

The Upside-Down
Halloween Sunday, October 27, 2019

Every Sunday, pretty much for the past 144, it feels like I have gotten up here and in some way or other said, “The world is crazy. This is how we can deal with it.”

And it feels to me each week like it can’t possibly get any crazier – and then it does. Take this week.

- Saying that Isis had been defeated, the US abandoned our long-time allies, the Kurds, leaving them be massacred, declaring the new arrangements good for everyone, and then moved troops into Iraq to – fight Isis.
- Two dozen Republican members of Congress forced their way into the secure briefing room in which three House committees were conducting impeachment hearings, demanding access to the information – even though half the group were on the committees conducting the hearings and so had access. In the process, they compromised the security of the site.
- A former acting attorney general said that “abuse of power is not a crime.”
- The current attorney general began a criminal investigation into his own agency’s investigation of Russian inference in our elections.
- According to the Washington Post fact-checkers, as of mid-October, the President had made 13,455 lies or misstatements during his time in office. If you’re trying to do the math, that’s 13.3 public lies per day.
- Wild fires in Sonoma County, California, spread from sparks set off by PG&E’s unmaintained equipment, even as they forced customers into blackouts to stop sparks.
- Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos declared that private for-profit colleges which are in the process of accreditation could classify themselves as non-profit to make them eligible for government funding.
- And for comic relief, we have the President’s attorney, Rudy Giuliani inadvertently calling a reporter’s phone and unwittingly recording a conversation about the Bidens on the reporter’s voicemail.

Everything is topsy turvy – wrong is right, false is true, reality is what you say it is. Except we know it’s not. How are we to make sense of it all? How are we to live with integrity in the midst of lies? How are we to maintain our work for justice and without feeling sapped and discouraged?

Today in my annual Halloween sermon, we're exploring what wisdom and examples the Netflix series *Stranger Things* might offer us. Every year I choose a topic thinking it will be funny and campy, and every year I find the topic offers a serious connection to our world. This year is no different. For in many ways we are living in a *Stranger Things* world.

How many of you have watched the series? For those who aren't familiar, *Stranger Things* is set in Hawkins, Indiana, a town a little larger than Hingham. The first series begins in November 1983, a time when Ronald Reagan was president, Michael Jackson's *Thriller* was the number 1 hit, and the Cold War with the USSR had entered an especially tense time provoked by President Reagan's build-up of the armed forces and his attacks on their "Evil Empire." There were cut-backs to environmental protections and fears for the ozone layer and toxic chemicals in water, food, and the air. It was an age of anxiety similar to our own. So all this underlies the seemingly idyllic life in Hawkins, where children are still free-range, riding their bikes to friends' houses and exploring the woods. But hidden in those woods is a laboratory run by the Department of Energy where strange creatures are on the loose and children with psychic powers are monitored and trained to use their powers for warfare.

One night while he is bicycling home from a Dungeons and Dragons session with his three close friends, 12 year old Will Byers is seized by a monster. That same night, a girl of about the same age escapes from the laboratory and ends up being found by Will's friends Mike, Dustin, and Lucas who are out searching for Will. She doesn't have a name – she is only known by her number "Eleven" so they call her "El." The first season focuses on the search for Will, the question of who El is and the menacing and violent efforts of the government to reclaim her, and the quest to find and kill the monster. I don't want to get into details or spoil the series for any of you who haven't yet seen it, so I'm just going to highlight a couple of themes this morning and encourage you to watch it if you haven't.

First: the realm of the Upside-Down. In the show, the Upside Down exists parallel to this world. Houses, shops, streets, forests, cars, sheds, trees, and plants exist in their same places there as here. But it's a world of death, not life. The air is toxic, and only monstrous creatures can survive there. Human beings are dragged there to be eaten and smothered by vine-like creatures. There is no color in the Upside Down – everything is black and white and wrong. Although it has always existed in parallel, somehow a gate between the worlds has been opened and

the monster, which the boys call the Demogorgon after a character from Dungeons and Dragons, has been freed to walk and hunt in both.

