eucatastrophic fiction, may contribute to lifting the veil for the contemporary congregation. By drawing similarities between contemporary dystopian and eucatastrophic fiction and apocalypse in scripture, the preacher can bring listeners to an understanding of the experience of repentance, forgiveness, and love that is present in both apocalypse and science fiction.

Apocalyptic imagination may also be formed by works of dystopian and eucatastrophic fiction, which are written in direct response to what is going on in the world. Secular dystopias make a claim about what is happening in the world. Apocalyptic stories in scripture claim God’s activity in the life of God’s people, in the life of this planet, and in the fulfillment of all things at the end of the ages. As dystopian and eucatastrophic fiction ignites the imagination, and scripture fans the flame, this conversation between the two results in theological reflections that bring new ideas and depth to the preacher as she is challenged by, or struggles with, preaching scripture that seems hard or confusing.

Science fiction and fantasy are stories about otherworld-building, and they imagine otherworld possibilities. They are stories using apocalyptic imagination to get at some very important questions about human behavior and human moral decision-making. Science fiction and fantasy tell humanity’s story from the secular point of view. Things

³ Bruce W Scott, *When Time Ends: The Victory of Forgiveness at Armageddon* (Charlottesville, VA: Rockwood Press, 2010), 107.

that are unknown and unknowable become the fundamental religious questions. Science fiction and fantasy authors create new worlds in which everything becomes possibility. For example, they explore creation by proposing creation stories in alternate worlds. They explore relationship by creating otherness. They explore broken relationship by showing the violence and destruction caused by the characters' mistreating one another and mistreating the created world. They explore trust and loyalty placed in things and people that outside of that otherworld would be rejected. They explore the nature of evil and ask questions about what we would do if placed in similar circumstances. They explore forgiveness and redemption by showing the slippery slope of choice. They explore the nature of this present world and a coming age, or a world to come, by presenting life in an otherworld after dissolution or destruction.

Secondly, dystopian fiction and eucatastrophic fiction can take on the role of the prophet. In the words of Barbara Rossing in *The Rapture Exposed*, "The prophet's goal is to wake people up and turn people's hearts to God's vision of justice and generosity for the world. The future is not yet determined. There is hope that judgment can be averted."⁴

The prophet calls humanity, as a whole and as individuals, to repentance, away from a course that leads to destruction. The stories I am studying work in this way. The arc of the story shows that when the characters, the culture, or the society continue along the path they are on, it will end in violence and destruction. Inherent in the story is the prophetic call to change direction, to do something different, to move away from self-

⁴ Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, Pbk. ed (New York: Basic Book, 2005), 89.

serving or power serving to community, compassion, justice, generosity, forgiveness, and redemption. The story serves as a warning, as described by Rossing in her book.

Rossing's discussion of Ebenezer Scrooge's spirit journey in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is helpful to understand the prophet's goal. Scrooge is taken on a visionary journey of his life; he sees his past and gets the first warning of what his future will be if he does not change his life. He sees the pain he has wrought, and also a vision that inspires hope—the warmth and love of his assistant Bob Cratchit's home and family. Finally, it is the last vision of his own death and grave, with no one mourning him, that causes him to ask the ghost if this is what is, or what may be. Scrooge finally realizes that life would be much better lived if he changed his life. Rossing argues that the purpose of a spirit journey is not to predict the future but to bring about reform. This argument is incredibly useful.⁵ This is what science fiction and fantasy stories help the reader to do—to take a journey in the otherworld, to ask questions of meaning, and to imagine the ultimate consequences when a single person or an entire society or culture continues on a path of destruction. For Scrooge, facing the horror of his future allows him to build relationships that transform him into a new man.

Brian K. Blount in “Dawn of the Dead,” a Beecher Lecture at Yale Divinity School, speaks about the fear of the end of the world and the moral collapse of the human race.

Driven by fears of having two world wars, financial Armageddon, the threat of nuclear and now environmental and pandemic annihilation, 20th and 21st centuries have taken on an apocalyptic bearing in a secular guise. Secular apocalyptic formulas are in every way the functional equivalent of their religious

⁵ Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*.

predecessors expressed in non-religious idioms in which the supernatural has been purged.⁶

Blount's suggestion that secular apocalyptic formulas are taking the place of their religious predecessors is exactly the point of holding these stories in conversation with each other for the purposes of preaching. Science fiction and fantasy worldviews may be taking the place of scripture in answering these big questions of meaning for people wondering about the direction our world is headed. Therefore, having these stories as a conversation partner engages the enlivened imaginations in ways that may invite the listener into repentance, resistance, and hope.

For example, in *Warm Bodies*, a big question is what does it mean to really be alive? In the story, the zombies are not really alive, and the "boneys" are not really alive. The humans are not really living; they are all behind a wall that keeps the zombies out and the humans isolated from one another. The main character in the story wonders if the answer to the question of aliveness is to be in relationship with one another, to be connected to one another. The apocalyptic event is the aftermath of technology that disconnects people, destroys relationships, and disintegrates bodies. The means to relationship and connection is to lay down and let go of technology that isolates people from one another. It is not a simple answer and considers the human complexity of relationship and tribalism. This story is a prophetic call to change. The preacher can ask questions about an apocalypse that seduces humanity into disconnection and

⁶ Brian K. Blount, "Dawn of the Dead: Preaching Revelation, First Beecher Lecture | Yale Divinity School," October 10, 2011, <https://divinity.yale.edu/news-and-media/videos/dawn-dead-preaching-revelation-first-beecher-lecture>.

disintegration, pointing to connection and relationship with God through Jesus as an antidote.

In addition, these stories serve as an icon through which one may see God. Because these stories set up an otherworld, the God one may see may not be the God you or I imagine, picture, or read about in Hebrew or Christian scripture. But I contend that it is in the imagining of the possibilities that we are able to get a clearer image of the God of Hebrew and Christian scripture. This may not be the intent of the author, and yet the exploration may lead the reader in this direction. An icon through which one may see God can be a story of self-giving love. Popular culture and print and cinematic media shape a narrative that is often antithetical to the notion of self-giving love. For example, Madeleine L'Engle, the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, when interviewed about making her story into a movie, said that she would not want the notion of self-giving love to get lost in making her book into a movie. Her reason had to do with the distortion of love. Central to her story is love giving up all power. Because she was confident that anyone writing a screenplay would get that wrong, she held off selling the screen rights for her entire lifetime. In the story, the young boy Charles Wallace must be freed from the powerful evil force of IT. It is Charles's sister Meg who frees him. This is accomplished not by using her own power but by realizing that it is love—her love not only for him but the existence of her love in the world, in her web of relationship with family, friends, and in the love that creates the universe, namely God—that can free. The preacher can help listeners to see through the power struggles of their lives to the God who loves them so very much and whose life was given for theirs.

Dystopian and eucatastrophic stories can serve as the vehicle by which the preacher invites listeners into a new way of experiencing the biblical, and especially the apocalyptic, narrative, thereby spurring new or renewed faith in the powerful truth of God's love for all. The readers of these stories are pointed to new ways of hearing, seeing, experiencing, and understanding biblical truth that can be both life-giving and transforming. These stories, in conversation with biblical stories of prophecy, end-times, and apocalypse, give the preacher a rich and robust popular language with which to describe and engage the apocalyptic imagination of the hearer so as to spur the possibility of hope in a world that seems hopeless.

CHAPTER 3

APOCALYPTIC IN SCRIPTURE

The common thread and the location of conversation is the apocalyptic imagination found in the Gospels, in Old Testament prophecies, and particularly in Revelation. Blount says we live in one of the most apocalyptic periods in recent historical memory as evidenced by popular literature and the proliferation of horror, zombie, and walking dead television shows. Added to these, in a sort of reverse sense of escapism, is the voyeurism of reality television. Peering into the narcissistic lives of those who populate reality TV gives us a sense of order in the midst of the chaos. Secular apocalyptic formulas are everywhere in our popular storytelling.

So many mainline denomination preachers have been reticent to tackle the apocalyptic in scripture, for fear of it. And yet, as we read with the eye of the one who calls our congregations, our people, to repent and return to the Lord, we realize that what we have before us in so many ways are stories of “what if.” What if we humans continue along the path we are on? What if we continue to destroy this earth, this terra, that sustains us? What if we succumb to governments that lose sight of compassion and mercy and instead enslave people, put people into districts, divide people into factions, pull us apart to take away our power? What if reality TV becomes reality? These are the stories of apocalypse in our culture; these are the dystopian stories being written and published, and they are not very different, save for time and place, of the stories of apocalypse in our scripture.

The conversation includes two voices. One voice is the apocalypse and promise of revelation, particularly the end-times narratives read in liturgy during Advent. The other voice is the dystopian and eucatastrophic stories. To converse, we must have knowledge of what it is we are speaking. Firstly, let us examine the scenarios of apocalypse in Revelation and in the Gospels in the Revised Common Lectionary for the season of Advent, when we not only consider the incarnation, but we also consider the fulfillment of all things, the end of the ages.

Apocalypse/Revelation

The genre or narrative of apocalypse reveals the transcendent reality that envisages eschatological salvation and, at the same time, a more temporal course of events. The conversation at hand considers how an interplay between the apocalyptic in scripture and the scenarios of dystopia and eucatastrophic in young adult fiction and fantasy informs preaching.

In *Revelation and the End of All Things*, four themes are presented by Craig R. Koester, and they are particularly appropriate to the conversation between apocalypse in scripture and the dystopian and eucatastrophic genre. Those themes are as follows: prophecy; sin, evil, and repentance; resistance; and the Great Battle.

Prophecy

Prophecy means different things to different readers. Some limit the meaning to foretelling the future. Others expand the meaning to include bold preaching of any sort. David deSilva, in *Seeing Things John's Way*, presents five interpretive keys regarding prophecy in Revelation. The historicist reads Revelation as a prediction of events spanning the time between the book's composition and the establishment of the new

heavens and new earth. DeSilva describes the approach of the historicist as the most intuitive. Revelation begins with messages addressing seven churches at the end of the first century and ends with visions of Christ's return, the last judgment, and the breaking in of God's eternal kingdom—with the visions representing the course of history from John's time to Christ's end-time return.

Secondly, the futurist understands some of Revelation to pertain to events contemporary with its author, then looks to the future for the fulfillment of the vast majority of Revelation's material. This approach became what we have come to know as dispensationalism, as articulated by John N. Darby in the early nineteenth century and widely disseminated in the West. Most recently, it was popularized in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The futurist reading is quite literal. DeSilva observes that the problem with the futurist reading is that it renders most of Revelation irrelevant to the first audience, save for the assurance that God would eventually triumph over evil.

Thirdly, preterism emerged afresh in the modern age as a Catholic response to antipapal readings of Revelation. Preterists suggest that the predictions of Revelation, except for a few pertaining to the end-time, were fulfilled in the distant past. Some preterists read virtually all of Revelation as a prediction of events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem (represented by Babylon) in 70 CE, which is equated with the second coming of Christ.

Fourthly is the idealist approach. This approach does not share the premise that Revelation is primarily a collection of predictions. Rather, Revelation uses symbol, vivid

imagery, and dramatic action to express transcendent truths that are valid in every generation.

Lastly, deSilva describes the contemporary-historical approach, the approach to which he devotes his scholarship. The contemporary-historical approach is the modest affirmation that “the Apocalypse was written specially for the benefit of certain people who were living at that time, and for the purpose of being understood by them.”¹ This approach assumes that John cared most about the readers he actually addressed, and that he wrote Revelation for them rather than any future generations of readers.

Contemporary-historical interpreters approach Revelation essentially as they approach Amos, Galatians, or any other such situation-specific call for faithfulness to the God of the covenant.

For the purposes of this conversation, a prophet would say that certain events would occur if people didn't repent, much like deSilva's exposition of the contemporary-historical approach. The point of prophecy was to encourage repentance from impurity, injustice, and other ways of betraying the trust that God demanded. Sometimes a prophet's prediction was confirmed by events. The prophets urged reform to avoid catastrophe, and sometimes they were spectacular failures. When and if the people, communities, and even governments change their ways and remember who they are and to whom they belong, the description of what may happen does not happen. Then the new life, the new world, and the hope promised in Jesus, in incarnation, reigns. As Craig R.

¹ David Arthur DeSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 6.

Koester writes, “The criterion for authentic prophecy is finally whether the prophet’s message promotes faithfulness to God or whether it leads people away from God.”²

The dystopian and eucatastrophic novels that are involved in this conversation reveal aspects of prophecy—prophecy that is similar to the call to communities and to individuals to repent and return to the Lord, the call for faithfulness to the God of the covenant, and the call to change the course of a life and of a community. Additionally, in the book of Revelation, prophecy is a distinctive form of divine communication. These are the visions John received through the power of God’s Spirit. Prophecy is about the future in that the vision John describes of the new heaven and the new earth is in the future, but prophecy is not limited to telling or predicting the future. There are words of encouragement to the seven churches, which are given not just as condemnations of sin but as a call for repentance. There are threats given in conditional form, only to be carried out if people and the churches do not repent and turn around, change their ways, or do something different to prevent a future of pain, suffering, and judgment.

I do not claim that dystopian and eucatastrophic fiction are the same as the prophecy found in scripture. However, I do claim that the dystopian and eucatastrophic genre reflects an aspect of prophecy that calls communities to repentance, to make national, international, and global change that can impact this fragile earth and its inhabitants for good. When the preacher converses with these stories in a significant way, it can lead to repentance, change, and growth. This conversation may result in

² Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 50.

opportunities for preaching that point listeners to God, and to God in the flesh, in transformative ways.

Sin and Evil and Repentance

Returning to Koester,

Revelation's world of thought is not entirely unique but is similar in some ways to the thought worlds of other apocalypses. These writings typically understand the present age to be dominated by the powers of sin, evil, and death; but they anticipate that in the future the wicked will be defeated or judged by God, and the world will be transformed into a state of blessedness and joy.³

The conversation between Revelation and dystopian and eucatastrophic narrative and the impacts for preaching is rich in mining these themes of sin, evil, and repentance. To use Koester's language, these thought worlds are characterized by sin, evil, and death. It is these very themes that are present in dystopian world-building, with the additions of alienation, isolation, fragmentation, and repentance. These narratives point to the defeat of sin, evil, and death, through repentance brought about by the one who bears the word of prophecy, the one who shows the change that must happen, and the one by whose very life and death transformation is possible.

