

Sermon: Isaiah 35, Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), and Science Fiction
by Randy Newswanger; Delivered December 11, 2016 at Community Mennonite Church of
Lancaster

Miss Sikorsky saw me sitting at the library table wondering what to read. I was probably seven years old, in second grade, and with my class in the Landisville Elementary School library during our reading period. Miss Sikorsky, the librarian, came to me and wondered if I would like a suggestion for some books to read. I agreed and she suggested I might like some stories that she called "Tall Tales." One was about a large cowboy whose name I can't remember, and the other book was about Paul Bunyan, a giant lumberjack, and Babe, his big blue ox. All I can remember now of the Paul Bunyan story is that he carried a large axe and was excellent at cutting down trees.

In early elementary school I was prone to daydreaming. I would sit at my desk and gaze out the window, or stare at the ceiling, or follow the alphabet letters scrolling above the blackboard. Perhaps I was thinking about the white limestone rocks in the playground that Brian thought were dinosaur bones. Or maybe I was dreaming of being on the swings with Jon who told stories about the Bermuda triangle and disappearing ships.

I enjoyed school, probably because I was generally successful. But I do recall that routinely, during parent/teacher conferences there would be gentle admonitions that I was prone to daydreaming, or not really applying myself, or not working up to my potential. But when Miss Sikorsky introduced me to Paul Bunyan and Babe, and then to other tall tales, and then to other fiction, I remember being engrossed in the books.

Also in my childhood, our family subscribed to National Geographic magazine with its glossy pictures from around the world, but also with stories about the moon and the planets of our solar system. I especially remember pictures of Saturn from the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft. They were sent out to take pictures of planets and send them back to us. But they also carried images and songs from earth out to the universe as messages for whomever might find them. At age 10 it was as easy for me to imagine that someday aliens might find our spacecraft, our images, and our songs as it had been to believe, earlier that rocks in the playground were dinosaur bones, or that some mystery in in the ocean near Bermuda made ships disappear.

So when I happened upon Science Fiction in the library at Centerville Junior High School, I was well prepared to become engrossed in book after book after book. A whole new universe opened up to me. I remember stories of space ships being launched, carrying communities of people to other planets and other stars. Plot lines were the challenges of starting a new colony on the moon or mars, mysterious deaths in interstellar space that needed to be investigated, and interactions with aliens who were either very similar to humans or very very different.

Science fiction authors ask "what if...?" questions. What if 100 people were travelling for several generations on a spaceship from one planet to another? What would family look like? What would religion look like? How would relationship conflict or romance play out? What if something goes terribly wrong and the only people we have to blame are ourselves? And the stories I remember were filled with difference; machines that might be people, people that might be machines, aliens with too many arms or funny smells or strange customs, stories of cultures where difference was celebrated and cultures where even minor difference was deviant. I especially related to smart quiet students who become heroes or gay characters with gay relationships. And I was drawn to the characters of underdogs, or the disadvantaged, or

those of low status who found crafty, sneaky or edgy ways to change or subvert the world. Crafty. Sneaky. Edgy.

So I read Isaiah Imagining, “what if...?” What if the wilderness and the dry land were glad? And by glad he means blossoming abundantly, rejoicing with joy and singing. What if weak hands were strengthened and weak knees made strong? What if the blind could see? What if the deaf could hear? What if the lame could, not just walk, but leap like a deer?

Well, Isaiah, I’ll tell you what if... I’ll tell you because I have read Science Fiction. Science fiction is full of these “what ifs....?” Science fiction is full of terraforming where whole wilderness planets become Gardens of Eden. Science fiction stories assume that lifespans can be 100 years or 300 years, or longer. Illnesses are cured in fabulous medical facilities. Broken bones are replaced with titanium, metabolic disorders are cured with gene therapies, and bionic bodies can do miraculous things. And yet, Isaiah, technology breaks, drought and famine occur. People are still people. In science fiction, people are still greedy and jealous and generous and kind. People are still lost and forsaken, rich and haughty, proud and strong. (reference to Hymnal A Worship Book, 6. “Here in This Place”, text by Marty Haugen.)

