



Texts in Context

Not Safe, but Good: Preaching a Holy God in a Time of Terror

FREDERICK J. GAISER

Back when I was in college, one of the horror movies du jour was *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). I fear that for a little girl in Africa, some four decades later, I was her middle-aged zombie (well, late middle-aged). That story occurred when I was invited to visit a Masai village in northern Tanzania—not just to pass through but rather to spend some time there, actually to live there as a guest. But that would not be easy, because the villagers and I were so very different. Paul Ricoeur might say that those Masai folks lived in a “first naïveté.”¹ With no media, no mass communication, no modern transportation, their village was the only “story” they knew. Some hardly even knew there was an “outside world,” much less had they come in contact with it. So, when I was invited into a family hut, the little girl inside began screaming uncontrollably—shrieking, shaking, and sobbing that would not end. It turned out that she had never seen a white person before, so in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, her view of the world, her “story,” was irreparably shattered. I was the unexpected terror, the creature from the black lagoon, the wild boar that had invaded her vineyard. I was fear itself. I was her zombie.

¹“First naïveté” is described by Lewis Mudge as “an unquestioned dwelling in a world of symbol, which presumably came naturally to men and women in one-possibility cultures to which the symbols in question were indigenious,” in his introduction to Ricoeur’s *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*; online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1941&C=1770> (accessed January 30, 2015).

The biblical texts appointed for Trinity Sunday proclaim a holy God. This might be just what we need to confront the significant terrors of the world around us.

Back to my high school and college years: In those days, at least for most of us guys, a horror movie was not real, it was a joke—just an opportunity to take your girlfriend to an outdoor movie, scare the wits out of her, and get her to jump into your lap. (The girls may have seen that differently, of course.) But now, all those zombie movies, all those apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian features that show up every week at our theaters, seem somehow more real—at least to many of the younger viewers. When I first read recently that a double-digit percentage of American young people “believed” in the existence of zombies, I was in despair.² How would we ever survive as a country or a civilization with those people growing up to be our leaders?

I needed a second look, however, a different view of the zombies that haunted their souls. That view was provided by a 2013 *New York Times Magazine* report and interview with Max Brooks, the author of *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (Crown, 2006). While the novel and the subsequent movie portray zombies that are “real” (and actually made somewhat more plausible than in many other portrayals), in the interview, Brooks was able to offer a more objective view. Does Brooks believe in zombies? According to the interviewer:

These are the zombies that Brooks believes in: the ghouls that come for you that you can't fight. The zombies are his mother's cancer. They're the fear that his wife and his son won't be O.K., which makes him check his phone every few minutes when he's apart from them. They're the car that killed a friend of his in high school as they walked across the street, Brooks just a few steps ahead. The zombies are anything that comes into your life, without prejudice, and destroys it. The zombies are: Life's not fair.

And more:

Of course there's no such thing as zombies. And yet—“Since 2001, people have been scared,” he explained. “There's been some really scary stuff that's been happening—9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Katrina, anthrax letters, D.C. sniper, global warming, global financial meltdown, bird flu, swine flu, SARS. I think people really feel like the system's breaking down. . . . It's Hurricane Katrina. It's neighbors knifing each other for food, women being raped, the cops not showing up, children dying of starvation, an old lady dying in a wheelchair.” Brooks reasons that many folks can't cope with real-life dangers; they (like him) would prefer to metabolize their anxiety through science fiction. “If all that happens because of a zombie plague, then you can say, ‘Oh, well, that would never happen, because there's no zombies.’”³

But the girl in the Masai hut might have thought differently about the reality of “zombies”—she had seen one, namely, me. I had come into her life, without prejudice, but I had turned it upside down. And young people in our culture are worried

²The source of that statistic is now lost to me and is probably unverifiable in any case.

³Taffy Brodesser-Akner, “Max Brooks Is Not Kidding about the Zombie Apocalypse,” in the *New York Times Magazine*, June 21, 2013, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/magazine/max-brooks-is-not-kidding-about-the-zombie-apocalypse.html?pagewanted=all&r> (accessed January 30, 2015).

about these paradigm-altering “zombies,” too. The operative mantras seem to be one of the final lines of the movie version of *World War Z* (2013), “Be prepared for anything,” and the warning from the 1986 horror film *The Fly*, “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”⁴

WHAT’S A PREACHER TO SAY?