John's Revelation is filled with images that in today's media world would be ripe for computer-generated animation; audiences would stand in lines to wait for the opening. Modern readers of dystopia and eucatastrophe are very familiar with heroes and villains and battles for the control of the universe. The reality of alienation and isolation and fragmentation, one way to define sin, is the stuff of novels, and particularly dystopian novels. The cosmic drama of Revelation, the battle for control, is not a scenario caught in

³ Koester, 29.

its own time; it is a scenario that elicits powerful responses throughout history. Koester asserts that “instead of offering an explanation for evil, visions in Revelation address listeners as a form of proclamation that is designed to bring repentance and faith.”⁴

The series of visions that John paints in Revelation, and the function of Revelation’s imagery, serve as a warning to the church not to be deceived into despair. It also serves as promise. It is a call to perseverance as well as repentance. The defeat of sin and evil through God and through the Lamb eventually thwarts the efforts of Satan and Satan’s agents, the beasts and a harlot. And in John’s story of the triumph of God over evil, the ordinary limitations of time and space do not apply.⁵

The battle is real in Revelation. The battle is not only for one’s heart and soul but the heart and soul of the universe, of the cosmos. Revelation is not deterministic. It is descriptive of a world in which empire controls people’s lives. It is descriptive of a world in which people and governments lose sight of loving. It is descriptive of a world in which suffering is a real part of life. Suffering is disintegration, suffering is fragmentation, and in this world, belonging to God does not bring an exemption from suffering. Belonging to God is a wholeness in which sin is forgiven and alienation, isolation, or fragmentation is alleviated. Repentance is the realization that one’s name, because one is already claimed by God and named by God, is already placed in the book of life.

⁴ Koester, 89.

⁵ Koester, 117.

Resistance

Belonging to God does not bring exemption from suffering. Revelation urges readers to not only persevere under empire, because God has already claimed them and does not want them to fall away, but to resist. When apocalyptic scripture and Revelation are read as an in situ reality, resistance to the oppressing and violent empire arises from the text. Resistance to the forces of darkness, the forces of evil, and the forces that keep people and populations in bondage is a pervasive theme of the dystopian and eucatastrophe novel which, in conversation with apocalypse and revelation in scripture, sheds light on our present reality.

Anathea Portier-Young, in *Jewish Apocalyptic Literature as Resistance*, writes that

it is not accidental that the first extant examples of the literary genre apocalypse emerge in the Hellenistic period, an era marked by a new internationalism as well as by continuous warfare, military occupation, and reconquest of Judea and surrounding territories. Conquest created empire; ongoing military activity, occupation, taxation, tribute, and colonial power maintained it (Portier-Young 2011: 50). The earliest apocalypses did not merely take shape within this new imperial context. They resisted it.⁶

Koester writes that persecution was at a local level, and that tensions stemmed from the Christian loyalty to Jesus as Lord, which was seen as a subversive idea that warranted suppression. In this scenario, faith takes the form of resistance.

C. Wess Daniels, in *Resisting Empire, The Book of Revelation*, writes,

I do not believe Revelation has anything to do with predicting the end-times and has everything to do with how small, minoritized communities of faith survive the onslaught of empire. It gives them tools for how to survive in a world where

⁶ Anathea Portier-Young, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature as Resistance," 1, accessed October 7, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/5738448/Jewish_Apocalyptic_Literature_as_Resistance_Literature.

everything around them is completely off-center and seeks to create an alternative moral imagination for those who wish to resist empire.⁷

It is the alternative moral imagination for those who wish to resist empire that intertwines with the imaginative otherworld-building of dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling. It is this place of moral imagination that holds the promise for the preacher to invite the listener into new ways of thinking about power. The dystopian and eucatastrophic stories of resistance in empire building help the hearer of Revelation, and other traditionally accepted stories of end-times, to see those biblical stories in the light in which they were written: stories of resistance, stories of perseverance, stories of faith and a source of hope, as well as stories that can show transformation.

For years, many have written and preached about the book of Revelation and other scripture passages as foretelling a particular future. As previously argued, prophecy serves to call communities of faith to repentance, not so much to predict the future. When read as description of persecution and oppression by the Roman empire in its time and place, God's call to be faithful, to persevere even to the point of death, rises from the fantastical, even baffling, prophetic writings.

When read as resistance and not as foretelling the future, it becomes apparent that Revelation and other stories that have been solely understood as a prediction of end-times become something else entirely. They become letters, epistles written to communities experiencing oppression and persecution, and those communities are not us. That is to say, I am a member of a majority; therefore, as I read Revelation, I do not identify with the ones being persecuted. I identify with the persecutors. This changes my relationship

⁷ C. Wess Daniels, *Resisting Empire Now, The Book of Revelation as Resistance*, Kindle ed. (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, Inc., 2019), Loc. 498.

with the scripture and shifts my perspective. This puts me into the position of power, and God's call becomes to side with those with whom God sides—the ones who are crushed and marginalized by those in power. What this reveals challenges the comfortable, powerful, and privileged. It challenges those who have used Revelation and other biblical passages to frighten both faithful people and people who question God's existence with the threat of a grisly and fiery end.

This religion of empire described in Revelation and other biblical passages is based on violence, coercion, suspicion, and fear. It is the powers and principalities that Paul talks about. The religion of empire is signified by the beast—a powerful, destructive force that seeks to annihilate all that resist it and seeks to subject all it deems threatening. It breeds suspicion of the other and scapegoats those who get in its way. It conjures fear, blaming, scapegoating, and violent response. It is truly darkness.

But John the gospel writer reveals a counter-story about a Light that is not overcome by darkness and encourages ordinary believers in tiny, powerless communities to be lampstands. It encourages ordinary people to step out into darkness to shine a light. Wess Daniels writes, “Revelation reminds us that while the darkness will not conquer the Light, we have our own role to play in the whole thing.”⁸

Dystopian and eucatastrophic imaginations work out in otherworld-building what resistance to the dark forces might look like. This conversation between otherworld-building and the in situ reality of Revelation and other biblical passages, carried out in our present time, bears fruit for preaching today. Dystopian and eucatastrophic

⁸ Daniels, Loc 611.

storytelling is filled with characters who resist the oppression of empire and, in doing so, are transformed and empowered to live new lives of hope.

The Great Battle or The Slain Lamb—Hope

Traditionally, the term used to describe the Great Battle and the slain Lamb in Revelation is *end-times*. In fact, two of the books that have been integral in this research have end-times in their titles. But if we take that research seriously, end-times may not be the best descriptor. These scholars make the case that what apocalyptic literature and Revelation describe is the in situ reality of those stories. Therefore, rather than predicting a future, the call to the followers of Jesus is to repent and return to the God of love. The call to the followers of Jesus is to resist the forces of empire that would enslave and destroy them, and the call to the followers of Jesus is to hope—hope that resides in Jesus’s resurrection, and hope that is a present reality in apocalypse and Revelation. This is a call to the followers of Jesus to live in the now and not yet. This is a difficult reality to preach, and a reality that the preacher must preach. However difficult this reality, and however difficult these words, we must confront these stories, especially in Advent—the liturgical season in which we live in the now and the not yet, in the place between resurrection and the fulfillment of all things. And a conversation with dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling with a contemporary apocalyptic imagination may be helpful.

Now we will turn to hope. Beginning in Revelation, two concurrent images are present, Christ the warrior and the slain Lamb. Christ the warrior appears on a white horse. This figure, seen at the very beginning of the story, is not a stranger but is the one who walks among those who follow. The rider on the horse appears as each vision begins, and after the plagues end, a similar rider appears. The first horseman was released

by Christ, and the second rider is Christ himself who comes to defeat the foes of God.

Koester writes that Christ the warrior, coming to wage battle on the forces of darkness, does not sanction violence, instead incites resistance.

Revelation does call Christians to take an uncompromising stand against sin and evil, but this militancy takes the form of faithful resistance against corrupt religious practice and greed. Moreover, in the cataclysmic battle of Revelation 19, what do the heavenly armies do? Nothing, according to John's account.⁹

But Christ himself is the agent of God's victory. John's vision of the warrior Christ carries out a campaign not only against the beast but against tendencies to look at the powers in the world through rose-colored glasses. Koester again,

The imagery is designed to be disturbing in part because many of John's earliest readers had been lulled into complacency. John does not want readers to think that Christ's death as a sacrificial Lamb was intended to placate the forces of sin and evil.¹⁰

The allies of these forces of sin and evil were given repeated opportunities to repent, but they refused. Christ died to free people from the kingdom of sin so that they might serve the Kingdom of God. And obedience to the Lamb means resistance and defiance of the beast; there is no neutral position.

The religion of empire and the religion of the Lamb are two patterns of human society at work in the world described by C. Wess Daniels in *Resisting Empire*. If resistance is against the religion of empire, then hope is the hallmark of the religion of the Lamb. God's kingdom comes, God's will is done.

In our congregations, many have been exposed to a dispensationalist version of a grand spectacle of earth's final war and destruction. In this scenario, Christians who are

⁹ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 174.

¹⁰ Koester, 175.

raptured, or escape earth, get to escape having to suffer any violence yet will be able to view it all as it unfolds. Barbara Rossing describes this as a “voyeuristic desire for an aerial view of the end of the world while escaping its torments.”¹¹ Or they are so frightened of what is ahead, they ignore and deny rather than living in the hope that is realized now and the hope that is the fulfillment of all things. In this scenario, any renewal or healing for the world is put off to a distant future, and only after God has destroyed the earth.

But “Lamb power,” as used by Barbara Rossing,

leads us on an exodus out of the heart of empire, out of the heart of addiction to violence, greed, fear, an unjust lifestyle, or whatever holds each of us most captive. It is an exodus we can experience each day. Tenderly, gently, the Lamb is guiding us to pastures of life and healing beside God’s river.¹²

In the image of the Great Battle (or the Last Battle) and the image of the slain Lamb (or Lamb power), is a fertile metaphor where an expansive imagination takes hold and instructs the contemporary hearer in the way of truth. In this fertile place, scripture and dystopian storytelling are conversation partners. So much dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling is filled with hope—hope for the present, hope for a future, hope that includes justice, kindness, liberation, and peace. And that hope is borne by a person like Christ, who is both warrior and Lamb.

¹¹ Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 139.

¹² Rossing, 142.

CHAPTER 4
TURNING TOWARD APOCALYPTIC AND END-TIMES
IN DYSTOPIAN AND EUCATASTROPHIC FICTION

These themes in end-times biblical writings, prophecy, sin/evil/repentance, resistance, and Christ the warrior/the slain Lamb, are themes that populate dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling and otherworld-building. The non-biblical texts under consideration in this conversation are novels in written form. This choice is to limit the scope of this particular work; however, mention must be made of the impact of the cinematic media and the electronic media as well. The corpus of the science fiction and fantasy genre in written form has been described in the introduction to this paper; in addition, the cinematic form of this genre continues to be a popular choice, as indicated by the economic impact. As people in general, and young people in particular, continue to devour this genre, it is important to converse with and consider these narratives. When Christians ignore or even judge poorly popular culture, we miss an opportunity to engage a narrative in ways that can be transformational. Sometimes we worry that young people are devoid of imagination, but the popularity of this genre shows us that huge existential questions are being asked and answered in ways that must be taken seriously by the church. In these science fiction and fantasy stories, the deep narrative is about the way in which an overarching purpose for the universe is being worked out over countless ages through the deeds of creatures both great and small.

Surprisingly to some, but not to this avid reader, there is much work done on the topic of science fiction, fantasy, heroes and superheroes, and how that intersects with religious faith. *Finding God in the Graffiti, Empowering Teenagers through Stories* by Frank Rogers Jr. contributes greatly to the conversation. Rogers says that “personal identity is narratively constructed. The power of narrative in teaching and ministry is not that we all love a good story; it’s that we all are a good story. Narrative is the form through which we constellate our experience into meaningful patterns.”¹ In other words, story and narrative provide a means of shaping personal identity for the young person.

Rogers writes that our core life narrative is how we understand our own identity, and that our identity can change, or be transformed, as we reflect critically on our story and tell it differently. There are many competing narratives in our culture today that inform our personal narratives. Some of those narratives induce fear, doubt, and confusion. Some of those narratives induce prejudice, injustice, and abuse of power. But it is in the biblical narrative where humans find their life’s meaning and find their way back home. In the church, preaching is an opportunity for people to hear that the dystopian and eucatastrophic stories they read or watch are a way to work out the big questions of God’s relationship with humanity. Transformation and empowerment appear quite regularly in the characters that populate science fiction and fantasy.

In *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture*, Paul S. Fiddes discusses the relationship between spiritual content and religious form in fiction. He asserts that “new

¹ Frank Rogers, *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories*, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 56.

possibilities are disclosed in the world of the text which are not confined to the limits of the present.”²

Dystopian and eucatastrophic otherworld-building allows time and space for testing out in the present an identity that includes spiritual content. *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture* is a collection of essays by novelists writing about their craft and their context. In the introduction to these essays, the editor compiles reflections and comments on the essays themselves. The discussion centers around whether secular fiction (as different from Christian fiction) is a suitable vehicle of spiritual experience and truth. The question that the editor proposes is whether secular fiction, while not intentionally written to inspire transformation, can indeed do so. The writers of the essays have differing views on this point.

One author in particular, Sara Maitland, argues that our culture has lost the ability “to use myth or to see things in multifaceted ways . . . the reader can hardly insert experiences of the divine Other into contemporary novels.”³ I disagree with Sara Maitland. This is where the importance of fiction—particularly dystopian and eucatastrophic stories—as a conversation partner with scripture, can bear fruit. These are stories that rely on the readers knowledge of myth and the hero’s journey. These are stories that rely on curiosity and imagination. And these are stories that are giving people a place to live in the present as well as creating a new future. Putting all of that in conversation with scripture, particularly end-times scripture, can be a very dynamic way

² Paul S. Fiddes, ed., *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture*, Religion, Culture and Society (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 8.

³ Fiddes, 9.

to stimulate the imagination and preach into a cultural reality that makes sense of these scriptures. People of all ages are reading dystopian and eucatastrophic stories, stories that ask and answer important questions: How do humans fit into this world? What will happen if humans continue to mistreat each other and mistreat this earth? What would life look like if it all started over, or was created by a maleficent creator rather than a benevolent creator? These questions are no different than the questions humanity has always been asking, but as fewer people are reading or hearing scripture, more people are answering them in a void. And as scripture is the narrative by which one identifies oneself as a beloved creature made in God's image, a conversation with dystopian and eucatastrophic narrative can encourage the reader to imagine the possibility of transformation and even inspire transformation.

In *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, Gabriel McKee writes, "Science fiction/fantasy can fill a spiritual void, leaving behind an abiding faith in something greater."⁴ McKee informs this conversation by suggesting that science fiction itself is a form of faith, even a form of mysticism, that seeks to help us understand not only who we are but who we will become. As the Bible is the narrative that forms and informs and transforms life, works of science fiction/fantasy are narratives that invite the reader into an otherworld that cracks open the imagination in ways that allow the head and the heart to consider the transforming mystery of the Creator God. The purpose of science fiction, or speculative fiction as McKee calls it, is to change our world. The creation of imaginary

⁴ Gabriel McKee, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From The Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xii.

futures becomes the ongoing creation of the real future. This activity is inherently spiritual.

And finally, *Holy Sci-Fi!* by Paul J. Nahin argues that the otherworld-building in science fiction is an ideal form to deal with religious themes. The ideas introduced in science fiction—for example, the future of humankind, the ethical implications of science, or the nature of evil—raise up questions and ideas to be explored, which are not necessarily constrained by the laws and rules by which humankind orders itself. But Nahin also points out that “SF writers have a thoroughly imaginative mindset and so many of their religious tales snuggle up pretty close to what some—usually devout Christians—consider impropriety.”⁵ A robust imagination coupled with an imaginative narrative, may be the very vehicle by which a young person, or any person reading young adult science fiction/fantasy, come to identify their own life narrative and discover that they indeed are a beloved child of a Creator God.

