

New Scripture

by Rev. Tony Lorenzen
First Parish Church in Weston, MA
(A UU Christian Congregation)
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In the parish office at my church in Hopedale there are 4 illustrations of biblical scenes - large full color paintings done right on the office walls decades ago by a member long since passed away. One of them is the scene from today's gospel - Jesus as a boy in the temple learning and teaching the old wise elders.

In the scene from today's reading, a blonde-haired, blue eyed pre adolescent Jesus clothed in white, sits in the center of a group of older, dark haired, dark skinned men in robes of muted blue, green, brown, and gray.

In each of the other 3 paintings, the hero - Jesus or Moses - is the only white person in the scene, everyone else is obviously semitic. An adult Jesus with light skin, golden hair and beard, blue eyes, and white robe teaches his dark skinned, dark haired, dull robed disciples. A light skinned, brown haired blue eyed baby Moses is plucked from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants, all obviously Egyptian Africans.

These artist, I am sure, painted these in good faith, but to contemporary eyes they seem shockingly racist. Both saviours of the people, Moses and Jesus are blindingly white - when in reality they looked more like all the other African and semitic people that surround them in the scenes.

Interesting how two men of color when they are the heroes, even the messiahs, become white. The Hopedale Unitarian Parish office artist would most likely be horrified and not a bit ticked off were you to suggest at the time of his painting these that he left the color out of the heroes of color on purpose in some racist, white-supremacist attitude of eliminating the experience of people of color from their place as central scriptural figures. And yet, intentional or not, that's exactly what it looks like.

Our white eurocentric lens turns people from the middle east into people who like Europeans. That's not surprising, but 150 years after the end of slavery, 50 years after civil rights legislation, you'd think we'd put the semitic back into the semites and the black back into the African characters. But quite often we don't.

The paintings in my church office came to the forefront of my attention as Rev. Jeff and I arranged for me to preach this weekend and I noticed that the lectionary reading was one of the scenes depicted on our office walls and our study group, The Greenfield Group, had just chosen as its spring convocation topic, Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism is an movement in art, music and literature that recenters the African, and Afro-diaspora experience. Frequently it deals in an imagined future that incorporates not only the presence of black people, but black culture and history. The term was first used by Mark Derry in a 1994 essay titled "Black to the Future" and has come to be associated with an aesthetic that explores the connection and interplay of African Diaspora Culture with Technology. For a jumping off point think Wakanda and The Black Panther.

We live in a time when attendance at religious worship service is down, membership in a faith community is down, and the nones or the unchurched religiously unaffiliated are the largest religious group in America. We live in an age where the values and message of Jesus and indeed the core teachings of many world faith traditions are promoted and learned not from the ancient sacred texts, but from new scriptures, like the Black Panther.

The more I rumbled around with Jesus in the temple and Afrofuturism two things occur to me - that science fiction functions like scripture for many people and people of color are missing from this world the way Jesus' ethnicity is so often missing from how he is depicted.

The first season of the TV show Blackish featured an episode called The Nod that highlighted the lack of attention paid to black geek culture and by extension black presence in the world of sci-fi. In this episode, a father noticed that his high school aged son doesn't seem to understand the nod, the cultural predisposition for people of color to acknowledge each other especially in white settings. He thinks he's failed as a parent until he notices that his son Junior does acknowledge other minorities with knowing nods and other mutually understood acknowledgements of presence of being seen in the majority world, only the folks his son nods to aren't people of color, but other geeks.

Afrofuturism takes the reality that western culture has decentered or even eliminated the black experience and reasserts it and puts it back in. I think this is important because Sci-Fi and fantasy have become a modern scripture. And if we need to be aware to put the person of color back in Jesus when we picture the stories from the New Testament we also need to be alert to making sure we do even better with scripture that is designed to envision a better future.

I'm asserting that fantasy and sci-fi is scripture. Scripture - from its Latin roots - it's just Writing - but writing that has deep meaning, a place of honor and respect, connects people through shared knowledge of it and shared interpretation of it.

Thomas Shoemaker, a professor of religious studies at Mesa Community College in AZ, notes in one of his course handouts (<http://www.mesacc.edu/~thoqh49081/handouts/scripture.html>) that writing about God is not enough - Plenty of people have written about God and the book of Esther (the original Hebrew not the redacted Septuagint Greek) doesn't mention God at all. He notes that the word sacred doesn't help for what makes writing sacred? It's venerated by whom and why? Sacred because it deals in faith? Neither does revelation help us, he argues, how do we decide what's a true revelation and a false one? If it depends on faith, whose faith? By what authority? Shoemaker looks at a long list of near 20 sacred texts and asks what do they have in common? The commonalities include:

- provide a reasonable moral system
- make sense of the seeming chaos of daily life
- direct us to a path to a satisfying individual life
- create a community from disparate peoples
- provide a widely accepted justification of a political, social or economic system

Missing from the (above) list is an age requirement, although many of the world's religions go back thousands of years, something like Dianetics the scripture of Scientology was published in 1950. Nor is it a requirement for something to last forever-even though we may be dealing in lengthy periods of time, scriptures come and go - for example the Didache, The Letters of Irenaeus of Lyon, The Enuma Elish, and others. Scriptures come and go as do religions. And many works of contemporary fantasy and sci-fi possess enough of the qualities of scripture for us to consider them so.

