Proper 25A: Genesis 11:1-9
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
October 28, 2023

The Monsters We Make

"It was a dark and stormy night." So familiar are these words as the opening of ghost stories that they've become a cliché. But they describe well the real setting for the conception of one of the world's most iconic horror stories. The year was 1816, the "Year Without a Summer," as it became known, when the world was locked in a long, cold volcanic winter caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. Mary Shelley, aged 18, and her lover (and future husband), the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, were visiting the celebrated author Lord Byron, at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva, in the Swiss Alps. The weather was too cold and dreary to enjoy the planned outdoor activities, so the group retired indoors for the night. Sitting around a log fire, the company amused themselves by reading German ghost stories. At some point in the evening, Byron proposed that they "each write a ghost story" of their own. Unable to come up with anything for several days, Mary Shelley became anxious. But then one evening, after midnight, when unable to sleep, she became possessed as she beheld the "grim terrors" of her "waking dream." With that, Shelley began writing what would become the spine-chilling tale we know today as *Frankenstein*, the story of young Victor Frankenstein, the quintessential mad-scientist, and his monstrous creation.

Shelley's book has been adapted and retold in numerous films and TV shows, from the classic movie starring Boris Karloff to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Despite this variety, it's hard not to think of Frankenstein's monster as the unstoppable zombie-like menace of the original movie from 1931, or as the bumbling fool of the Herman Munster incarnation. Yet the green-skinned, metal-bolted lumbering lurch of popular culture is a far cry from Shelley's literary creature, who is at once repulsive *and* pitiable. Indeed, we miss much of the message of the novel, its truly dreadful import, when we focus on the monster and the macabre means of his creation. For the story is less about the monster than about his maker, Victor Frankenstein, and the monstrous things that *he* does

But before getting into that, I need to address a question you all are probably asking yourself: why am I a Christian minister talking about *Frankenstein* this morning, from the pulpit no less? And you may recall that this isn't the first time I've brought up horror movie monsters. This time last year I preached on Dracula and vampires, and the year before that it was zombies. Sure, Halloween is a few days away, but what do horror stories have to do with God? It's because zombies and vampires and Frankenstein's monster are just that—*monsters*. You see, at its root 'monster' means that which should be paid attention to, a portent, a warning. Monster movies and ghost stories are fundamentally morality tales, teaching readers to recognize the dangers of a depraved and corrupt life. Indeed, the original horror stories were often explicit explorations of the degraded existence that results from rejecting the Christian God. Where beautiful artworks attract us with the glories of God and heaven, monster movies scare us with pictures of what it's like on the "other side."

This is clearly the case with Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The story begins when young doctor Victor suffers the death of his mother and becomes obsessed with discovering the secrets of life and death. Using the new insights of science, he develops a secret technique to impart life to non-living matter, stitching together a body from parts of other human bodies. When the creature comes to life, though, Victor is repulsed by his work and flees. The Creature disappears, hiding from society. Rejected by his 'father,' and without the affection of a mother, he comes to loathe himself, and despise his creator, indeed all humanity, for his mistreatment. The Creature eventually confronts Victor, insisting that the doctor fashion a bride for him, a female companion like himself. Should he refuse, the Creature threatens to kill Victor's remaining friends and loved ones and not stop until he completely ruins him. Fearing for his family, Victor reluctantly agrees. But just as he was nearing completion, Victor is overcome by fears of what he will unleash if he follows through and so destroys his work. The Creature is enraged and spends the rest of the novel making good on his threat, killing Victor's wife, his best friend, his father, then Victor himself, before disappearing on an Arctic ice flow.

Frankenstein is a classic tragedy, with the downfall caused by a deep moral flaw, in this case, Frankenstein's *hubris*, his desire to create life apart from God, to *be God* to his creation. And in showcasing the misery that results, it is a cautionary tale, a warning against "playing god," against trespassing on sacred territory, transgressing the natural order. Shelley's point is clear: when we pursue knowledge and power apart from God, as if God doesn't exist, the results are disastrous. When "the masters of science sought immortality and power," Shelley warns, an uncontrollably violent monster threatens.

What's remarkable is that it is Frankenstein's own creation that executes the penalty for the doctor's crimes against nature, against God. It's as if there is something inherent in the order God established in the world that reacts when we overstep our bounds. Something that when violated will have its revenge, as Shelley shows, in the form of existential despair, individual crisis, and communal disintegration.

Shelley's novel remains strikingly relevant to us today, in that it illustrates what can happen when our creations, our inventions, initially promoted as miracles, turn out to have a much more destructive impact. Modern life is filled with such creations, inventions that were touted as marvels but have come to threaten our very existence—nuclear weapons and DDT, for instance, or genetically-modified crops ("Frankenfoods") and lab-grown super-viruses, social media and Artificial Intelligence.

It's not always the case of mad-scientists devising new ways to destroy the world. More often than not, it's that we invent something for a particular and limited purpose, and then the invention follows its own agenda. Neil Postman called this, aptly, "the Frankenstein syndrome." "Once the machine is built," he writes, "we discover, always to our surprise—that it has ideas of its own; that it is quite capable not only of changing our habits but …of changing our habits of mind."