The remainder of this work focuses on the chosen works of science fiction/fantasy and traces four major themes that arise out of scripture, particularly apocalypse and revelation, as this is often the otherworld-building of dystopia. In addition, it shows the possibility of incorporating these themes in preaching as a conversation partner. Those four categories are, prophecy, sin/evil/repentance, resistance, and the Great Battle warrior Christ/slain Lamb.

⁵ Paul J. Nahin, *Holy Sci-Fi!: Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect*, (New York: Springer, 2014), 26.

CHAPTER 5

MAKING CONNECTIONS—WHERE IS THE HOPE?

This conversation continues with an acknowledgment to Charles Bartow who has taught us that the universe is God’s self-expression, God’s speech act. With that, all narrative, and all human expression for that matter, reveals something about who God is or isn’t. There is much to be said about who God is or isn’t, especially in the world-building of dystopias, and eucatastrophic stories—otherworld stories with an intentionally redemptive resolution. This opinion is based on the belief that God’s final purpose is to bring all of creation to Godself. The pain and the suffering of the story are not where the story ends but are where the conversation about God and God’s love for creation begins. These are stories that give us a way through God’s doorway to see and hear in some imaginative and creative way something about God’s activity in our lives. And these are stories that point to and reveal humanity’s need to lie down and let go of the need to control and to have power over people. Madeleine L’Engle has said in one of her works of nonfiction, *A Circle of Quiet*, “It is through the world of the imagination which takes us beyond the restrictions of provable fact, that we touch the hem of truth.”¹ When considering how to preach the truth of scripture, particularly those stories of end-times that cause us to stretch our imaginations further than they are used to going, using

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972), 93.

the genre of dystopia and eucatastrophe as a conversation partner can help our listeners identify how God works in their lives and find a way to hope in a dark time.

The Hunger Games Trilogy

Katniss is the hero of this dystopian tale of power, enslavement, oppression, voyeurism, and empire. The world that is built in this story exists in the ruins of a place once known as North America. It is the nation of Panem, a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. The Capitol is harsh and cruel and keeps the districts in line by forcing them all to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate in the annual Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live TV. The people of District 12 are starving; the rations they get are inadequate and barely edible. Katniss learned early from her father how to breach the fence that keeps them captive, hunt with a bow and arrow, and collect greens and berries to supplement her family's food.

Katniss is the tribute² from District 12, the furthest outlying district as far as she knows. Katniss's younger sister was actually the tribute chosen by lottery, but Katniss put herself in the place of her sister, surely to die. The other tribute is Peeta, the son of the bread baker. Katniss is sure that, when she was younger, it was bread from his father's bakery, purposefully burnt and thrown out in the trash for her to find, that saved her and her family.

² Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 1st ed (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008). The means by which the Capitol keeps the citizens of Panem under their control is by holding the Hunger Games each year. A tribute is the child who is chosen at the reaping. A tribute is between twelve and eighteen years of age. At the reaping, there is one boy and one girl chosen as tributes by pulling the name out of a glass ball. At the conclusion of the reaping, the boy and the girl say goodbyes to their family and friends and are transported to the Capitol to be prepared for the Hunger Games.

Katniss and Peeta are whisked away to the Capitol, to be shaped into tributes that could garner support when tossed into the arena to battle the tributes from the other districts to the death. But Katniss begins to realize that to save herself—her real self, not just her life and Peeta’s—she must resist the evilness of those who devise the game, and she must resist the power of the empire of Panem. This is the evil that dehumanizes: evil that is voyeuristic and that revels in the meanness and violence of people. In the resistance, she and Peeta begin to shape a new world in which the powerless are empowered and the hungry are fed. Katniss and Peeta inaugurate a new beginning that raises up the lowly and gives hope in a very dark world.

This is a story that reveals humanity at its very worst, and it is a judgment on a government that actively abuses its people in order to keep power, a government that rounds people up and keeps them behind deadly fences, a government that chooses its youth to go fight and kill. But the oppressed characters in the Districts dream about humanity as it may be, definitely not perfect, but truly more kind and real. The author has built a world that raises the question of how people can so easily disregard human life. And in that disregard for human life, in that void of not respecting the dignity of every human being, humanity descends into violence and barbarity. It is not unlike the stories from history of gladiators in the arena, and it is not unlike the stories from John’s visions in Revelation of terror and tribulation. And yet, what John’s Revelation shows us is also redemption and transformation. Jesus, as warrior king and as the slain Lamb, brings new life and hope to dwell with humanity. *The Hunger Games* is brutal and violent, and yet, in conversation with scripture, can help us see and understand that same brutality and

persecution that fills Revelation, as well as passages in Matthew that point to the end of all things.

The Hunger Games is prophetic in the sense that the story pulls back the curtain, revealing the effects of oppression, dominance, and evil. The prophetic nature of this story calls readers to examine the reality of empire, and at the very least model a different way, a way of compassion and advocacy. The meta-narrative shows the oppressive power of the Capitol, akin to empire, holding its citizens in bondage with the threat and reality of hunger, degradation, and death. The yearly spectacle that makes that real is the reaping immediately preceding the Hunger Games. At the reaping, an innocent child is randomly chosen as a tribute to the Capitol, most assuredly to die in the arena to appease the power and thirst for blood of those who do not have to think about where their next meal will come from. Additionally, it reveals the complicity and shallowness of the audience. This crowd that gathers to watch the spectacle of violence and innocence lost is as guilty and in need of repentance as the powerful President and underlings of the Capitol. The story acts as prophet to call the reader to see more clearly the ways in which power corrupts, and how it is often the innocents who suffer. In conversation with scripture, the story offers the possibility of opening up an understanding of biblical prophecy that calls the listeners to a different way, the way of compassion and mercy. The Preacher calls listeners to hear scripture in a new way, a way that will fire up a passion for Jesus in the listener and lay the groundwork for transformation. *The Hunger Games* can call people to turn around, to repent, and its voice in concert with scripture is a prophetic call to change.

Sin and evil are represented by the lack of any human decency or compassion by those in power in the Capitol, as well as by the decadence of the Capitol's elite. It is

mind-boggling that in this story, few are shocked by how normal it is to put children into an arena to kill one another. Before their debut in the arena, they are extravagantly dressed and made up in preparation for riding on display through the Capitol where a marker of the Capitol elite is the alteration of the body—for example, surgically reshaping ears and adding whiskers and a tail to look like a cat. It is not merely these outrageous alterations of the body that are under judgment; it is in normalizing outrageous and depraved behavior. It is a slippery slope when capturing and caging of children becomes normal, when alteration of the human body becomes normal. In the conversation with and about sin and evil and the need for repentance, it is the slippery slope and seduction of corrupting power that becomes normal in the Hunger Games. As human history is told, each time a person or government begins to normalize outrageous and repugnant behavior, the call to turn around and repent, to change the direction, becomes more urgent. The book of Revelation is an urgent call to change, a warning of judgment that, in conversation with this dystopian world-building, may serve to help listeners to not accept as normal governments and people in power who oppress and degrade any of God's creation. Preaching on the difficult topic of power is hard; however, showing people what that looks like using this story of dystopian world-building in conversation with scripture provides an opportunity to help the listener to imagine a world in which power corrupts in ways that are not so different from our own.

If Revelation is taken seriously, as Craig Koester would have us do, as a book of resistance that inspired a people to hold on to hope in times of persecution, then Revelation's prophecy may be twofold. First, it shows what happens to an empire, made known as beasts and harlot, when it holds its people prisoner. That should be enough to

warn any aspiring empire to benevolence. Secondly, it is a book of hope whereby the slain Lamb dwells with creation calling all to itself. The beast that is the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* does not repent. The killing field in the arena of *The Hunger Games* is as vicious and brutal as the depiction of persecution and empire in the book of Revelation. Katniss is the warrior Christ figure in this story. She fights for the lives of the people she loves, she is not a stranger but their champion. Koester writes,

When Christ appears as a rider on a white horse, readers quickly realize that this figure is no stranger but one whom they already know and who already walks among them . . . The vision showed that Christ was already present with his followers, for he walked among the golden lampstands that represented the congregations.³

Katniss is the one who put her life down for those she loves, the one who resists vengeance and retribution and instead fights for something better. She returns home to dwell in her home district with her kin and brings new life with her. As the arc of the dystopian story before us reaches its conclusion, Katniss brings hope to her people.

The first glimpse of resistance is that Katniss puts herself in her younger sister's place. And in so doing, assures, for all intents and purposes, her own death. She gives her own life for that of her sister. This ultimate act of love and service becomes the reason Katniss eventually stays alive in the melee of the arena. She begins to understand her own worth and is not willing to bow down to the oppression and persecution of the Capitol. She resists. Her act of resistance, in partnership with Peeta, spreads into the districts, and is the beginning of the undoing of this particular empire. It is also, however, the act by which she and Peeta were marked as agitators and hunted down. It is reminiscent of Jesus

³ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 172.

turning the tables in the temple. This act of defiance resists Roman rule and puts Jesus completely at odds with those who hold power, Roman and Jewish alike. Jesus eats with sinners and women, overturning law and embodying gospel. Katniss's first act of resistance is to clothe the friend she made in the arena, Rue, at her death, with a pure pall of flower petals, a sure sign of resistance and love.⁴ At the conclusion of the games, both Katniss and Peeta show the power of the Capitol what resistance really looks like. Rather than bowing to the manipulation and coercion of a rule change,⁵ a rule that first allowed for just one tribute left standing, and then was changed so that there will be two left standing, and then changed to one again, Katniss and Peeta, in full view of the voyeuristic television audience waiting with bated breath and wild anticipation for one of them to die, were prepared to ingest poisonous berries so they both would die and therefore foil the games, the Gamemakers, and the Capitol. This resistance inspired the people of the Districts to own their own power to rise up and to hope for a new world. John's visions in Revelation inspired a people in a world of oppression to live in the present reality of resurrection and the yet to come reality of fulfillment. John's visions call a people to walk in expectation at the fulfillment of all things, when God will dwell with God's people.

But in the in-between time, the time after resurrection and ascension and before the fulfillment of all things, in this present reality it is the time for resistance; it is the time for loving one another in the face of hate, violence, and death. These are the times of

⁴ Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 237.

⁵ Collins, *The Hunger Games*. The rules of The Hunger Games were not written or agreed to. They were created by the Gamemakers, and subject to the whim and will of the Gamemakers at any time. In mid-game, the Gamemakers decided that two should survive, effectively creating a partnership between Katniss and Peeta that the voyeuristic audience was hungry for. Just as Katniss and Peeta were the last tributes standing, the Gamemakers announced that only one could win, therefore one must kill the other.

dystopian storytelling. In *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, the time between the arising that Katniss and Peeta inaugurate and the resolution in *Mockingjay* is a time of violence. Found in the sights and sounds of the Capitol and outrageous alterations of the body and immorality that knows no bounds, there is a festering sore the people don't even know they are participating in. Government that should take care of its people has turned from the people for whom it should care and put on parade a caricature of humanity. The sin and evil is so broad and so deep that repentance, turning away from that evil, takes the overturning of the entire world as it is known. And the sin and evil in this world-building is a government not caring for the poor, the weak, and the hungry. The sin and evil in this world is the forgetfulness that love is the most powerful integrating force in any world.

This story spans three novels, *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*,⁶ and *Mockingjay*,⁷ with the trilogy as a whole referred to as *The Hunger Games*. At the end of the entire story, there is hope and new life. The people of Panem and District 12 are not rescued from the scars perpetrated by the Capitol on the land and the people. But they live in hope. After all of the violence, after all of the devastation, the hope and new life are in the healing power of the baked bread, that bread that saved Katniss's life as a child, now baked again by Peeta, broken and eaten. In that bread, they find realness, they find themselves. In that bread, their broken and scarred selves are put back together again, and a new love and new life makes its home with them. The Lamb that is slain is resurrected and ascends to the Creator God. In Revelation 21:3, "God dwells with them, they will be

⁶ Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 1st ed, The Hunger Games Trilogy, bk. 2 (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009).

⁷ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*, 1st ed, The Hunger Games, #3 (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010).

his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes” (NRSV). New life arises out of the ashes as the dandelions and other flowers bloom. In the midst of their new world rising, Katniss and Peeta make a book of memories in which they find peace and hope for their children’s future, if not their own. Katniss and Peeta battle their own demons in ways that transform and empower them to live lives worthy of all those other tributes who fought and died. There is an aspect of a relationship in something bigger than themselves, a communion of not so much saints, if you will, but with all those who went before them hoping for something more.

Divergent, Insurgent, Allegiant

Divergent, Insurgent, and Allegiant, by Veronica Roth, tell the story of a sixteen-year-old girl, born Beatrice Prior. Beatrice lives in a dystopian Chicago, in a society in which a committee of leaders provides for its citizens, who are neatly divided into five factions: Amity, Erudite, Dauntless, Candor, and Abnegation. Raised in her selfless birth faction, Abnegation, Beatrice struggles with this identity.⁸ Every time she looks at herself in the mirror, which she is only allowed to do on haircut day; when she struggles to give up her seat on the bus, which she should do; when she sees others of her faction being selfless, which is so hard for her to do; she realizes that when it comes time for the day she is to choose a faction for herself, she cannot choose Abnegation.

The most important thing in her life and in the life of this remnant of people, is community. Beatrice says, “My mother told me once that we can’t survive alone, but

⁸ Veronica Roth, *Divergent* (New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2011). There are five factions: Amity, the kind; Erudite, the intelligent; Dauntless, the brave; Candor, the honest; and Abnegation, the selfless.

even if we could, we wouldn't want to. Without factions, we have no purpose and no reason to live."⁹ She is afraid that choosing outside of her faction or not choosing at all will render her factionless, without community, all alone. "And to live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to be divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community."¹⁰

Each sixteen-year-old takes an aptitude test to determine which faction they are suited for.¹¹ They are free to stay in the faction into which they have been born or choose the faction to which the test reveals they are most suited. Beatrice has a fearful surprise with the results of her aptitude test. She learns that there is no single faction into which she fits; she learns that she is Divergent. When the day of the choosing arrives, Beatrice chooses Dauntless over her faction of birth and family, Abnegation. Not only does she permanently leave her family, her mother, her father, and her brother, she has chosen the Dauntless, who are not just brave but reckless, violent, and thrill seekers as well. All of the sixteen-year-olds are ushered out with a hasty good-bye, and they join their new factions as transfers, immediately ushered into training to either pass or fail. Failure leaves them factionless, separated and alone.

The Dauntless ride the trains, jumping on and jumping off with no slowing down. Beatrice survives her first jumping on and jumping off, and then must jump down into an

⁹ Roth, 20.

¹⁰ Roth, 20.