Dealing as it does with the future, we like to imagine that in the worlds of fantasy and sci-fi the problems of racism and other areas of human sinfulness would be eliminated - or at least somewhat better- in the future. Yet this isn't the case, even in sci-fi universes that try to do so and are most utopian.

Star Trek intentionally diversified it's cast in the 1960s and the franchise has been one of the better ones at attempting inclusion. Yet in the original series even with Lt Uhura, Mr. Sulu, and a Vulcan, the diverse characters are still mostly tokens in a future universe based upon white history and western european culture, even in the 23rd century. Although the latest incarnation in CBS's online only Star Trek Discovery the protagonist is a woman of color. At the same time however

The Lord of the Rings is modern quest story - perhaps the most well known Hero's Journey of our time. Gollum is what happens to the human soul when it's motivation is misplaced, solely internal and narcissistic, and consumptive - it become isolated, shriveled, unable to relate to others, scheming, mistrustful. Among the famous quotes from this scripture are teachings of the wizard Gandalf - "Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends." And even though there are many races, elves, dwarves, men, even talking trees, the forces of evil are black rider and monstrous orcs with dark skin.

Star Trek's the Next Generation episode 3 from season 5 in 1991 deals with the inability to communicate due to lack of shared cultural, historical perspective. In this episode Capt. Picard runs into the commander of an Alien craft whose race speaks only through allusions and quotes from history and literature - their history and literature, of which even the Star Fleet computers are ignorant. The phrase Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra is now common code among geeks for talking past each other due to not having a shared history and background.

Battlestar Galactica deals with humanity trying to out run a race of androids, the Cylons, they themselves created, so realistic have they become you can't tell them apart from humans. Their home worlds destroyed by the Cylons humanity races toward a mythical planet called Earth. Among the big questions addressed by the series are what does it mean to be human, and inhuman? What happens when we die - the Cylons are resurrected at death, their consciousness uploaded to a new body? Monotheism - The cylons believe in one God, very Unitatrian, and the humans in a pantheon resembling Greek and Roman mythology. The series deals with contemporary topics such as the human rights, the use of torture, democracy, and an increasingly militarized government - Among the famous scriptural quotes from this series is Commander Adaman's statement to the president of the 12 human colonies when asked to use his forces to police the people - he says The military fights the enemies of the people and the police serve and protect the people. When the military becomes the police the enemies of the state tend to become the people. And although there a few Asians and black people and an Asian cylon, this universe is also basically white.

The Star Wars universe pits the forces of good and evil against each other and the force is now a common metaphor for God, the good, the divine. There are master spiritual teachers, the Jedi and proverbs such as "Try not. Do or do not. There is no try." In six movie chapters there are a lot of Aliens, there are only two black main characters and neither is really more than a supporting role. But the ultimate force of evil is a man dressed all in Black - and although voiced by a black actor, the guy in the suit was white!

Game of Thrones has a great story arc about the evils of slavery and freeing slaves, but slavery isn't race based in this world. And although there a handful of characters of color, this is by and large a white world. The Dothraki, horse - riding barbarians - look perhaps, maybe middle eastern, but even if we do consider them people of color what's it say that they are decidedly the uncouth, uncivilized race.

This morning in the Gospel - Luke is still Christian scripture by all accounts - Jesus is learning the ways and the texts of his Jewish tradition. In time, his followers would create the gospels and stories about Jesus and what he said and did become scripture.

When his parents didn't find Jesus they went to look for him - and found him in the temple in God's house. When we go looking for Jesus, we will find him in God's house - in the new scripture of Science Fiction , in the new scripture of Afrofuturism - ready for us to do our work dismantling white supremacy.

This time he might look like the dark skinned, dark haired middle easterner that he was. And we may then add to our shared common stories, other scriptural literature such as MLK's Letter from Birmingham City Jail that was intentionally modeled after the letters of St. Paul so as to be more of a rebuke to his white clergy colleagues. It was written from Jail and in the form of an open pastoral letter. Perhaps in the not too distant future a Sunday morning's scripture will include not the Gospel of Luke's story of the young Jesus learning in the temple , but he story of how a young Luke learned from Yoda and not the Letter of Paul to the Romans but the Letter of Dr. King to his dear Fellow Clergymen. OR maybe instead of a parable of Jesus, a reading from The Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler - one of the few black women authors who made a living writing sci-fi, where the protagonist and narrator is Lauren Oya Olamina, a black woman who at the break down of western civilization begins a new religion called Earth Seed and writes its scripture The Book of the Living:

“Create no images of God. Accept the images that God has provided. They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change— Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving— forever Changing. The universe is God's self-portrait.”