That may seem strange to say but consider how one invention, the smart phone, has changed human behavior—

— we now expect to be, and are expected to be, in constant communication, always "on";

—yet we no longer talk to each other; when bored, we play on our phones
—when we do communicate, it's in the form of texts, not conversations, our political debates similarly are reduced to tweets
—we also remember less and rely more and more on our phones as our "external memory";
—we take a lot more photographs, of everything but especially ourselves, which we share online, leading to a sense of life being a performance, "for show"
—and, because we know we can be videotaped at anytime, we can no longer expect privacy or impunity when we do something wrong

These are but a few of the ways this one device has changed how millions think and act.

Many of us today sense that our relationship with technology has changed, that the balance of power has shifted. Without most of us noticing, technology has infiltrated our lives—and we have grown dependent on it, for everything from sewage treatment to vaccines to traffic lights. This might make us even more wary of the power our creations have over us. Yet we clamor for more of it, for more inventions. But, you don't have to believe the world is about to be taken over by mindless murderbots hellbent on exterminating humanity, like we see in the movies, to recognize the dangers of technology, to question how the things we've made are making us, or worse unmaking us. It's disquieting, I think, that at the same time as reliance on technology has become widespread, so has existential despair, individual crisis, and communal disintegration—the very afflictions Shelley shows follow from the neglect of God.

Still, I don't want you to go home this morning thinking that I'm "down" on technology, that I think Christians should give it up and move in with the Amish. I use my laptop several times a day to retrieve information and create documents, and my smart phone is rarely far from me. Nor is the point simply that we need to be selective, to pick and choose which technologies we will allow into our lives or into our society. I don't think it's a bad idea, if we could be more thoughtful and more discriminating in our use of technology. But, the larger point that Shelley was making, that I think we should heed, is that technology's promise of greater efficiency and greater control is at root the promise of power, and in that promise is a temptation, the temptation to become god, to seek to transcend our limitations, to be immortal.

This is the lesson of the story of the Tower of Babel. As we just read, the first human civilization applied its knowledge and skill, their technology, to build a massive city and tower, a great structure that aimed at reaching heaven. God, seeing their arrogance, thwarts their effort by besetting the builders with a "confusion of languages." They could no longer communicate with each other, so they wander off, leaving the tower unfinished. As this story shows, humanity has long been tempted to think we can use our ingenuity, our knowledge and power, to make ourselves gods, that we can devise by ourselves a way to rise above our station, to metaphorically leave our earth-bound existence and live in the heavens, to be gods.

Indeed, what both the Tower of Babel and Frankenstein make clear is that technology, no matter how complex or sophisticated, is ultimately a spiritual endeavor. That may seem odd to say, but from the time technological innovation first began to emerge in the Middle Ages, through the Industrial Revolution to the contemporary era, technological advancement has been tied to a vision of spiritual progress. With greater technology, it was assumed, humanity was moving closer to perfection. So, spirituality has been long fused with technology, in rhetoric if not in

people's engagement with actual machines. Today, though, that distinction has been lost, as the gurus of Silicon Valley no longer disguise the spiritual motivations behind their inventions as they pursue their techno-utopian social vision with religious zeal and fanaticism.

Mark Zuckerberg, the head of Facebook, for example, is actively promoting his social network as the answer to our spiritual longings, promoting a series of bizarre innovations ranging from computer applications that enable us to pray through machines, to conversations with church leaders about how Facebook can enhance worship, to launching his own religion, the Church of Facebook. I kid you not! The point is, for all the technologists' claims to be soberly pursuing utility, power, and profit, they are really driven by distant dreams, spiritual yearnings for supernatural redemption, for transcendence, indeed, for salvation.

So, techno-enthusiasts, those who cannot wait for holographic cellphones and computer chips they can put in their brains, they are not all that different from us Christians. Both groups yearn for a more glorious, more perfect world. We differ though on what it takes to get there. Technologists seek a better world through machines that will enable us to transcend our limitations, even transcend humanity itself. Christianity holds, rather, that there will be no better world without better people. And technology, for all that it can do for us, cannot make us better people. It cannot make us more human, more humane. It can make us faster, stronger, smarter, but it cannot make us more creative, more compassionate, or more virtuous. And what's more, our pursuit of the former, of technological progress without regard for God, will, we respect, end like Frankenstein, in making us monsters.

Despite being written over 200 years ago and being addressed to an audience that was just becoming aware of the possibilities of science, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* speaks to us today as we seek to understand the promises and dangers of the scientific explorations of our own day. In creating a literal monster, Shelley illustrated the dangers of pursuing science apart from the governance of God and morality. At the same time she revealed the spiritual conceit of those who claim to just be "advancing science" or "improving our lives" through technology. Christianity, we understand, offers a different way of "improving our lives," one which looks not to technology, but to God for our betterment, one which promises not the ability to *transcend our humanity*, but rather to make us *more human*, as it teaches that transcendence and salvation come not through exercising god-like powers, but by becoming godly in loving God and our neighbor. This Halloween, may we heed the warning of Frankenstein, to trust not in ourselves, in our powers or creations, but in God, who loves us and redeems us in his Son. Thanks be to God!