I think one of the draws of this series is the power of this alternate world and the effort of the characters to close it off from our world of life and hope and color. Though the upside down we deal with day today is not as deadly as the one leaking into Hawkins, it is toxic, disorienting, and dangerous in ways we had not foreseen and feel unable to control. Interestingly, when the series was originally planned, no scenes were set in it; the writers thought that it would be scarier in the imagination. But as the story evolved, the writers realized that we had to see the characters go into the Upside Down, see them walking through its vaporous, eerie streets, confronting its evil.

And how do the characters in the story – spoiler alert – rescue Will and return the monster to its own world? They do it through the power of love. Initially of course, they try force – shooting the monster, but that doesn't stop him. Only love gives them the power they need. *Stranger Things* profoundly is about the power of love: the love in the friendship among the four boys; the fierce love Will's mother Joyce feels for her son and his older brother Jonathan, a love which she extends beyond the circle of her family to others who are vulnerable; the love the police chief Jim Hopper feels for his daughter, who has died before the series begins, a love he draws upon to save Will and care for Eleven; the love between Will and his brother Jonathan and between Mike and his older sister, Nancy; the love Nancy feels for Steve, her first boyfriend, and for Jonathan, and even for her brother's annoying friends; and the love which grows in Steve throughout the series, turning him from a shallow, arrogant young man, to a vulnerable human being offering himself to protect others. And there is Eleven's understanding of what it means to be in relationship and care for another. Eleven has never known love since she was taken from her mother as a baby. She has been manipulated by scientists at the lab through her human desire for connection and affection, but it isn't until that she connects with the boys and Joyce and Hopper that she begins to trust that she can be cared for and care in return.

In the end of the first series, El sacrifices herself to save the boys from the monster and return it to the Upside Down. It's interesting how many writers see this act as Christ-like and El as a Christ figure because of it, but I think they miss the point. Love so profound that you would die for another or make other sacrifices isn't just part of the Christian tradition – it's part of every tradition, every mythology. It's an archetypal love. And all the main characters put themselves out

in front of evil and danger for the good of others. Everyone in the series grows in their sense of connection. These connections motivate them to act for the good of all, but these connections also help them to accept assistance. No one acts alone.

At one point Jonathan and Nancy go into the woods to try to trap the monster and almost get trapped in the Upside Down. When Jonathan's mother Joyce finds out about what they did, she says to Jonathan, "You act like you're all alone out there in the world, but you're not. You are not alone." We are not alone.

Jonathan Storment, is a minister and blogger who has written a series he calls "The Gospel According to *Stranger Things*." He wrote about the pull of the series, "We want to believe that there is a kind of friendship that will lay down its life for another. We want to believe that our deepest pain can somehow be redeemed into something good. We want to believe that there is a love that is stronger than death. We want to believe that there is a good in this world and it's worth fighting for."

This is the hope and example the series offers us in our world, Not that there is a savior with otherworldly powers who will come and kill the monsters and sacrifice herself for us, but that together we contribute our own gifts – stubbornness, scientific knowledge, artistic vision, unconditional love, persistence, intelligence, the ability to make others laugh in a tense situation – whatever it may be, we all contribute our gifts to the work of making the world safe and healthy for all people and all life forms. And that while we work in our small groups in our communities, other groups of people in other places are using their gifts to work toward the same goals. Even though we may never know of their efforts, we benefit from them and they from ours. *Stranger Things* is a series about hope and promise, the promise that good does triumph, though slowly and with setbacks, that our human efforts do make a difference. Our sacrifices, great and small, are meaningful actions. And though there are structures of power and people who are invested them who may act against us, together, we too have great power.

Towards the end of the first season, El uses her powers to visualize where Will is hiding in the Upside Down. She walks through that realm in spirit but it's so real in her mind that it's as if she's there in body. As she's preparing to do this Joyce says to her, "I will be with you the whole time, and if it ever gets too scary in that place, you let me know." On the journey, she comes upon someone who has died and cries out in fear and grief. And Joyce, who is there, says to her, "It's okay. It's okay. You're safe. I'm right here with you."

As we confront the Upside Down threatening our world, may we remember and remind one another that we are not alone. We are right here with one another, supporting each other as we face whatever scary creatures and events may confront us, sharing strength and love and hope, filling our world with color, life, and joy.

- Pamela M. Barz