¹¹ Roth, *Divergent*. The faction system is meant to maintain peace in this futuristic society, and it persists because they are afraid of what might happen if it didn't. The aptitude test is a drug-induced virtual reality session that enables the test administrator to measure responses to specific stimuli, thereby determining which of the five factions best suits the individual.

unknown building with an unknown bottom. As she is helped off of the net when it catches her after she has successfully jumped, she is asked her name. Beatrice shakes off the old identity of Abnegation, and takes on the new identity of Dauntless, as Tris.

Tris trains as Dauntless, she hardens her body and her mind. The deuteragonist in the stories is Four, whose birth name was Tobias, and who was also Abnegation before becoming Dauntless. Tris and Four partner throughout the entire arc of the original trilogy, through *Divergent*, *Insurgent*, and *Allegiant*, in their efforts to resist the power of this punishing empire. This empire, supposedly a grand social engineering experiment trying to achieve peace, to free people by enabling them to live lives that are fully and completely alive in their own giftedness, but which is slowly revealed to be another way to hold people in bondage. Throughout the arc of the story, it becomes apparent that those in power are withholding information that would reveal what is beyond the chain-link fence that surrounds their settlement, and leads to the question, is there more to this life than what is seen?

This is a story that reveals humanity struggling to live in peace despite the chaos that now forms their lives, but where the means to that end enslaves and oppresses. The story operates as prophecy in the sense that it calls humanity to change, to turn around and turn outside of oneself and do something differently, lovingly, and compassionately, through self-sacrifice. But this story shows what the world looks like when those in power withhold the truth and information needed for choice and freedom. And this story predicts a dire future ruled by fear and division with the constant threat of disintegration without community. This is world-building that presents the muddiness and messiness of life and relationship. There is no black versus white, good versus bad, nature versus

nurture, the few versus the many, selfish versus selfless, knowledge versus truth, or action versus pacifism. It is a world in which a moral choice for good is never easy or even clear. Every virtue can be inverted into a vice; bravery can give way to aggression; intelligence can become calculating and manipulative. Even love of peace can become passivity. The search for truth that the characters in this story embark upon challenges each reader to search for truth themselves, understanding that truth is not easy or clear but, more often than not, difficult and muddy.

As a conversation partner with scripture, the difficult and muddy aspect of humanity elucidated in this story is very valuable. Sin is a slippery slope; evil is a seduction. Sometimes people approach scripture looking for some very clear answers and, in doing so, misunderstand the nature of gospel, the good news. Tris helps us to experience the disquiet and chaos of moral choice. What is right and good is not always immediately apparent, or ever apparent. Tris shows us that one may be a hero and, at the very same time, be flawed and filled with doubt.

Throughout the arc of the *Divergent* stories, the reader is challenged to think about community and relationship. Scripture and experience show us that God is the integrating force of the universe. It is God who puts us back together when we fall apart, who heals us when we are broken, and who brings life out of death. And it is God who overflows the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to include all of humanity and all of creation in relationship.

Therefore, community in God is about relationship. The world-building in the *Divergent* stories presents community in a way that is attractive and at the same time repressive. It sounds good, this faction, this chosen community, where faction is

prioritized before blood. And this is the slippery slope and the prophetic call; it is good to live in community, and it is good to find camaraderie and friendship with like-minded and like-gifted people. But in a society in which identifying giftedness is a way to control rather than empower people, and to create fear of the other who is different, the trajectory in this story becomes dark and violent. This is one of the ways that this dystopian story serves as prophecy and speaks to us as oppressor and oppressed alike. It is in being Divergent, embodying all of these defined categories and being a complete person, that relationship and wholeness and purpose for living emerge. The fear that those in power have for those who are Divergent is rooted in the inability to control them. Persecution of those who are forging a new way, a new life, a new society, is ever present.

Sin and evil, repentance and forgiveness, play a part in the Divergent dystopia. In the training to be Dauntless, each candidate must navigate their fear landscape. The Erudite, the scientists and thinkers, have developed an injection, similar to that which tests for faction, that creates an interior experience incorporating all one's fears. Each candidate must work through this hallucination that presents each fear. Again, in this world-building, this experience presents both the positive and the negative. In this story, conquering one's fear is about embracing, encountering, and transforming fear into the strength that may lead to forgiveness of self and others and, eventually, to healing. Facing fear is brave, as the Dauntless are brave. However, it is in the interior battle, for our heroes especially, where evil must be banished. And it is in the discovery of their own weakness and strength, that they find the ability to respond to the evil that is perpetrated on them and their people. With the facing of fear and the evil that inflicts it, vulnerability, and then forgiveness of self follows. However, none of this is rosy or easy. Forgiveness

of self and forgiveness of those who perpetrate evil is a long and rocky path. And its conclusion does not result in a peaceful solution.

In the Revelation of John, persecution takes the form of beasts and fiery pits. In this dystopian otherworld-building, persecution is in the form of truth serums and control tactics that blur truths and untruths. The beast is the evil that executes judgment for the purposes of division and control. The arc of this trilogy of stories is a judgment on all the isms that are present in our world today and throughout history, including racism, sexism, and genderism. When faction ceases, when the barriers are broken down, humanity begins to live God's dream of kingdom life.

Our heroes resist these powers of evil in fits and starts, in small successes and failures, and it is a violent fight. It is so tempting to believe that humanity can achieve peace through nonviolence, and that is always the hope. But in this dystopia, fighting for peace involves violence. In our own time and place, resistance to persecution, resistance to a repressive regime, resistance to a government that only has power and money as its goal can be nonviolent on the part of the resisters, but it always ends up violent on the part of the oppressors.

The last battle in this trilogy brings Tris to her sacrifice. Tris returns in her mind to a conversation she had with Tobias: "The Abnegation say you should only let someone sacrifice himself for you if it's the ultimate way for them to show they love you."¹² In this dystopian tale, the warrior Tris becomes the lamb who is slain. She is the one who makes the sacrifice out of love. This is so important to the conversation between scripture and

¹² Véronica Roth, *Divergent. Allegiant 3 3* (New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2013), 448.

this particular world-building because when preaching hard scripture like Revelation, it is hard to know what love looks like. Tris's sacrifice helps to show what God's love in Jesus looks like. Love is what brings Jesus to the cross. Sometimes God gets so big and far away that God's immanence is lost to God's omnipotence. Love is what will bring humanity to its conclusion and end-time, unless humanity destroys itself first, and that is the warning. This is true for all populations of people, not just youth and young adults. With these stories there is a place to identify and talk about the work that Jesus does on the cross.

In this *Divergent* dystopia, there is a picture of evil drawn, and it is division, fragmentation, oppression, persecution, and violence. But there is also a picture of love shown in relationship, forgiveness, and sacrifice for others. Humanity has agency in its resistance to oppression, and that agency is found in community and in love. Hope in this story is found in sacrificial love, the giving of oneself for the love of the other. It is the hope that is found in Christ, who is the Lamb that is slain, the one through whom peace and union with God flows.

A Wrinkle in Time

Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* is not so much dystopia as it is eucatastrophe. At this point, it is good to revisit Tolkien's definition of eucatastrophe as "the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears, produced by a sudden glimpse of Truth."

A Wrinkle in Time is a story that takes place in Kairos (God's time), rather than Chronos (people's time). In this story, Meg, our hero, is indeed the square peg in a world with only round holes. Meg's father is a physicist who works for a top-secret government

agency on experiments with travel through space-time in the fifth dimension. In trying to tesser to Mars, which is to travel through a *tesseract* or wrinkle in time, he is captured and imprisoned on the dark planet of Camazotz. Meg's mother is a microbiologist. It is this pedigree, and Meg's feeling totally out of whack with the rest of her contemporaries, that causes Meg to doubt herself and her own abilities. Meg has three younger brothers. The youngest, Charles Wallace, is gifted in a multitude of ways but lacks social skills. Meg is befriended by Calvin, who is popular and cool at school. But at home, it is another story. His parents are harsh, and his brothers and sisters are unkind. Upon arriving at the Murrays' home, Calvin feels like he has come home.

The children are met by Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which. These three are ethereal creatures who seem to know the particularities of Mr. Murry's disappearance, and they accompany the children on a mission to find him. They tesser to the dark planet of Camazotz. On the way there, they stop off to meet the Happy Medium, who shows them their own planet, earth. Meg observes that "the outlines of this planet were not clean and clear. It seemed to be covered with a smoky haze. Through the haze Meg thought she could make out the familiar outlines of continents like pictures in her Social Studies books."¹³

A conversation about the planet and what is surrounding it ensues: the children want to know what this is. Mrs. Which, who speaks in an ethereal way, answers, "Itt iss Eevill. Itt iss thee Ppowers of Ddarrkkness!"¹⁴ They call it the Thing. The Mrs. W's tell the children that there have been fighters throughout earth's history. Mrs. Who quotes

¹³ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Ariel Books, 1962), 87.

¹⁴ L'Engle, 88.

“And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.” The fighters include Jesus, and all the great artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Bach, and Pasteur and Madame Curie and Einstein. Schweitzer and Gandhi and Buddha and Beethoven and Rembrandt and St. Francis. Euclid and Copernicus.

The Happy Medium then shows them a place in the stars where there are no shadows, no fear. Only the stars and the clear darkness of space that was quite different from the fearful darkness of the Thing. When the children ask what happened, “It was a star,” Mrs. Whatsit said sadly. “A star giving up its life in battle with the Thing. It won, oh, yes, my children, it won. But it lost its life in the winning.”¹⁵ Self-sacrifice becomes that which saves the stars, the angels, and Meg.

In this story, prophecy serves as warning. Humanity is warned that when people no longer immerse themselves in the arts, or the sciences, or music, when humanity chooses to hate rather than love, to take power rather than empower, darkness overcomes the light, hopelessness takes up residence. Sin and evil are a tangible pall on the earth and other planets, such as Camazotz, and the only way sin and evil are banished is by self-sacrificing love. The children discover that the Mrs. W’s are stars who have sacrificed that glorious existence for the love of humanity. Their sacrifice gives rise to courage in the children, so that they may go forward to do what they are called to do.

When Meg, and Calvin, and Charles Wallace reach Camazotz, they encounter a world in which the greatest good is sameness. Sameness erases all diversity, creativity, joy, and hope, planting fear of punishment and death into the citizens of Camazotz. Sameness wipes out art, and music, and science, solidifying the darkness.

¹⁵ L’Engle, 92.

Meg and Calvin and Charles Wallace find the power that is holding all of the people hostage at the CENTRAL Central Intelligence Building, and it is IT. IT holds the people hostage by convincing them that IT is benevolent. IT says to them,

“Now my dears,” the words continued, “I shall of course have no need of recourse to violence, but I thought perhaps it would save you pain if I showed you at once that it would do you no good to try to oppose me. You see, what you will soon realize is that there is no need to fight me. Not only is there no need, but you will not have the slightest desire to do so. For why should you wish to fight someone who is here only to save you pain and trouble? For you, as well as for the rest of all the happy, useful people on the planet, *I*, in my own strength, am willing to assume all the pain all the responsibility, all the burdens of thought and decision.”¹⁶

This evil IT uses seduction and temptation and even what looks like kindness, and it is the youngest and most vulnerable of the children, Charles Wallace, who falls into IT’s spell. This is exactly what evil does, it uses seduction and temptation. Gospel writers Matthew and Luke show the devil in the wilderness using seduction to try to lure Jesus into using his power to control rather than using his power to love. The devil tries to seduce Jesus with a story of rightness and goodness, showing Jesus all that could be accomplished if Jesus would succumb to the seduction of power and control. Craig Koester writes, “Revelation regards evil as a kind of cancer that has invaded God’s world.”¹⁷ The character IT is fashioned after this kind of cancerous evil. Koester continues,

Cancer cells are malignant, and as they grow, they destroy the healthy tissue around them. As the disease spreads, life is diminished as more healthy tissue is destroyed, and if the cancer is left unchecked, death will result. Accordingly, treating the disease means destroying the malignant cells that destroy life—and the goal is that life might thrive. This is the drama that unfolds on a cosmic scale in the last half of Revelation, where the Creator and his allies set out with the goal

¹⁶ L’Engle, 121.

¹⁷ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 116.

of “destroying those who destroy the earth” (11:18), so that the victory will be life for the world.¹⁸

IT is the cancerous evil that destroys life. And Meg, Calvin, and eventually Mr. Murry, will partner with the good and the light, to overcome that which controls and destroys the earth and all of creation.

It falls to Meg to resist IT, to resist the evil that seduces and absorbs Charles Wallace into it. After freeing her father, using the gift of sight she was given by Mrs. Who, Meg needs to resist the power and evil of IT. Meg is nearly destroyed herself as she saves her father and almost loses Charles Wallace. Meg, her father, and Calvin tesser back to a healing planet. There, just as Jesus retreats to a place by himself to pray and is given the strength to continue his mission, Meg finds the healing she needs to return to Camazotz and IT to free her brother.

Meg’s healing is important to consider as this conversation continues. Her healing points to new life over and against every indication of darkness and death. In a world dominated by hate, it is love that heals her. The being that is the channel of Meg’s healing is Aunt Beast. Aunt Beast is not the beast’s name, but Meg needs to call her something, and names her Aunt Beast because the “gray body was covered with the softest, most delicate fur imaginable.”¹⁹ Meg experiences from Aunt Beast a warmth and light, even though the beasts themselves did not see. Aunt Beast then feeds Meg, who hasn’t eaten for quite some time, and then sings to Meg, music without words but “more

¹⁸ Koester, 116.

¹⁹ L’Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, 179.

tangible than form or sight.”²⁰ Meg’s healing is brought about by the unconditional love that she is shown, a love that is sealed in a meal, a love that is also fighting against the darkness that engulfs this world.

The imagery and feeling of this healing story elicit the very person and mission of Jesus, both in gospel every time Jesus gathers people and feeds them and in Revelation 22 where it is written, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life” (NRSV). The intersection of this eucatastrophe and scripture shows clearly that it is Love. The Love that laid down its life for the beloved, the Love that gives up all power for the beloved, is the very Love that is new life, and makes it possible for humanity to live their new life in the present as well as in the end of times.

After Meg is healed, and as she returns to Camazotz, she hears Mrs. Which’s unforgettable voice saying, “I hhave nnott ggivenn yyou mmyy ggiffitt. Yyou hhave ssomethinnngg that ITT hhas nnott. Thiss ssomethinnngg iss yyourr only weapon. Bbutt yyou mmusstt ffinndd itt fforr yyourrselfff.”²¹

As Meg approaches IT, who has Charles Wallace under IT’s control, Meg wonders what it is that she has that IT does not. As she contemplates the predicament, she continues to grow in hatred and anger and feels herself being pulled into IT and almost destroyed. And then she realizes what she has that IT has not, Love. This scene points the reader to the work Jesus does on the cross. Many listeners, in this preacher’s experience,

²⁰ L’Engle, 185.

²¹ L’Engle, 203.

are not well informed about Jesus on the cross. Many accept a belief that it was necessary for Jesus to die on the cross, or that God needed Jesus to die on the cross. These doctrines are problematic when it is the God of love that is the Creator of all. Revelation 21:3 bears that out. “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples” (NRSV).