So Isaiah, what else do you imagine? Isaiah imagines a holy way, a holy road, a path for God’s people. A path for the clean and pure. A path free from lions and wild beasts where no one can go astray. A path that leads to singing, joy, gladness, and the end of suffering. Isaiah imagines the community of God coming together into Zion.

For Isaiah, the vision of the people on the road to Zion was constrained by religious laws; laws about purity. If someone was sick or lame or blind or deaf, they were unclean and excluded from religious rituals. For the whole community to go on the road to Zion together, God needed to fix people before the whole community could do something together. And it was beyond his imagination that women would be there as equal.

But what if God doesn’t make everybody, every body, pure for the road? What if God doesn’t heal everyone? The author Amos Yong, who has a brother with disabilities has written several books about theologies of healing, illness, and disability. His three starting assumptions are that we are all created in the image of God, that no one should be defined by their differences or disabilities, and that disabilities are not necessarily evil or need to be eliminated. (Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 13) In the language of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster we might say You are known and loved by God. Everyone is known and loved by God.

So I wish to hold onto Isaiah’s “What if...” vision of the whole community, together, on the road. I don’t know what Isaiah meant about the road to Zion, but for me, the vision is the community of people together on the road to justice, to mercy, to right relationship with Love despite our differences and impurities and frailties and weak knees.

Mary: Imagining “what if...” from the perspective of Mary. “My soul is filled with joy as I sing to God my savior: You have looked upon your servant. You have visited your people. And holy is your name.” (quoting from *Sing the Journey*, 13. “My Soul is Filled with Joy” text by David Haas.)

Mary is not in the center of the community of people, on the road free from lions, to go to Zion. Mary is unwed, if not quite single, pregnant, and not quite homeless. Mary wants the hungry have food. Mary wants the oppressors to be overthrown. And Mary has a more profound trust than I do, that God can accomplish this. Me, I’m a skeptic. But I’m also sure that Mary

knows a thing or two about sneaking around the edges of authority, about finding the crafty solutions, and about bending the world as an unwed pregnant woman, in the way that in Science Fiction, and in real life outsiders and undogs always find crafty, creative, and collective ways to fight for justice. Crafty. Creative. Collective.

Despite my earlier critique of Isaiah's assumption about bodies needing to be pure and healed before they could be on the holy way together, I want to remember this week that deep human desire for healing of our bodies when we are sick, and the grief and loss we experience when bodies are not healed. We have wished that God would make it different. This week I'm especially thinking of Roland who died on Monday.

And this week I was following the news story from Oakland, California about a fire in a warehouse. It wasn't an empty warehouse. It was a warehouse that had been transformed over time by artists into something like a museum of creative beauty; room after room after room of personal artistic transformative vision. And it was a space that hosted musicians and created events for collective dancing and celebration. And for some it was a safe space, free from judgment, where people with various gender identities, and transgender identities gathered to be creative, together. And last weekend it caught fire and many people were trapped and died. This morning I imagine Isaiah's vision of the community on the road to Zion together as a warehouse full of artists, free from rent increases and fire disasters.

I also imagine Isaiah's vision in our Mornings on Orange Street program.

Yesterday afternoon I was in this room for the second "Stand Up Lancaster" community meeting, where people are organizing efforts to work toward protection of all the people in our community. As I was walking down orange street, I saw people in front of my, behind me on both sides of the street, streaming up our front steps to join together. That felt like the vision from Isaiah.

Later you can remind me and each other of more of the ways that we, together, are helping God feed the hungry and overthrow the princes, or the ways that you see our community on the road, together. And I need your help to imagine with Mary what if the fires of justice burn? What if the dawn draws near? And What if the world is about to turn? (reference to Sing the Story 124, "My soul cries out", text by Rory Cooney.)