So, if that’s the world we and especially our young people live in, if this is one aspect of our posthuman identity, haunted by zombies, robots, mutants, cyborgs, werewolves, vampires, and aliens, what is a preacher to say? Certainly, it won’t do to tell people there’s nothing to fear. There probably is. And platitudes won’t do either, so no “There, there, it will be okay” sermons. Perhaps it won’t be okay. Brooks is right, of course: life *is* unfair (hardly a new discovery). But then what? My generation just sort of assumed that we would live better than our parents. Today, don’t bet on it. True, we played “drop, duck, and cover” in our classrooms for the simulated air raid drills, but it was mostly a joke. I was shocked years ago when my own kids told me they were not at all sure they would live to adulthood. It’s a different world. What’s a preacher to say?

Perhaps we need to take more seriously the Bible’s texts of terror—no, not those texts of terror that Phyllis Tribble was talking about, texts that tell stories of unimaginable violence and abuse with seemingly no sense that anything wrong is going on there⁵—not those, but the texts in which we are urged to fear God, to understand that God is unimaginably other, that God is God and we are not, that God is, well, “holy.” How might these play in our own age of terror? Brooks talks about “metabolizing” anxiety through science fiction. Might it be possible for the preacher to take that anxiety seriously and “metabolize” it through the vision of a holy God?⁶ There, holiness is certainly other than business as usual, but it finally does not prompt just indiscriminate, abject terror. God’s holiness rather invites entry into another world (or a new take on this world) that provides cleansing and comfort.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: THE CALL OF ISAIAH

Though this context could provide an approach to any texts proclaiming the holiness of God, consider for now the text for this coming Trinity Sunday, the call of Isaiah in Isa 6:1–8 (though we will need the other verses from that chapter as

⁴For more on zombies and young adult dystopian fiction, see the article in this issue by Thomas J. Jorgenson, “Imagining the Nightmare: Empathy and Awareness in Post-Apocalyptic Young Adult Fiction,” *Word & World* 35/2 (2015) 162–170. It was in conversations with Jorgenson about his article that my eyes were opened to the significance of this literature, especially for today’s youth culture.

⁵Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

⁶Elaine L. Graham offers a similar positive role of science fiction in her thorough study of the fantastic creatures that haunt Western myth, religion, and literature. She speaks of the “promise of monsters” and states, “Fantastic, utopian and speculative forms of fiction—epitomized by science fiction—shock our assumptions and incite our critical faculties”; in her *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 13.

well). There is certainly “otherness” there, perhaps muted only by a familiarity with this text that tends to tame its weirdness. But weird it is, with six-winged flying serpents; a scary deity enthroned on high, so huge that just the hem of his robe fills the entire temple; smoke and fire, burning coals, and a booming voice that shakes the foundations. In urban slang, this stuff is “heavy”—altogether appropriate, since that is exactly the response to the booming and dangerous voice of the storm (God’s storm) in Ps 29, the psalm chosen to accompany our Trinity Sunday texts: “The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, ‘Heavy, man!’” Well, what they actually say in the NRSV is, “Glory!” (Ps 29:9). But that word “glory” means in its root (*kabod*) weighty, heavy, awesome.⁷ Tornadoes are awesome (Ps 29) and so is God (Isa 6). Something like this is what “holy” is about in our Isa 6 text. This gives rise to the parallel use of “glory” and “holy” in both Ps 29 and Isa 6 (emphasis added):

“Ascribe to the LORD the *glory* of his name;
worship the LORD in *holy* splendor.” (Ps 29:2)

“*Holy, holy, holy* is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his *glory*.” (Isa 6:3)

*God’s holiness invites entry into another world (or a new
take on this world) that provides cleansing and comfort*

This is wild stuff, and the preacher should not let it get away. What will we do with this wild and holy text—or, for that matter, as Mary Oliver asks, what will we do with our “one wild and precious life”?⁸ Surely, we shouldn’t waste it on boring readings of (or sermons on) wild and precious texts.

If somebody bought the movie rights to Ps 29, the result would have to be something like the fictional film *Twister* (1996) or the Discovery Channel’s *Storm Chasers* documentary series (2007–2011). If somebody who knew what they were doing bought the rights to Isa 6, the result would not be some kind of Cecil B. DeMille spectacular. Only sci-fi would do. And the score should probably be heavy metal. Preachers should work with this, use it playfully and creatively to bring people closer to this dangerous God.

Let’s take a closer look. A possible difficulty with Trinity Sunday is that we end up celebrating a doctrine, an abstraction, rather than the person of this amazing God and the wonder of God’s very specific works. Congregations will probably sing “Holy, Holy, Holy,”⁹ and we ought not forget that, in the words of the hymn

⁷Caveat: while the urban slang use of “heavy” quite accurately captures the meaning of the biblical text here, the preacher to whom such language is not natural (like me) must be careful in using it, perhaps only with a strong measure of self-deprecating humor, lest the hearer reject the preacher’s use of it as phony or, worse, manipulative.