The Last Battle in *A Wrinkle in Time* is a battle that wages Love against denial. It is not just evil or hate, not even persecution, but the denial of the beauty and wonderment of humanity. In this Last Battle, Meg’s strength, her gift, her warrior, is her ability to lay down her life to love her brother. Charles Wallace and the others on Camazotz are caught in the personality cult of IT that demands sameness over difference, or uniqueness, or diversity. Beauty, music, art, have no place in this sameness. There is no real choice for the people of Camazotz. To give over one’s autonomy is to stay alive. It isn’t really even giving over one’s autonomy as it is being absorbed into power. Meg realizes that Love is the only way this fight will be won, and it may be at the expense of her life, which she willingly offers for the love of her brother. In this conversation between eucatastrophe and scripture, Meg points to the love that brings Jesus to the cross. On the cross, Jesus could be filled with hatred and anger toward his persecutors, toward his murderers, but instead, Jesus loves. And in this moment that Jesus loves, Jesus saves. Jesus’s last battle is to love, to lay down his life for humanity.

The conversation between *A Wrinkle in Time* and scripture, especially when working out what it is that God accomplishes through Jesus on the cross, provides a treasure trove for preaching. Charles Wallace says to Meg, “you saved me.” But it is Love that saves Charles Wallace. As Mr. Murry, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace

return home to Mrs. Murry, the scene plays out as the union of souls with their creator. It is the love of the creator for the creation, and the love of creation for one another that brings new life where there was death, and pain, and sorrow. Creation can't get to new life without first walking the path of pain and sorrow. Hope is found in the gift of love. Joy and sorrow are reconciled.

The Last Battle

The Last Battle is the ultimate story in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The Narnia stories begin with *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and span seven novels, concluding with *The Last Battle*. As the Narnia stories begin, four young English children are sent to the country to stay with an eccentric old friend as the bombing of London in World War II begins. On a rainy day, they explore the big old house in which they are living. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy find a wardrobe in a room in a wing where they are not permitted to be. Lucy first goes into the wardrobe and arrives in the Land of Narnia; the others eventually follow.

All of the stories in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are in Kairos, a time out of earth's time, or God's time, rather than Chronos, chronological time. Rather than a future time, or time travel, this world-building occurs in a parallel time that is experienced more compactly than the time the children left. The four children in Narnia are called the Sons of Adam and the Daughters of Eve, designating them as not from Narnia. In Narnia, they meet Aslan, the great lion. Aslan appears in Narnia as a large lion, both terrifying and equally magnificent and wise. Aslan is very wise, and a powerful force for good, but as Mr. Beaver says, (during those days of Narnia, all the animals were able to talk) Aslan is not a tame lion. Aslan is dangerous, and an unconquerable enemy, to those who would

put selfish desires before good, and Aslan, the creator of all of Narnia, a companion world to earth, is unquestionably good.

Edmund is seduced by the White Witch, and in order to free Edmund, Aslan gives over his own life. The White Witch ties Aslan to the Stone Table, tortures him, mocks him, and kills him. After everyone has left the Stone Table area, Susan and Lucy approach Aslan's body. They untie his bonds; they cry over him and fall asleep next to him. As the light of the morning grows, Susan and Lucy hear a great crack. The Stone Table breaks, and Aslan rises. As the girls give thanks, they wonder how this could be, as the White Witch was sure he was dead. Aslan said,

“Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”²²

No one would mistake this for anything other than an allegory of Jesus's death and resurrection. This begins the benevolent reign of King Peter, Queen Susan, King Edmund, and Queen Lucy over Narnia. They are just and compassionate rulers in Narnia. Aslan restores Narnia to health and quietly slips away. One day when they are out riding, they notice the same lamppost that they had seen on their entry into Narnia, and they return to their own time through the wardrobe—to the very day they had left.

Given that background, our conversation centers in the last book in the Narnia series, *The Last Battle*. It is the last days of Narnia. No longer are King Peter, Queen Susan, King Edmund, and Queen Lucy in Narnia. Much time has passed, and Tirian is

²² C. S. Lewis and Clive Staples Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1. Collier Books ed, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis; Bk. 1 (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 160.

now the king. The story begins with an ape named Shift who has coerced a not very smart donkey named Puzzle to be his slave and to don a lion skin to pose as the great lion Aslan. Darkness and suspicion have descended on the land, and as long as Shift keeps the people and animals in the dark, both literally and figuratively, most believe Puzzle in the lion skin is Aslan. They cannot understand why Aslan is no longer compassionate and wise. Violence and unrest, suspicion and cruelty are carried out on behalf of the lie that this donkey in the lion skin is Aslan. Shift gains power over all the people, including those from the neighboring land of Calormene.

The last of the Kings of Narnia, King Tirian, and his dearest friend, Jewel the Unicorn—who had fought together in preceding wars—have heard that the great lion Aslan has returned to Narnia, and they cannot believe the stories about persecution and people and animals going to war and being killed. King Tirian and Jewel begin to make their way to the place where Aslan has been reported to be seen, not knowing that this is not Aslan, but a ruse put on by Shift. Their friend Roonwit the Centaur conveyed his reading of the stars: that the death and destruction that was occurring would continue. On their way to the place to find out what was happening, King Tirian and Jewel were attacked and tied to a tree and left to die. As the life was seeping out of King Tirian he called upon all the past kings and queens, all those who had fought to preserve Narnia, what we may call the communion of saints. And in response to the calling, Eustace and Jill, two children from what would be considered our world who had traveled to Narnia previously, appeared and freed the king. Eustace and Jill, King Tirian and Jewel traveled to the place where Shift was keeping the disguised Puzzle captive. As the four made the

journey together, there was much remembering and storytelling about the country and beings of Narnia.

Calormene is a country to the west of Narnia, and the Calormen worship a god they call Tash. The Narnians were peaceful beings; the Calormen were interested in an empire, wreaking war and destruction. When Roonwit the Centaur is found dead, it is clear that all the worlds are drawing to an end.

The Last Battle is a story about the end of time, a vision of what may happen. In that way it is prophecy, but prophecy of a different sort. *The Last Battle* is a story of the eucatastrophic type—a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears, produced by a sudden glimpse of Truth. The conversation for preaching with *The Last Battle* yields a way into a vision of end-times that is not dark and violent and exclusive but instead is hopeful and inclusive.

Sin and evil are portrayed in terms of seduction. The choice to follow evil Shift, a servant of Tash, is a choice for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, a choice to be on the winner's side while excluding the losers. The evilness of exclusion is a constant theme throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and most especially in *The Last Battle*. Shift also sows seeds of war and violence by convincing Narnians that the god that the Calormenes worship is the only god, again excluding all who do not believe. Tirian and the others commence fighting against the Calormenes in what would be the last battle.

It looked as if the battle was lost for King Tirian. The king of the Calormenes was forcing him into the stable, and the two kings stumbled in. There the king of the Calormenes realized that indeed there was something beyond himself—a higher power, a

god. And the king of the Calormenes who was strong in battle but did not believe in any god, lost all of his bravado and courage.

Tash pounced on the miserable Rishda and tucked him under the upper of his two left arms. But immediately, from behind Tash, strong and calm as the summer sea, a voice said: "Begone, Monster, and take your lawful prey to your own place: in the name of Aslan and Aslan's great Father, the Emperor-over-sea." The hideous creature vanished . . .²³

And in that moment, the vision of the new heaven and the new earth takes flight.

All of the characters who had traveled to Narnia were there except for Queen Susan, who was no longer a friend of Narnia. With the exception of Tirian, Eustace, and Jill who had entered Narnia at the end-time, all had died in a train wreck. At its center this vision of the new and deeper Narnia includes a banquet, and then a clarity of vision and realness.

This vision of what is on the other side of "the door," or what is on the other side of life, is an inclusive vision. All are welcome, but not all come. Aslan says about some humans, "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they can not be taken out."²⁴

And later, in this new Narnia, they encounter a young Calormene of noble birth, to whom the name of Aslan was hateful because he served Tash. Upon meeting Aslan on the other side of the door, the young Calormene "fell at his feet and thought, surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honour) will know that I have served

²³ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 133.

²⁴ Lewis, 148.

Tash all my days and not him . . . But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, Son, thou art welcome.”²⁵

And, the vision of what is on the other side of the “door,” or on the other side of life, is clearly a vision of inclusivity. Both Aslan and Aslan’s great father, the Emperor-over-the-sea, welcome all who have been true, just, and loyal. Implicit in this welcome is repentance, turning away from false gods, turning away from false worship. Time does not matter in the kingdom of Narnia, as time does not matter in the Kingdom of God. Turning to God, receiving Jesus as the Lamb who takes away sin, is in God’s time, not human time.

The battle that was waged by the Calormenes, led by the beast who was Shift, was won by one who was slain and resurrected. And the battle and its aftermath does not stay within ordinary limits of time and space. Narnia becomes brighter, more colorful, more true, and more real. And it is not somewhere else, up in the sky or elsewhere. It is Narnia, a new Narnia, ever more real than the old one. It is a world right out of Revelation.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. An I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1–4 NRSV)

In *The Last Battle*, the otherworld of Narnia presents a way to preach about Revelation and an end-time theology that is not fearful but is real and hopeful. A conversation with *The Last Battle* is a way to understand that God is a God of love and

²⁵ Lewis, 164.

inclusivity. There is no one left behind, but always humanity being prepared for the deep relationship with our Creator God, and the Lamb who was slain, Jesus. Even Susan, in the Narnia stories, was not excluded from the beauty of the other side of the door but was being prepared for another time. The new Narnia is the new heavens and the new earth; it is a more real Narnia, not somewhere else. It is the place where God's dream meets humanity's kenosis, and humanity has agency in that dream, partnering with God for a more real, just, compassionate world.

Warm Bodies

Warm Bodies is a contemporary subset of dystopia: the zombie story. The proliferation of zombie movies, stories, and events suggests something about American culture that reveals a deep fear. Many of the zombie stories are written as postapocalyptic. For example, visions of the future after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and more recent mass shootings and climate change, bring up disturbing realizations about the human capacity for violence. Kelsey Geiser quotes Angela Beccera Vidergar in an article reported in the *Stanford News*: "We no longer necessarily 'imagine the type of positive future that was more prevalent in centuries past, for example, during the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution.'"²⁶

Humanity imagining the future as disintegration of relationship and physicality is the end of times that zombie stories are about. Much of the dystopian otherworld-building, and eucatastrophic storytelling imagines great pain and violence as humanity reaches its end, but zombie stories take that pain and violence one step further, into

²⁶ Kelsey Geiser, "Stanford Scholar Explains Why Zombie Fascination Is Very Much Alive," February 20, 2013, <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/february/why-zombie-fascination-022013.html>.

disintegration and cannibalism. Because zombie stories are an ever-present part of current American culture, the preacher can engage the stories while engaging scripture and, using these categories of prophecy, sin/evil/repentance, resistance, and the Last Battle as categories of hope, can give voice to an end-times narrative that is one of love, not of violence and death. This is what makes these stories an important conversation partner for preaching. Deeply rooted in zombie stories is fear: of death, of powers out of one's control, of the other, and of those who are in control.

The zombie hero, who is designated R, meets up with Julie, who is not a zombie. But rather than doing what zombies do, R befriends Julie. And what we have is a brilliant, poignant, truthful story about disintegration—sin and evil, and repentance, and eventual new life, connection, healing, and wholeness. In this story, a zombie is a human being caught in decay and disintegration. In this story, a zombie is a placeholder for isolation and alienation. A zombie is someone who walks through life without really living, wandering in the wilderness, in exile. But in this zombie story, there is an antidote. The antidote is repentance. The antidote is turning toward the source of love. The antidote is connection and truth. The antidote is for humans to be changed and refined, from the inside out.

The setting for *Warm Bodies* is a broken world. All the humans are living in an athletic arena that is behind a thick wall guarded against the zombies. R lives with other zombies in an abandoned airport. On a feeding expedition to the city, R and his zombie buddies encounter a small group of young people. Julie is one of them. R's impulse is to bring her home and keep her safe from the other zombies. R begins to recognize the life energy that is Julie, and something within him begins to live again. Julie recognizes there

is a change taking place in R. In a conversation between R and his buddy M, about change, R says,

“Maybe the debris of our old lives still shapes us.” M responds, “But we don’t remember those lives. We can’t read our diaries.” R says, “It doesn’t matter. We are where we are, however we got here. What matters is where we go next.”²⁷

As connection and relationship begin to fill R again, his imagination brightens, his vision begins to clear, he begins to feel again, and where he goes next begins to be important. Nerve endings he has not experienced come back; his blood begins to run again. This is not simply boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy’s blood runs hot. The otherworld-building of this story affords a place to ask some deep questions about what it means to be alive for an individual and for a people, and what happens to humanity when human communication devolves into text messages and tweets. The reader wrestles with the nature of sin and evil, repentance, and new life.

What causes zombies is always an important part of any zombie story. As referenced previously, zombies are mostly created by catastrophe, nuclear fallout, and disease. *Warm Bodies* takes us to a new place. A world where human lives are made up of disconnection and disinterest causes zombies, resulting in disintegration of the body, and the mind, and the spirit. The prophetic warning is real. Human interaction and relationship at a profound level is necessary for human life to exist. Human connection and relationship with God is vital for living fully alive. Without it, humans become violent and base creatures who no longer have any moral or ethical values, and then it becomes easy to drop bombs that kill innocent civilians and to ignore climate change that is leading to the loss of many species, both plants and animals. Human connection to one

²⁷ Isaac Marion, *Warm Bodies* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2012), 89.

another and to the sacred and holy is necessary for human life to be lived fully. Without that human connection, disease, disintegration, and decomposition ensue. The evil one in this story is not so much embodied, as disembodied and disseminated. The beast becomes humanity itself—humanity that is decomposing, literally falling apart, because there is no more interaction, no more relationship. In Revelation, the beast is the personification of malevolent power; in *Warm Bodies*, the beast is the power that pulls humans away from one another. It is the breakdown of communication and connection resulting in distrust and hatred of one another.

The sin in this story is not the ugliness of zombies and what they do; the sin is forgetting what humanity is, forgetting who individuals are. Each of the zombies are known only by a letter. Their names, who they are, and who they were connected to has all been forgotten. As R begins the transformation back to human again, as he begins to be connected again, he begins to say yes to life again. R thinks to himself, “. . . we’ll see what happens when we say *yes* while this rigor mortis world screams *no*.”²⁸ R resists the decomposition of the rigor mortis world, and others begin to accompany him on that journey—the very antidote to disintegration. In a conversation between two human characters referring to the very old book *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one character says, “The world that birthed that story is long gone, all its people are dead, but it continues to touch the present and future because someone cared enough about that world to keep it. To put it in words. To remember it.”²⁹

²⁸ Marion, 106.

²⁹ Marion, 140.

Actually, this is the key to the importance of the conversation between these dystopian and eucatastrophic stories and preaching. It is the cultural narratives, the personal narratives, and the biblical narratives that we remember and tell one another that connect us and can possibly give hope in a dark world. When we forget these stories, when we forget who we are and to whom we belong, rigor mortis sets in. Preaching has the power to ignite the imagination in ways that connect people and attach them to the ultimate integrating power, God in our midst.

