

March 18, 2018 - The Shape of Water

Jeremiah 31:31-34

So it's the fifth and final Sunday of Lent and this year we're finishing our movie series with the winner of the Oscar for Best Picture: *The Shape of Water*. How many of you saw the movie in a theatre or downloaded it on the Internet? It's an unusual film – an adult fairytale – with an unlikely prince and princess. It starts, as so many fairy tales do, with a narrator saying:

If I spoke about it - if I did - what would I tell you? I wonder. Would I tell you about the time? It happened a long time ago, it seems. In the last days of a fair prince's reign. Or would I tell you about the place? A small city near the coast, but far from everything else. Or, I don't know... Would I tell you about her? The princess without voice. Or perhaps I would just warn you, about the truth of these facts. And the tale of love and loss. And the monster, who tried to destroy it all.

Yes, the princess is without voice – she can hear, but is unable to speak. Her name is Elisa and she works as a cleaning lady in a hidden, high-security government laboratory in Baltimore, USA. It's 1962 and the cold war is at its peak. Elisa's life changes forever when she discovers the lab's classified secret -- a mysterious, human-shaped, fish-scaled creature from South America that lives in a water tank. Using sign language, Elisa is able to befriend this intelligent being. One day she discovers that the government has decided to kill her new found friend. The military want to understand more about its anatomy,

how it is able to live both on land and in water. So Elisa comes up with a scheme to remove him from the lab and she takes him to live in the bathtub in her apartment. Eventually Elisa falls in love with her new roommate and they even make love.

In many ways this is the classic “beauty and the beast” story found in ancient fairy tales from around the world. Maria Tatar, a professor of folklore and mythology from Harvard University, explains that these tales of unlikely love were probably first written to give hope to young girls who were about to enter arranged marriages with older men. They were stories that sent “a beautiful message about the power of love” - that it is possible to find love even with someone you do not find attractive or even likeable when you first meet them. These stories remind us of the importance of going beyond what we can perceive with our senses and connecting to the essence of the other through our hearts.

<https://www.glamour.com/story/the-real-story-behind-beauty-and-the-beast-is-not-what-you-think>

Professor Tatar goes on to say "That's one side of the message. The other side is, this is a story that tells us about monstrosity... the monster is a projection of our own anxieties." As children, we believed that monsters lived under our beds or in our closets. Now, as adults, many of us in western society are convinced that monsters worship in mosques or wear a hijab. I invite you to think of all the ways that we create, or have created, monsters in our own minds by projecting our fears or insecurities on the “other.” (*Muslims, black people, people in the LGBTQ community, First Nations people, disabled or disfigured people*) Of course, in the 1960's, during the cold war, there was an irrational fear of anything or anyone associated with communism, the civil rights movement was just

beginning and homosexuality was still illegal. *The Shape of Water*, like other fairy tales, reminds us that we need to recognize these monsters for what they really are... our own fear of the dark... our own fear of the unknown.

But what I love about this movie is that it goes even deeper than your typical “beauty and the beast” fairy tale. *The Shape of Water* explores not only how we perceive and interact with those who are different; but also how we perceive and interact with the sacred, with God. You see, the prince in this fairy tale, Elisa’s friend and lover, was worshipped as a God by the indigenous people of South America. The characters in the film, as they interact with this being, explore what it means to be created in the image of God. Strickland, the man who originally captured the creature, and the true monster in this movie, says,

You may think that thing looks human. It stands on two legs, right? But we’re created in the Lord’s image. You don’t think that’s what the Lord looks like, do you?

Strickland believes in a Caucasian God – a God that looks just like him - the God that we find on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But humankind’s image and understanding of God has changed through the ages. The ancient Hebrew Scriptures have many stories of interactions with God. In the story of the flood we meet a wrath-filled Father God who wipes out an entire civilization and then puts a rainbow in the sky and makes a covenant with Noah that it will never happen again. In the story of the Exodus we meet a judge-like God who writes commandments on stone tablets and then makes a covenant of law with the Israelite people.

And in today's reading from the book of Jeremiah we meet a God who wants to connect with the Israelites in a new way. Instead of making covenants with rainbows or writing laws on stone, this God wants to connect through the hearts of the people. Through Jeremiah, God says, "I will put my Law in their minds and on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." So the image of God begins to move from angry father or law-writing judge, to a Loving Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus taught us to know and love. This God doesn't just meet with prophets on mountaintops. The Essence of Love resides in the mind and the heart of each and every one of us.

One movie reviewer wrote, "Put simply, *The Shape of Water* is about love and how it, like water, has no natural shape."

<https://www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/reelspirituality/film/reviews/the-shape-of-water>

Whether you are talking about the love between two beings on earth or Love with a capital "L," that sacred love that is God, it doesn't matter. Love can take on many permutations. Love has no natural shape, but instead, like water, takes on the shape of the container in which it is held.

Fairy Tales like *The Shape of Water* were written to teach us about the incredible power of Love. That with Love we are able to overcome our fears and anxieties so that we can live lives filled with courage, peace and trust. That with Love we are able to perceive beyond our senses and connect with the "other" through our hearts. That with Love we are able to move past pre-conceived notions of the sacred and recognize God in all creation.

I want to end with a quote from *The Shape of Water*. These are the narrator's final words:

When I think of her, of Elisa, all that comes to mind is a poem.

Made of just a few truthful words... whispered by someone in love,

hundreds of years ago...:

Unable to perceive the shape of You,

I find You all around me.

Your presence fills my eyes with Your love,

It humbles my heart,

For You are everywhere.