⁸Mary Oliver, “Summer Day,” in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); online, for example, at <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html> (accessed January 26, 2015).

⁹Reginald Heber, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* #413.

itself, we are praising a God who is hidden in darkness and whose glory we dare not see.

Isaiah and his listeners may have preferred to have God, like the Wizard of Oz, remain hidden behind that curtain. Instead, God spoke and Isaiah was given a terrible word about the coming disaster, “earned” by God’s people by the economic and social disorder decried by all the eighth-century prophets (Isa 6:9–13). Why the threat? Because God has given God’s people a wonderful world in which to live, a vineyard on a fertile hill, but they have produced bloodshed rather than justice and a chaotic cry rather than righteousness (Isa 5:1–7). God does not punish willy-nilly, but God is seriously ticked because of the disaster the people have brought down on their own heads.

As Abraham Heschel wrote:

[Our] sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God’s sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval; God’s reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God’s anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed?¹⁰

True, we live in an altogether different social and economic environment than the people of eighth-century Israel, but that’s why God calls preachers now as well as prophets then. What will “justice” mean in our complex world? Who are the widows, the orphans, and the oppressed that we are called to serve, and how are we to do it, individually and as a society, in this very different world? People need a “prophetic” (and humble) preacher to help them figure this out. Isaiah’s response, “Here I am, send me,” takes him to a very difficult place. And if we sing today, “Here I Am, Lord,”¹¹ we should be prepared for a rocky journey.

Think again about what it means to serve a holy God. This is the God who said to Moses, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet” (Exod 3:5), and “You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exod 33:23). By all means, don’t get too close, not because God is maleficent, but simply because God is God.

Think of God as a blast furnace. That furnace in no way means you ill, but it will burn you if you touch it. This is not a cozy God. Dystopian or fantasy literature plays with this danger frequently, from the Forbidden Zone in *Planet of the Apes* (1968) to the Forbidden Forest in *Harry Potter* (1997–2007). These images can help the preacher make the point, but they can be dangerous as well. The melting faces of the Nazi troopers in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) do a good job of depicting the dangers of messing maliciously with the divine presence, but they may give the false impression that God is only some kind of magic, and pretty dark magic at that.

C. S. Lewis gets it better in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when the

¹⁰Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 284–285.

¹¹Dan Schutte, “Here I Am, Lord,” in *ELW* #869.

kids who have mysteriously entered Narnia are being taken to meet Aslan, the great lion and the Christ figure in the book. It occurs to them that Aslan is, after all, a lion—and not at all a Disney lion! “Is he quite safe?” they wonder. “Safe?” comes the answer from Mr. Beaver, “‘course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”¹²

unless we recognize something of the blast furnace character of God, we will not fully appreciate the significance of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”

The sci-fi magic of the ark in *Raiders* is not the same as the “deep magic” of Narnia. Narnia’s magic is more like the Bible’s “wild and precious” mystery, which Job, for example, encounters after all his complaints. This is not “The Creature That Ate Sheboygan” (a 1979 board game), but the mysterious God who hides in and speaks from the whirlwind, the one who makes crocodiles, hippos, and sea monsters for the sheer sport of it (cf. Ps 104:26; Job 40–41), and who, more amazingly, brings life out of death—a God who is profoundly not Job and not us. A God who is dangerously mysterious yet fundamentally trustworthy and always striving to save, both “good and terrible at the same time.”¹³

Not safe, but good, may pretty well describe God’s holiness in many biblical texts. Unless we recognize something of the blast furnace character of God, we will not fully appreciate the significance of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”¹⁴ Now the holy God has become touchable, and all God’s power comes to comfort us in this world of terror. Beware, however, of turning this into an Old Testament (bad)/New Testament (good) dichotomy. The book of Isaiah has already affirmed that Abraham is God’s “friend”—or even, based on the Hebrew, God’s “lover” (Isa 41:8). Thus, the prophet can say (or God can say), “Do not fear, for I am with you” (Isa 41:10). Israel knew that. We hear it again in the New Testament’s proclamation of Jesus.

PSALM 29: THE FEARSOME VOICE OF GOD

Consider how this works in Ps 29. It is a fearsome text, praising a God whose voice breaks trees, rings out in claps of thunder, and flashes forth in lightning. Stand back! Nothing can contain this God—impossible!—but the psalm presents God to us in a hymn whose structure can offer a measure of security. There are four uses of “Lord” in both the opening and closing stanzas (vv. 1–2 and 10–11); there are ten “Lords” in the central section (vv. 3–9). Four, ten, four—this is hardly accidental. Nor are the three uses of “ascribe” in the opening verses and the seven “voices” of vv. 3–9. Four, ten, four; three and seven—the poet is bringing this awe-

¹²C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950; New York: Harper Collins, 1978) 80.