The Great Battle in this story fought against the skeletons, called “boneys,” is a battle worthy of Revelation. And in the end is the realization that the beast or the skeleton or the zombie is really of humanity’s making. As R says, “I think we crushed ourselves down over the centuries. Buried ourselves under greed and hate and whatever other sins we could find until our souls finally hit the rock bottom of the universe.”³⁰ R found literal new life in connection and in love. He led those like himself to resist the greed and hate that power or apathy rained down on them until their souls hit rock bottom, and the only way out was to be put back together again.

This is a theme reminiscent of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, idolatrous behavior demanded punishment, and so the glory of the Lord departed from Jerusalem. Once the defilement was removed, a new temple would provide the focus for a restored Israel. It is idolatrous behavior that causes disintegration and disconnection in *Warm Bodies*. Humans thinking they are in control, they are godlike, is idolatry, and this has been true since Adam and Eve were in the garden. The particular idolatry added on top of that in *Warm Bodies* is the barrier put between humans causing disconnection. In this modern world, that is

³⁰ Marion, 222.

represented by the lack of conversation, connection, and depth of living due to obsessive and sometimes narcissistic use of social media. *Zombies in Warm Bodies* are placeholders for isolation and alienation. Ezekiel's vision in chapter 37, The Valley of Dry Bones, demonstrates how God, the powerful integrating force in the universe, will always bring the beloved back from oblivion, even if the beloved is the one responsible for running headlong into oblivion in the first place.

God gives a second chance, new life, and resurrection. It is only through love and connection, and the One who calls us into integration, wholeness, and healing, that we can be saved from ourselves and the beasts without and within. It is love that makes us human and it is love that connects us to God. Hope is where God reaches out to humanity to lift us out of our disintegration into wholeness with God and healing with one another.

CHAPTER 6

ADVENT AS THE EXAMPLE

The Revised Common Lectionary doesn't give the preacher many chances to preach apocalyptic and end-times texts. For the purposes of this project, Advent was chosen as an opportunity to focus on end-times and in-between times because the readings and the nature of the liturgical season point us in that direction. The categories found in Koester's work *Revelation and the End of All Things*—prophecy, sin/evil/repentance, resistance, and the Great Battle/the slain Lamb—are fleshed out to form the pattern of this series of Advent sermons. In these sermons there is no dwelling on the details of apocalypse; the brush strokes are mighty wide and broad. However, it is in the transformation that the slain Lamb enacts and embodies where hope, love, and new life prevail. It is the pricking of the imagination, the impetus to delve deeper into the reality of Revelation and apocalypse and end-times that provide the path for these sermons.

Time itself is of major importance during Advent. Our culture hurries us on to the next thing, especially during Advent. There is no encouragement to be in the present; we are always pressing toward the consumer Christmas. To contemplate end-times in our culture is to be fatalistic. Advent is a time to get ready for the new heavens and the new earth that are brought about by the slain Lamb. It is a hopeful vision of new life and new birth.

Dystopian storytelling is useful as a conversation partner for preaching in Advent because these stories offer a vision of time and space that demands that the listener imagine time and space differently than they experience it in ordinary time. As stated previously, Advent time calls the preacher and the listener to try to experience time and space as fluid or stacked or wrinkled, or all time experienced at the same time. The concept of Advent time is difficult for our twenty-first century imaginations to grasp. However, Koester points to John's use of word pictures to describe things that do not neatly fit within the confines of space and time. These dystopian stories in conversation with scripture during Advent help the preacher to speak of time in imaginative ways.

Prophecy was chosen as the theme for preaching on the First Sunday of Advent, Year A. The gospel is Matthew 24:36–44.

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." (NRSV)

This is a problematic passage for listeners who already struggle with what has come to be known as "the rapture," and a problematic passage to preach in a culture that for the most part has rejected "the rapture."

For preaching, focusing the idea of prophecy on the call to change, the call to repentance, offers a way into this passage, and a way to preach about end-times that doesn't leave one wondering if one will be taken or left behind. Indeed, the call to

change, to do something different, is the very thing that deepens the very thing that deepens our relationship with the God who is in our midst in the present, and who is able to change the future. Preaching about prophecy is not a call to a dire future; it is a call to change the dire present so that the future may then be brighter. Being ready, keeping awake, is to not sit still with an already wrapped-up salvation. Being ready, keeping awake, is to partner with God in being the change in the present moment, to affect a future reality.

A Wrinkle in Time is a good conversation partner for understanding prophecy, and the prophetic role. This story shows a world wrapped in darkness. The prophetic call to repentance comes when we question if this is the way it must be. Is this a future that has been determined? The answer, like the answer in Revelation, is no. God's love for humanity is not dependent on humanity. But keeping the light burning does include staying awake to life and all the abundance that God has for humanity. The darkness is the collection of all the lies that are told about human worth and the lies that are told about no need for beauty, art, or music. The darkness is the wrap of power and control that take away human dignity and human agency. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, the antidote to that power and darkness is Meg's ability to Love, and her identification of a Love that is beyond herself. It is this Love that is God with us and God who is to come, the conundrum of Advent, which scatters the darkness and makes people ready to love fiercely. Preaching prophecy as that which is not predetermined but is rather a logical progression if humanity doesn't do something different, in conversation with this particular story about the Love that shines the light in the darkness and dispels the power

that holds people hostage, is a powerful call to being the change we want to be during this in-between time.

Repentance was chosen as the theme for preaching on the Second Sunday of Advent, Year A. The gospel is from Matthew 3:1–12, verses 1 and 2,

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (NRSV)

Repentance means to turn away from that which is killing you and to turn toward God who gives you life. Repentance is the theme that encapsulates *Warm Bodies*. R turns away from that which is literally killing him. He turns away from disintegration, he turns away from alienation and isolation. R realizes that what makes him a zombie is that he and the other zombies, and even the people who are still alive, are not really living.

God’s judgment is a part of a biblical end-times scenario, and judgment in general is part of a dystopian end-times scenario. Judgment is inferred in this passage from Matthew. If you are not the wheat that is gathered into the granary, then you are the chaff that is burnt with unquenchable fire; it is a logical result. The conversation with *Warm Bodies* shows that the result of an unrepentant life is a life that has flatlined, a life that is not really living, a life that probably goes up in flames and ends in ashes. Preaching repentance not as a transaction, but as that which God dreams for us so that we may live fully alive as we wait and prepare while God brings all creation to fulfillment, may be informed by this very graphic image of the walking dead.

Matthew continues with the warning to bear fruit worthy of repentance and encourages his listeners not to rest on their pedigree. As R continues to turn toward love and make connections, the fruit that grows is worthy of repentance. Turning one’s face toward God brings new life, integrated life, whole life. That is what R has discovered.

Turning what is left of his heart toward love results in wholeness and healing. He and the others are saved from the death of living in fear, living disconnected, not living at all. As the zombies are welcomed into the arena that has housed those who were living, the living wonder what to do. Julie's friend Nora says, "Talk to them. I know it's scary at first, but look them in the eyes. Tell them your name and ask them theirs."¹

To tell them your name and ask them theirs is to find connection that is life giving. Turning toward God and finding connection and turning away from disconnection and disintegration is repentance, and it is what humans do in the in-between time, the time after Jesus's resurrection and ascension. It is what humans do while getting ready and staying awake for the end-time, for the fulfillment of all things. In doing so, we come to life; we are healed.

Resistance was chosen as the theme for preaching on the Third Sunday of Advent, Year A. In the midst of the chaotic cacophony that is a cultural Christmas, and the romantic notion of a baby in the manger, Advent is often overlooked as a time out of time and a time of anticipation and expectation for the cosmic coming of the One who draws all creation into unity and fulfillment.

Preaching resistance that would pull people out of a malaise of consumerism and uncaring and into wholeness that includes healing of self and of planet is a mighty call in these modern times. At first blush, preaching resistance may sound like a political move—which it very well may be—but it is also cultural resistance. Koester has called the book of Revelation, the book of resistance. He writes that in the book of Revelation,

¹ Marion, 234.

John is inspiring the followers of Jesus to resist the powers of the empire, which is political and, for those early followers of Jesus, also cultural.

In the gospel that is heard on the Third Sunday of Advent Year A, Matthew 11:2–11, the question of Messiahship is raised by John the Baptist as John wonders if Jesus is really the one. The answer Jesus gives is about himself: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (NRSV).

Preaching resistance in Advent is to remind our listeners about who Jesus was, is, and will be: the Messiah who is unlike the political figure they expected. Jesus is the one who resists the powers that bring chaos, so that the healing and wholeness that is brought about by the Lamb who is slain may prevail. In the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games*, to resist the powers that seek to control is to invite torture and possibly death, not unlike the world in which John was writing. As the entirety of the story arcs to its finish, Katniss’s and Peeta’s resistance of the empire that is the Capitol, results in healing and wholeness for themselves, and that seeps into the remnant of their community.

The Last Battle was chosen as the theme for preaching on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A. Advent is the season of incarnation, and at the same time, Advent gives us a glimpse of the end of times and God’s fulfillment of all things. This presents the preacher with a conundrum. Advent demands the preaching consideration of Kairos, God’s time. Advent demands the preaching consideration of the now and not yet. In the midst of the season of incarnation, the season of new birth, there is also the reality of the end of time, which is a fearful concept for many people.

One of the reasons that the end of time, or the end of life, is so difficult to consider, is because people fear God's judgment. That fear forgets that there is hope as well. Our modern ears hear judgment as punishment rather than warning, the call to do something different, to change our ways because of God's love for us. In addition, when the connection to God is a transaction rather than a relationship, it becomes harder to make room in the present or in whatever happens at the end of time for those who disagree or differ with our particular beliefs. The transaction with God might go like this, "If you (God or Jesus) get me out of this mess I've gotten myself into, then I will be good from here on out, or I will never take your name in vain, or I will never commit adultery again." Or something similar. If we don't uphold our end of the perceived bargain, then God will punish. Another aspect of the bargain is that as long as the rules are followed, the boxes checked, and everything is done right, heaven will be the reward. Hell is for those who don't follow the rules, or don't follow the correct rules.

But Koester offers a way to understand both Revelation's warnings and promises, the warning that disturbs people and the promise that assures people, and that is that the readers persevere in faith. Because even in the last days, God continues to love all of creation. In Revelation, humanity is "subject to judgement when people ally themselves with the beast, so that the opponents of God of every kind must know that their end will be destruction" (19:17-21). Koester continues,

Both visions of the future stand before the readers, warning that there is judgment for all and promising that there is hope for all. Readers can best respond to the contrasting visions by heeding the warnings and by trusting the promises. Those who fall into despair because the warnings are so severe need to hear again the promises of life through the power of the Lamb, while those who fall into complacency because the promises seem so assuring are rightly startled by the warnings concerning God's judgments on sin and evil. Faith, which is the

alternative to despair and to complacency, is the shape that life takes in anticipation of the End.²

We have been trained to be fearful of judgment, fearful of the other, and fearful of what tomorrow brings. We become so fearful that we opt into a transaction with God, rather than a relationship with God. Misunderstanding God as transactional then excludes all who don't meet the requirements of a particular way of believing. For preaching, the conversation with Lewis's *The Last Battle* offers a vision of relationship and inclusivity, and it doesn't deny judgment. Susan, the second of the four children, was not one of those who entered the new Narnia because she had ceased to believe. But the Narnian vision most definitely includes those who believe differently. The Calormene was included in the new Narnia because he did not bow down to the beast who was Shift; his perseverance in faith was recognized. The sermon preached on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A describes this inclusivity in the new heavens and the new earth.

Lastly, *The Last Battle* gives a glimpse of the vision of the new heavens and the new earth. The Unicorn Jewel says,

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!”³

John's vision in Revelation uses word pictures to “describe things that do not neatly fit within the confines of space and time.”⁴ Lewis gives the preacher word pictures that enable a wonderful interplay between John's visions that do not neatly fit and the

² Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 176–177.

³ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 213.

⁴ Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 177.

euclastrophic story of *The Last Battle*. The word pictures of Lewis in conversation with the word pictures of John's visions offer the preacher a way to present an apocalyptic vision that is not fearful but filled with faith born of perseverance and hope, in the beauty of the fulfillment that God promises.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this project is to show that where dystopian and eucatastrophic world-building and storytelling intersects with scripture, especially in the stories of end-times, there is a conversation that enlivens the imagination and may spur transformation and give hope in a chaotic world. In a culture that is fascinated by dystopia and the zombie apocalypse, we cannot downplay the effect of silence from the preacher. Using those very dystopian and eucatastrophic stories as conversation partners with the end-time and the apocalyptic texts of scripture not only recovers the voice of scripture, it can also be transformational and bring hope. Often the world we live in seems dark and violent, oppressive, exploitive, and cruel. All around us we experience the destruction of creation and, from some, the abject denial of any human responsibility in that destruction. Dr. Michael J. Chan, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, said in a presentation for The Craft of Preaching 2019,

We need apocalyptic texts because they recognize something that most contemporary, materialist analyses miss: the forces at work in our world are more than what we see and apprehend with our senses and powers of reason; they are mythic, cosmic, and even demonic.

Dystopian and eucatastrophic world-building and storytelling is a way in to preaching apocalyptic texts that may capture the imagination of the listener and afford conversation about end-times that is not only fruitful but hopeful.

The reality is that throughout human history, times have been just as dark and destructive as they are now. We in the twenty-first century do not have the corner on empire, colonialism, bigotry, racism, or genderism. Not preaching apocalyptic and end-times and other hard texts leaves a vacuum for malevolent, violent, and exclusive voices to be the only voices heard, and we already witness so much in our culture that doesn't seem much like the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. The preaching voice of love and hope can prevail.

This work has opened doors for listeners to ask questions and have conversations about difficult biblical texts, as well as to ask questions and have conversations about the cultural milieu in which we live in order to uncover darkness and hopelessness. Researching and then preaching end-time texts in conversation with dystopian and eucatastrophic novels has revealed a deep yearning and desire from listeners to hear the hope that all these stories contain. In my experience (and denomination) there is such a reticence to read end-time literature in scripture, and yet there are many who turn to dystopian and eucatastrophic stories, in both written and cinematic form, as a way to imagine what a postapocalyptic world may be like. This thesis provides some groundwork for deeper conversations and connections to help the preacher develop a capacity to imagine end-time scenarios and the new heaven and new earth that is now and not yet.

Dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling paints a picture of worlds as they may be if humanity does not change, repent, or just do something different. Like the classic story of Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, this storytelling acts as a prophet, issuing a call to repentance, a call to repent of sin and evil and a reminder that the future

is not set in stone. These stories present models of resistance. Their heroes show us that ordinary people thrown into extraordinary circumstances are capable of resisting evil and, in fact, are called to resist evil. And in the end, it is Lamb power, not dark power, or evil power, that has victory over death.

The exploration of both voices in the conversation has been personally fulfilling. Reading and researching apocalypse, Revelation, and end-times has been fascinating. Craig Koester's book is transformational. It is exciting to know that scholarship supports the understanding that John's Revelation describes the reality of the time in which it was written. Koester's description of Revelation as a book of resistance that inspires the reader to perseverance in faith is the very attribute that makes Revelation a compelling book in the twenty-first century. DeSilva's descriptions of how prophecy has been understood throughout the history of scholarship makes sense of all of the veins of interpretation of Revelation as well as many other apocalyptic scripture passages. Discovery of the research and writing by those who have asked questions about the relationship between scripture and science fiction and fantasy has been liberating.

This conversation between dystopian and eucatastrophic storytelling and the stories of apocalypse and end-times has been exciting. Standing in the breach between popular culture and scripture is part of what a preacher is called to do. Helping listeners to make connections and exciting the imagination, so that the listener can discover the assurance of a hope born in the flesh, nailed to a tree, slain as a lamb, and inaugurating the time when all things—indeed all creation—will be brought to unification with the Creator God is the call of this work.

There is so much more to preach, the Advent sermons are just dipping a toe into the water. It is not explaining the particulars of Revelation that is important; rather, the importance lies in cultivating the listeners' imagination to create space to receive the hope that Revelation conveys, not the fear that has been weaponized by many interpretations.

As this culture and country continues along a dark path of division and hateful speech and action, it is not answers that are necessary but instead a way forward that includes possibilities of thinking and acting in ways that include all of God's creatures and creation, not just those who are saved in a particular way and not just those who espouse a particular understanding of God's exclusivity. God is working out the new heaven and the new earth. God reveals to humanity what that looks like, what that is, and what that will be. Using the gifts God gives humanity—art, music, literature, story, and imagination—is all part of God's revelation.

As this thesis is being written, we find ourselves in great turmoil; the scenario seems straight out of a dystopian novel. It is as if the postapocalyptic novel section of the bookstore has been moved to the current events section. The COVID-19 virus is spreading. In an effort to contain the virus, we are relegated to our homes, unable to gather together in groups. Not only are all non-essential personnel to stay home, congregations can no longer gather in person for worship or any other reason. Conversations with colleagues have turned to concerns about how preachers can continue to inspire their congregants when many are afraid, and when we are not able to assemble. The answer to the means to gather is for another to ponder, but the message to preach is presented right here. Hope.

For thousands of years, imaginative minds have constructed postapocalyptic scenarios, but when I began to write this thesis, the reality of the scenario was unimaginable. Today we find ourselves in a liminal time, just like in Advent, a time in between. Although we are reasonably sure that we will come out on the other side, in this moment of waiting, the preacher must preach hope. Hope that arises out of incarnation, death, and resurrection. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live fully alive in the present, enveloped in God's love, knowing with absolute certainty the reality of death. If the preacher can assure those who are listening in whatever way they connect that no matter the scenario, God loves God's people, then we've made a difference.

Divergent calls us to redefine our communities. *The Hunger Games* calls us to resist the powers that would cause us to cause harm to ourselves or others. *A Wrinkle in Time* calls us to love one another and ourselves. *The Last Battle* gives us a picture of what living fully and dying faithfully really looks like. *Warm Bodies* teaches us to connect in new ways that we cannot yet imagine. All of these stories point us to the one who gives up even life itself for the love of the beloved. Each one of these stories show that life and death are out of our hands, and in the hands of God who calls us to love one another as we have first been loved. Our hope is in the God who gives God's very life for us. This conversation between dystopian novels and scripture shows us that there is a real battle that goes on between what happens when we follow Jesus — love, community, and connection, and what happens when we follow a darker path — disintegration, disillusion, chaos. Do we place our hope in God, family, community and connection, or do we place our faith in Wall Street and the economy? Are people merely collateral damage?

I look forward to and am energized by this work to continue preaching in ways that inspire imagination and make room for love and hope. To those who dismiss science fiction and fantasy as children’s stories or as flights of fancy, these stories help us to imagine how we may face the challenges of our age, not in fear but in hope. The protagonists in the stories outlined in this work, and so many other characters in so many other stories not mentioned here, cannot be dismissed as fantasy figures engaged in wishful thinking during hard times. Robert Morris, in a journal article titled “Apocalypse Fever” writes, “One might dismiss these fantasy figures as wishful thinking in hard times, but I can’t help seeing in them God’s clever way of getting out the message of hope, especially to the minds of children and adults who are overdosing on the bad news that screeches at them through the TV set.”¹

Entering into conversation with stories of otherworld-building expands the capacity of the preacher to inspire the listener to take up their call to be agents of change in the situations we all face, to help good overcome evil and constructive futures prevail over destructive futures. The stakes are high, and the journey seems perilous, but God’s dream of healing and reconciliation for this world is audacious. “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

The following appendix includes a sermon series preached during the season of Advent in Year A following the Revised Common Lectionary, and the penultimate Sunday of Year C. That sermons series relies on the Advent themes of end times and “in between times”, as well as the four themes mined from Craig R. Koester’s book,

¹ Robert Morris, “Apocalypse Fever,” *Weavings* XXI, no. 6 (December 2006): 44.

Revelation and the End of All Things. As this paper took shape, that seemed like a good idea. However, in practice, it became somewhat artificial and constricting.

Going forward, I would engage the congregation in a book read, or maybe a movie watching event so that there would be a shared experience. From that I would solicit responses and reactions, and conversation, about the particular themes that have been identified in Revelation. In addition, I would engage themes that are part of the pattern of God's activity with God's people, creation, blessing, sin, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, and new life.

I would use a feedforward matrix to pose wondering questions enabling me to be able to listen to the hopes and dreams, and fears people have in times of chaos, despair, and uncertainty. This would become the context from which the connections and conversations give rise to the sermon. It would create the opportunities for listeners to then be invested in the storytelling and otherworld building of science fiction and fantasy literature. This approach would help the listeners to hear anew end-times stories in scripture that they have heard many times and dismissed, and possibly listen deeply for the first time the story of Revelation. I look forward to this approach.

APPENDIX

First Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 2:1–5, Romans 13:11–14, Matthew 24:36–44, Psalm 122

Prophecy—A Wrinkle in Time

We enter into the season of Advent, the season of waiting and preparing. Advent, the season that demands that we be in three whens at once, the when that has been, the when that is now, and the when that is not yet. It is not an easy place to rest.

A hard part of Advent is that we don't really know what to do with it. Our culture has been at Christmas since Halloween. Completely skipping over the now and not yet hard stuff of Advent, the beginning, the middle, and the end of this sacred story. Before we arrive at incarnation, God in the flesh, the birth of the baby in a barn, we've got some work to do.

Matthew's Gospel gets us started this Advent, this story that traces the days of Noah before the flood, eating and drinking, and knowing nothing of the flood. And then continues with two in the field and one taken, two in the kitchen and one taken. Stay awake, Matthew warns us, stay awake. Not because you are so afraid you cannot sleep but because God is doing something amazing.

Today we are working on prophecy. Prophecy is a word that has multiple meanings. We have heard it used to talk about telling the future, predicting events. We have heard it used to describe a particular type of preaching, prophetic preaching. Prophecy is a big part of the belief we have of what will be, we may call that end-times,

we may call that revelation or apocalypse. But for us, here and now, prophecy is a call to change. It is a call to change course, do something differently. To take seriously following Jesus in the here and now, not at some later time. This prophecy calls us to stay awake!

The events that are described in scripture, and specifically in Matthew's Gospel, are signs of God's awesome power, and they are a terror only to the faithless. Remember, the arc of God's love bends toward mercy and compassion; there is no reason to be afraid. Sometimes this passage from Matthew has been used to make us afraid. It is one that has been wielded as a weapon to keep us in line as we hope that we are the one to be taken, or raptured, and not left behind.

Prophecy is not to terrify us; prophecy is to call us to change. Sometimes, that change needs be drastic, prophecy may call us from death to life—not out of fear but out of love, the love that God shows us in the incarnation, in appearing in the flesh, then, now, and yet to come.

Prophecy, the call to change is all around us. We see it in our climate. We see how important it is that we care for this creation that God gives us, or we will continue to experience the extremes of weather. We see it in our culture. We see how important it is that we treat each other with mercy, compassion, justice, or we will continue to walk down the road of fake news and name calling, disintegration. We see it in our neighborhoods and our families. We see how important it is that we love our neighbor, the ones that don't look or think or love like us.

Our scripture calls us into this relationship with God through Jesus, that turns us around, that rights us, that heals us. And our scripture shows us that while wholeness and

healing may not happen in this physical life, but indeed will happen when our hearts and souls are joined with God and the communion of saints in the eternal now.

Prophecy is not only in our scripture. Prophecy, the call to change, is part of our storytelling. The prophetic story shows us a world that may be if humanity doesn't pay attention or stay awake to what is happening around us. Stories, the world-building of novels, can help us see what profound change may be needed in our world today.

Madeleine L'Engle's story, *A Wrinkle in Time*, begins with a family in sorrow at the disappearance of the father. The oldest daughter, Meg, her youngest brother, Charles Wallace, and her friend, Calvin, encounter three beings, Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who, and Mrs. Which. These beings call the children into a journey that will save their father and bring new light and hope to the world as well. This is a story that acts as prophecy, a story that shows us what the world might look like if we humans don't do something different right now. This is a story that calls us to change.

I want to pick the story up at a very dark place, the children have traveled to a very dark world, a world shrouded by a dark cloud. On this dark world they discover an IT, that holds all of the inhabitants in power and fear and has captured not only the father the children are looking for but the child, Charles Wallace, as well. Our hero, Meg, encounters IT, and must free both her father and her brother. Meg discovers the means by which she can free her father and her brother. She must love herself, and she must love others. She must live into her own uniqueness. Meg is indeed the square peg in a world with only round holes. On this dark planet is the lie that they are all happy because they are all alike. On this dark planet is the lie that there is only one way to think and to be, and as long as everyone falls in line, everyone will be happy. It is clear in this prophetic

story a world away, that power rules, not love. And power over people results in darkness and death, whereas empowering people through love, and active love, not a romantic feeling, results in freedom.

Darkness and death are dire. Love, the love that is born into our time as a small baby, the love that was put to death on a cross, the love that was raised from the dead, the love that changes us, transforms us, frees us, is what the prophets point us to. This is the love that calls us into life, this is the love that frees us to love fiercely.

Sometimes, I think this prophetic little story is happening today. It seems like there is a darkness covering us. A darkness capable of fragmenting us into pieces of hate. But the light shines in the darkness, the light of love, the light of hope, the light of peace, the light of joy.

The prophets show us the way. You are loved, God's love in this world matters. Carry that love, that light, into all of the places you find yourself. In this Advent, this coming of God, this incarnation, stay awake, be ready, you are God's beloved, you belong to God already.

Second Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 11:1–10, Romans 15:4–13, Matthew 3:1–12, Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

Sin/Evil/Repentance—*Warm Bodies*

I don't know about you, but John, this John who is the baptizer, always seems a bit crazy to me. I might even compare him to a street corner preacher, shouting and looking stark raving mad in his odd robes eating his bugs and honey. This John on the street corner might even be holding a sign saying not "the end is near," but instead, "the beginning is near." The beginning is near, the beginning of your new life, the life that is

yours through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The new life that is yours because the kingdom of heaven draws near. Turn around, turn around and face the love that cannot be denied, turn away from the seduction of hate, and of darkness, and of chaos.

John the baptizer calls us to repentance, to turn around. And John doesn't suggest a transaction, he doesn't say if you repent then God will love you. John says, repent, turn around. Because John already knows that God is doing something amazing here, John already knows that the God of Abraham and Sarah, who were too old to have children and gave them a child anyway, is the God whose love is already turning us around. God, incarnate, God in the flesh, Emmanuel, Jesus, the one who is born in a born, born into all times and all places, the one who promises to bring all things to completion, this one is coming. Stay awake, get ready,

And John continues the theme of prophecy. Remember, we talked about prophecy as the call to repentance, the call to change, to turn around. John remembers to us, not just reminds us, because that is passive, but John remembers to us, makes real again, the story of those who came before, Abraham and Sarah. And John remembers to us his current reality, Jesus is the one who shows us the way to God. And John remembers to us the new reality, prepare the way of the Lord.

What is the sin in the world, in our lives, from which you must turn, and in the turning will ignite the kingdom life within you, will ignite a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. That's the way Eugene Peterson translates Matthew in *The Message*, God's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of

our lives. God will place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false, God will put out with the trash to be burned.

I'm pretty sure that's the way repentance, turning to God, works. And I'm also pretty sure that it is the love that is lavished upon us that is the cause of our turning, the cause of refining. I mean, really, which one of us chooses the refining fire? It is my experience that repentance and refinement are God's handiwork. Most of the time we are oblivious to the journey we are on, and how lost we've become, and the damage we are doing to ourselves and others, until we hit the bottom, or get thrown out, or can't see our way out of the jam we've created for ourselves, and it becomes clear that we must change direction or die. God places everything true in its proper place, God puts order in our chaos, and what is not true, gets thrown out with the trash.

If repentance is turning to God, if repentance is changing course, if repentance is being found after wandering in the wilderness, and I believe it is, then sin and evil are that which brings us to the place of needing to change course. Sin is missing the mark. Evil is all of the intention and seduction and slipperiness that connives to create chaos and disintegration. But the kingdom of heaven draws near. God's call is away from fragmentation, God's call to us is the call to turn around and be healed.

But it's not simple, is it, it's never really simple. It is the murkiness, the messiness, the muddiness of life. It's hard to hit the mark when our boots are caught in the mud. And healing doesn't happen all at once or even once; it is a lifetime activity. But remember, the arc of God's love bends toward mercy, and compassion, and healing.

As we continue our conversation with stories, stories that speak truth in our lives, I turn to a zombie story. Now, I love science fiction and fantasy, but zombies? No, not

usually. Zombies are really not my cup of tea. But this one is . . . different. *Warm Bodies*, and it's really brilliant. One of the universal themes in zombie stories is answering the question, how did they become zombies? The answers range from disease to disaster. But *Warm Bodies* engages the conversation with sin, evil, and repentance because it is really a story about love.

The zombie hero is designated R, and R meets up with Julie, who is not a zombie. But rather than doing what zombies do, which I'd rather not talk about here, R befriends Julie. And what we have is a brilliant, poignant, truthful story about disintegration—sin and evil, and connection and life—healing and wholeness. You see, a zombie is a human being caught in decay and disintegration, a zombie is a placeholder for isolation and alienation. A zombie is someone who walks through life without really living, wandering in the wilderness, in exile. And the antidote is repentance, the antidote is turning toward the source of love, the antidote is connection. The antidote is to be changed, refined, from the inside out.

And when connection happens, in this wonderful zombie story, and in our own lives, when love soaks into our sinews and our muscles and our skin, God's love as shown forth in incarnation, God's love as shown forth in the body that is Jesus, we are saved from the wandering, we are saved from the disintegration of our bodies and souls, we are saved from the death of living in fear. You see death is not something that happens at the end of life, or the end of this story, death is what happens when no one cares about life, and one another, and the planet. Many are walking around zombielike, disconnected from the reality that is love.