¹³*Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴Joseph Servien, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” in *ELW* #742.

some God home to us in symbolic numbers and rhythmic song that begin to subdue the chaos of the storm. And in the end, we are assured that God sits over the whole thing (v. 10). “Sits over” may not quite mean “controls,” and it probably should not, since creation remains as wild as Job has found it to be. But we are not just left to our own devices. God sits over us, with us, and thus, in the end, “peace” is possible (v. 11).

The Bible doesn't tame the terror that faces our world, and neither should we. Instead, God uses the divine holy “terror” to confront and chase away the bad terrors, the night terrors, the ghosties and ghoulies that go bump in the night. Hosea got it right: nothing can compare with the danger of a she-bear protecting her cubs against the threats of the unrighteous, even those within Israel itself (Hos 13:8), but if you find yourself in the middle of the dangerous sci-fi woods, you want the bear on your side.

Maybe Jesus got it right, that our future lies with the meek, the merciful, the vulnerable, and the pure in heart. The preacher should not let folks forget this while confronting, as we must, a world that can be truly scary.

GOD IN A SCARY WORLD

The dangers are real. The Forbidden Zone and the Forbidden Forest might be fictional, but the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is all too real. And don't plan to walk around Fukushima very soon. The young people are right: it's a scary world. We go to sleep and all seems well, and we wake up to ISIS, Ebola, “*Je suis Charlie*,” and the threat of global warming's inundation of much of our seashore culture.¹⁵ Having said this, though, the preacher might want to step back a moment, inviting parishioners along, at least enough to realize that the “news” in which we hear all these scary reports, is itself not “real.” It is a highly selective gathering and interpretation of data that exist, yes, to inform but—especially, for the commercial news sources—also to sell products and make celebrities. Catastrophic headlines do this much better than reports about helpful neighbors. It may be that our fears result from “knowing” (selectively) all too much about stuff over which we have very little direct influence. True, as many have said in one way or another, democracy requires an informed electorate, and we should seek to promote that and act on it, but we also need to promote an appropriate hermeneutic of suspicion that recognizes that essentially all our “informers” have an agenda. In one of his *Non Sequitur* comic strips, Wiley Miller has his wonderfully cynical character Danae observe that good behavior makes one invisible. The proof: “When have you ever observed a well-be-

¹⁵See, for example, Evelyn Gaiser, “The Future of Our City on the Sea: A Look at Miami's Environment,” *The Miami Herald*, October 16, 2014, at <http://ourmiami.org/the-future-of-our-city-on-the-sea-a-look-at-miamis-environment/> (accessed January 30, 2015).

haved person in the news?”¹⁶ Intriguingly, while Danae argues that good behavior makes you invisible, in the film version of *Word War Z*, Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt) discovers that weakness or illness makes one “invisible” to zombies. Maybe Jesus got it right, that our future lies with the meek, the merciful, the vulnerable, and the pure in heart (Matt 5:1–12). The preacher should not let folks forget this while confronting, as we must, a world that can be truly scary.

The good news? God enters our scary world—the real one with all its zombies and agendas, the one that remains anything but “fair,” the one that killed Jesus (but also the one with helpful neighbors). God enters as a fully vulnerable human being, finally and fully Immanuel—God with us. But God comes in Christ not primarily to confront the zombies in apocalyptic battle. One of my initial fears about the dystopian literature was that people would take it not too seriously, but too literally, as way too many do with the apocalyptic battles of the Bible itself. These are symbolic battles—the Bible’s own version of sci-fi. It may be time for those of us who tend to steer clear of such texts to dust them off for creative use in a terrifying world. But tread carefully! Wallowing too deeply (and too literally) in biblical apocalyptic will be dangerous to self and other. It will feed our paranoia and the extremists of all religions—including Christians, Muslims, and Jews—and it will get the Bible wrong. Equally as bad, it will be fundamentally escapist. No time to love the neighbor, I am busy preparing for Armageddon. No need to care for the environment, it will soon be obliterated anyway.

God takes the real world far more seriously than that. More, God loves it! Thus, what we do matters—to God, to ourselves, and to our neighbors. Who knows what comes tomorrow? But today, love your neighbor as yourself—the simple counsel of Deuteronomy and Jesus, a “deep magic” that might even save our world. ⊕

FREDERICK J. GAISER is professor emeritus of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is editor of Word & World.

¹⁶This strip was reprinted in the *Non Sequitur* desk calendar, October 28, 2014.