Advent prepares us for that new reality. Advent prepares us to be alive, with God's image stamped on us. Advent prepares us to lift our hands to God and to one another and turn away from all that would disconnect and disintegrate us. Advent prepares us to face the murkiness and messiness of this life and know that in the midst of the mud, we are full of God in the flesh. Advent prepares us to be cleansed in the refiner's fire and come out scarred but strong. Advent prepares us for the end of the story, while living in the middle.

Thanks be to God, for this life, for staying awake, for connection and for love.

Third Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 35:1–10, James 5:7–10, Matthew 11:2–11, Psalm 146:4–9

Resistance—*The Hunger Games Trilogy*

We come to the place, on this Third Sunday of Advent, when God's revelation is made fully real in Jesus. A new age is dawning. You and I live in the midst of this arc of God's fulfillment. Remember, Advent is a gift whereby we live into the then, now, and not yet of God's mercy and justice. We don't know much really about what the completion of the arc may look like, but we have lots of ideas. We read throughout our sacred scripture what fulfillment, completion, end-times, may look like. We see that completion depicted in artwork, and movies. And you know I see it in the world-building of novels. We'll get to that in just a bit, for now, let's look at John and Jesus.

In Matthew's Gospel, John the baptizer, who is now in prison, sends messengers to Jesus, to determine for himself that this is in fact the Messiah, the one for whom they have been waiting. There is a question about that, because in John's opinion, Jesus surely did not look or act like the Messiah.

The expectations for Messiah were that this one would come in power, and set up a new kingdom, restore Israel and throw out the Romans, and clean up the temple. And, to be fair, there were varying expectations of what this anointed one, in the line of David, would do or be. Would the Messiah be a warrior? or a man of peace? But you begin to see what is happening here, Jesus did not look like or act like the expected Messiah, and even John, who prepares the way, wonders if Jesus is really the one.

Jesus says about himself, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” This is what Jesus is doing, and it doesn’t look anything like what was expected. It becomes clear that Jesus can’t win here. On one side he’s got the temple priests disappointed and even up in arms, that the claims that Jesus is Messiah are not very promising. And, those same people are afraid because everything he does and says incites the Roman officials.

But for those who have been brought low, those who will listen and follow, Jesus is the healer. Throughout Matthew’s story Jesus heals a leper, a paralytic, Jairus’s daughter and the woman hemorrhaging, gives sight to the blind man, casts out demons, returns a withered hand to health, and so much more. This is one who brings God’s healing and wholeness to God’s people, this is one who resists evil in the world.

Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one, who doesn’t act anything like one in power but instead empowers the powerless. The baby, born in a barn, not the towers of power, will model another way. Poor people mattered to Jesus. Jesus is building a world that reverses generally accepted values by opposing evil. Jesus is God’s revelation, in all times and all places. With Jesus’s coming a new age has dawned.

I want to pick up our storytelling conversation and otherworld-building with a story that I think many of you have read or seen. In the Hunger Games, Katniss is our unaware hero. The world that is built in this story exists in the ruins of a place once known as North America. It is the nation of Panem, a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. The Capitol is harsh and cruel and keeps the districts in line by forcing them all to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate in the annual Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live TV. The people of District 12 are starving, the rations they get are inadequate and nearly not eatable. Katniss learned early from her father how to breach the fence that keeps them captive, and hunt with a bow and arrow, and collect greens and berries to supplement her family's food.

Katniss is the tribute from District 12, the furthest outlying district as far as she knows. Katniss's younger sister was actually the tribute chosen by chance, but Katniss put herself in the place of her sister, surely to die. The other tribute is Peeta, the son of the bread baker. Katniss is sure, that when she was younger, it was bread from his father's bakery, purposefully burnt and thrown out in the trash that saved her and her family.

Katniss and Peeta are whisked away to the Capitol, to be shaped into the tributes that could garner support when tossed into the arena to battle to the death the tributes from the other districts. But Katniss begins to realize that to save herself, her real self, not just her life and Peeta's, that she must resist the evilness of those who devise the game, and she must resist the power of the empire of Panem. This is the evil that dehumanizes, evil that is voyeuristic and that revels in the meanness of people. In the resistance, she and Peeta begin to shape a new world, a world in which the powerless are empowered,

the hungry get fed. Katniss and Peeta inaugurate a new thing, a beginning that raises up the lowly and gives hope in a very dark world.

Our sacred stories that describe the arc of God's love all the way from the incarnation, God in the flesh, Jesus, to all of the scenarios that imagine the end of times, apocalypse, always include resistance. The book of Revelation, that which seems so scary to us, could rightly be called the book of Resistance. It inspires the people for whom it was written to resist the evil that would oppress, the evil that would dehumanize, the evil that would try to convince us that death is the final word. But death is not the final word, and we do not live in an ideal world. To be alive in Jesus is to face at every turn the destructive reality of violence, and to resist it, as Jesus does in life and on the cross. And to be alive in Jesus is to side with vulnerable children in defiance of adults who see them as expendable.

Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one. And the kingdom that God inaugurates in the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus is a kingdom in which love is the first cause. It is love that empowers human beings, you and me, to resist darkness. It is love that empowers us to feed one another with the bread of compassion, the bread of mercy, the bread that is broken for us.

Like the people for whom the book of Revelation was written, we too are called to resistance. We are called to speak the truth of God's love, God in the flesh, with our voices and our bodies. We are called to stand up on behalf of those who have no voice. It is not death that has the final word, it is new life; it is the hope that is embodied in Jesus.

Resist during this Advent. Resist the rush, the chaos, the overspending, all that steals our sacredness. Resist being pulled into stress by what is happening around us.

Resist the impulse to be overwhelmed by the harsh news we hear, resist turning your eyes down when the one who is hungry, tired, in prison looks you in the eye. Resist the darkness, let the light shine.

Feed the world, or at least your small part of it, with the bread of life. Feed the world with the love that comes to us in the quiet of this new birth. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 7:10–16, Romans 1:1–7, Matthew 1:18–25, Psalm 80:1–7, 16–18

The Last Battle—The Last Battle

Here we are, the fourth Sunday in Advent, ever so close to incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel. Ever so close to the completion of God’s arc toward love, and mercy, and compassion. And even though we celebrate again and so very soon, the birth of the baby born in Bethlehem, the birth of the Messiah, we continue to wait. We continue to wait for the completion, the fulfillment, the promise, that God will bring all creation to Godself. We hear that promise in the collect for today, “Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a dwelling prepared for himself.”

Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth is so very different from Luke’s. Luke gives us the story from Mary’s perspective; Matthew tells the story from Joseph’s perspective. And Mark and John don’t include a birth story at all. In Matthew’s story, Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph could have had her publicly ridiculed and even stoned, but being a just man, decides to part ways with her quietly. But Joseph listened to an angel, who told him that this baby is the fulfillment of all of the yearning and all of the stories that Joseph knew, this child is Emmanuel, God with us. And Joseph knew that in

this child to be called Jesus, God comes to be right where we are. Matthew also tells us later in his story of the promise that Jesus will be with the people to the end of the age. Matthew looks to all of the stories of his people that came before him and sees in those stories this promise of God's fulfillment, that God will and does dwell with God's people.

Matthew's perspective points us in the direction of the coming of Christ, the climax of creation. Advent puts us in the midst of celebrating the birth, incarnation, God coming to be right where we are, and the fulfillment of all things, the completion of the arc of God's love for all of creation. It is all right here in front of us, and yet we forget. We forget that this story of God with us, is a story that is full of cosmic consequences. It is a story about new birth, incarnation, and it is a story about now, and not yet. Advent calls us to consider this reality. Alongside the romantic versions of a baby and angels, is the appearance of one to whom the reaction is, "do not be afraid."

I think we have been trained to be afraid or anxious. Anxious when we must wait. Afraid of the end of times. We either avoid the stories in scripture, or we become afraid of them, or we pass them off as the visions of a stark raving madman. And we live in a culture that teaches us to be afraid of so much. Be afraid of change, be afraid of the madman who stalks in the night, be afraid of the unknown man who will scam you. Be afraid of what you cannot control, be afraid of the weather, be afraid of the additives in your food, be afraid of your neighbor. In a world that makes us afraid at every turn, every angel that appears begins with, "do not be afraid."

But because Advent gives us time to be present in the then, the now, and the not yet, and presents us with stories that point us both to birth and growth and to the end of time, we enter into this most uncomfortable of places, and wonder what it may be all

about. We rest in the in between, counting on transformation, growth, and just like pregnancy, we will be forever changed.

I think many of you have read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, or at least seen a movie, but I'm fairly sure that many have not read all the way to the end of that series of stories, *The Last Battle*. Time, in these stories, is best described as Kairos, rather than Chronos. Chronos being time measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, it is measurable and quantifiable. Kairos is not, it may be defined as God's time. You've all experienced it, in a very limited way. It's when heaven and earth meet, and we don't really have the words to describe it. It's why we have poetry, and music, and art, and science fiction novels, because we have no other way to be in God's time.

The collection of stories by C. S. Lewis that begins with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and ends with *The Last Battle* is called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Narnia is the land that is real, it is Kairos, God's time. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, children living in war time London, all travel to Narnia and eventually meet Aslan, the great lion. Aslan is the lion who is put to death by the wicked White Queen and is resurrected to love the children and all the talking animals. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy reign as benevolent kings and queens until they return through the wardrobe to Chronos, as if they had never left. Throughout the stories there are other characters, Lady Polly and Lord Digory, Eustace and Jill, all whom have lived in the otherworld of Narnia. And there are the Calormenes, those who live in Narnia but who do not follow Aslan; they follow Tash.

Eustace and Jill are in Narnia, they find King Tirian, and the Last Battle ensues. It is a battle between the followers of Tash, and the followers of Aslan. As the battle rages on, Eustace, Jill, and King Tirian walk through a door to a stable, afraid of who is in it,

and enter a place of grace and beauty. Just before them, a dreaded Calormene had entered, along with the trolls, and they were unsure if they should be afraid. The world beyond the door to the stable is light and filled with beauty, unlike the dark world Narnia had become. Soon enough, our characters meet up with the others, Peter, Edmund, Lucy, Polly, and Digory, and learn that they had all been in a train wreck, and this is life on the other side of life. This is the end of time, and the beginning of time.

Aslan, the great lion came to them, and all were welcome at the great feast. But most importantly, for our conversation today, is this. The Calormenes had served Tash, the Narnians had served Aslan. The Glorious One who appeared to them all called them all Beloved. All of their waiting, all of their expectation, all of their hopes, and dreams, and fears were born in the truth that they had come home at last. Their new lives were just beginning. The land had become more real and more true.

The Last Battle is won by the love that is born in Bethlehem, the love that hangs on the cross, and the love that calls all creation to itself.

You see, Advent is real and true time in which we are called beloved, in which we come closest to realizing the glorious impossible of incarnation, the unreasonableness of God with us, the awesomeness of the fulfillment of God's dream for creation, not to be feared but to be anticipated. We can live our lives as if Chronos is less important than Kairos. We wait in quiet expectation; we prepare the mansion right here, in our hearts, and minds, and this earth, our island home, in which Jesus resides. Let us, along with Mary and Joseph, bear Jesus, the one who loves, and brings us hope, into the world. Amen.

23 Pentecost Proper 28 Year C November 17, 2019

Malachi 4:1–2a, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13, Luke 21:5–19

When I watch people interviewed on the news after a horrible disaster, like the fires in California, they wonder how they'll survive, they wonder what they'll do, they wonder why this happened. Life for them has ended as they have known it, and in the midst of such grief, it is so very hard to see your way out. Sometimes though, they realize that they are thankful no one died, and it is only stuff that was burnt or blown away. All of us have experienced something like this grief to a degree, some much more than others.

Luke is describing something like this deep, abiding grief in this gospel today. People are talking about the beauty of the temple, and Jesus reminds them of the fate of their temple in Jerusalem. It cannot and will not stand against the oppression of the Roman empire. So Jesus reminds them what happens when a people are willing to trust in God's new vision for their community.

They may be harassed, bullied, and tormented. Or they may be torn down, torn apart, left for dead. The world in which they live may come tumbling down before the new creation rises out of the rubble. This story that we read in Luke today is a story that is also true in our world today. And it is true in our storytelling. You all know how much I love a good dystopian novel. That is a novel in which the story takes place after some destructive event, and the characters live in a world of violence, or hopelessness. But in the story the characters may begin to build a world with new values, new relationships, new hope. I love to read these stories because I think they tell our human story, yes, at

our worst, and yet, they point the reader to something new, something hopeful. These are stories that often show new life, new creation, new vision, arising out of death and destruction. And that is exactly what we have in Luke's Gospel.

And, they tell us something about what might happen if we don't change our ways, either as individuals or as a community or a nation. A prophetic story, like the one we have before us from Luke's Gospel calls us to change our ways, change our trajectory. I think these stories, the one in scripture, and the one in the novel have a lot to say to each other and to us. Like two characters in a story.

So, there's a series of novels and the first one is called *Divergent*. I believe there were movies made, but I don't usually watch movies made out of novels I love. The setting is in Chicago, after the United States has pretty much self-destructed. Society is structured in factions, or groups of people who live in community and share a particular characteristic. This seemed a good solution to the problems they faced, problems like racism or classism. The factions don't mix, they all contribute to the whole to make the society work, but the people don't mix, they don't become friends, they stay with their own kind. When a child reaches sixteen, they may make a lifetime choice to change faction, and this choice is made and received often with shunning from the family. It should be clear which faction one is suited for. However, our main character does not fit into one particular category, and eventually she finds others who do not fit, and together they work toward a new vision. Our main character, Tris, and the band of misfits that found each other, had to face their fears, and then to find the strength and talent and community to move toward that new vision. But that new vision cost them a lot.

That society had clear lines and divisions between people, hierarchies of power and prestige. Not so different from the culture that Jesus lived in and may be not so different from what we have before us today. Jesus was calling his followers and all who he encountered to change, to turn around, to turn toward God and be a part of the new vision that God creates out of the rubble of our lives, the rubble of our very thick walls. This is how prophecy works. This is how stories work, and we need to pay attention.

Jesus calls us to cross the divisions, build the bridges, do not be afraid. Jesus calls us to not live divided as factions but to live interdependent as a body. Jesus calls us to live the new vision that God is creating for us today. It won't prevent the temple from falling, and it won't necessarily prevent the social structure from collapsing, but Jesus never promises it will be easy.

The good news is that we will not perish, we will gain our souls. You see, the worst thing is not dying, the worst thing is not living. Living as the image of God. The image of God is each and every one of us, the image of God is our beauty and worth, the image of God is our uniqueness and our gift. The image of God is our diversity and our likeness.

The new vision is not our buildings, that will fall down, or our rules, that will change, or even this most beautiful liturgy, that will pass away. The new vision is each of us created in God's image, the new vision is a life following Jesus.

Today, we baptize Riley Ann. Her parents bring her to us, her parents come to us, trusting that we embody this community, this new creation, this image of God. In baptism we walk with Jesus and with one another across the divide, through death to new life, across factions to interdependence. In baptism we receive God's grace, and we have all

we need to be God's agents in the world, to love one another as God has first loved us. In baptism we are equipped to be heralds of the new vision, the new kingdom, in which all creation is welcome, all are God's beloveds.

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