

**Into the Woods** – Sermon for Sunday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – Faith Formation Sunday  
-Bree McKee-Miller, MFA

Most of the people who speak to you from this pulpit are ordained ministers who have gone to seminary and gotten an MDiv. I am not that. But as I understand it, when my mother was ordained, she was pregnant with me, so...kinda? While my undergraduate degree is in Religious Studies with a minor in History, my graduate degree is a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. I write all sorts of stuff, but my focus is primarily on fiction. My favorite thing to write is Speculative fiction for young adults. You might know speculative fiction better as Science Fiction and Fantasy. So, buckle up: it's about to get reeeeeal geeky up in here.

Speculative fiction is often dismissed as escapism, which, yes. Obviously. Who doesn't need to escape reality sometimes? But to dismiss it because of that is failing to see the bigger picture of what speculative fiction can be. I am drawn to it particularly because it gives us a fantastic (literally fantastic) set of tools for examining reality and making social commentary. And we need this tool because we can see much more clearly when we are looking at a situation objectively than when we are in the situation ourselves. At its best, speculative fiction is a means of holding up a mirror and inviting us to think critically about what we see. And for the record, anyone who is mad about "wokeness" in the more recent Star Trek iterations either did not watch the original series or completely missed the point. But I digress.

We gave Bibles to our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders and our Confirmands today, and so it seemed like a good time to talk about stories and their power to help us understand the world. In fact, some research suggests that humans really don't understand anything unless they can put it in a narrative of some sort. So, I want to start with a story.

Roughly seven years ago, I was at the Fourth Street Fantasy convention, which is a small gathering that focuses on sci-fi and fantasy literature and attracts both writers and fans. It's held here in the west metro and has participants from all over the place. I was there with Nico, a good friend of mine from my MFA program, as his designated extrovert. That year, we were celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks*. Anyone familiar with it? Emma is a local Twin Cities author and is considered a pioneer of the urban fantasy genre, and *War for the Oaks* is considered to be one of the earliest examples of urban fantasy. Nico and I had taken a summer writing workshop from Emma together, and we were both excited to be celebrating this common mentor of ours.

One of the panel discussions around *War for the Oaks* got into the concept of liminality. Now, the first time somebody talked to me about liminality, I had to sneak off and google the word to figure out what the heck was going on, so I assume some of you are in that same boat. According to Miriam-Webster, the most common meaning of the word liminal is "of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase or condition: in-between, transitional." Examples would be the liminal space between waking and dreaming or in the middle of a move when you are between residences—that's a liminal state of being. It might help to think of the word "limit." Basically, a liminal space is neither here nor there and therefore outside the rules of

either place. It is a place that is both full of possibility and full of danger. For better or worse, anything can happen in a liminal space.

In fairy tales, the woods are a liminal space between villages or cities. The witch in fairy tales almost always lives in the woods. And weird things always seem to happen at midnight—that brief liminal space between days. In literature, you will often see liminal spaces associated with water. Think of all the folklore about ghosts or monsters not being able to cross water. You might also have heard stories of meeting the Devil at a crossroads. A crossroads is a point of decision, and also a meeting of two different ways—therefore, liminal.

This concept of liminal space is incredibly common in storytelling. It is so common, in fact, that we all just know it without knowing that we know it. We understand that there is power, danger, and possibility in moments of transition and places in between. I could go on, but the main thing you need to remember is this: Because liminal spaces exist in between and are not governed by the typical rules of society, this is where magic can happen.

Urban fantasy, such as *War for the Oaks*, as a genre, flips this idea on its head, identifying liminal spaces inside the city proper, finding the places that have slipped through the cracks of society. Some truly masterful examples of this are Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and J Michael Strazinsky's *Midnight Nation*, both of which play with the idea of a second city or world existing below or invisibly within the known world, and this is where the forgotten, invisible, marginalized people end up. Note the connection between the words marginalized—meaning pushed out to the edges—and liminal. In *Neverwhere*, the two worlds are referred to as London Above and London Below. Guess where the magic happens.

But anyway, back to *War for the Oaks*. It came up in the panel discussion that Emma had used a women's bathroom as a liminal space where the main character has a sort of parlay with the evil fae queen. And this is brilliant, especially to anyone who has gone to public school, am I right? Public bathrooms are weird neutral spaces that exist outside of the regular rules of society, and therefore, anything can happen in the bathroom. Plus, water and mirrors (which is another trope in fairy tales associated with traveling between worlds.) Pure brilliance.

So, right after this panel discussion, I stand up to head for a bathroom break, and Nico says, "Careful, anything can happen in the bathroom." Hardy-har-har. So, off I go. As it happens, I run into Emma Bull herself in the little lounge-like area in the front of the women's room. So, I head over to say hi. Now, gentlemen, I realize this sounds super weird to many of you, but it's absolutely normal to have friendly conversations in the women's room, even with complete strangers. It just is. Anyway, Emma was in conversation with a woman I had never met, but who was wearing a lovely handknit, beaded, lace shawl, and as a fellow knitter who knows exactly how much work that entails, I felt compelled to compliment her on her hard work and artistry. This is also super normal. Knitters find each other in the wild like this all the time. And because Emma is also a knitter, this seemed like a completely reasonable entree into the conversation. So, here's me gushing to this stranger about her shawl, and I realize that both she and Emma are staring at me in disbelief. I'm like uh oh. What did I say? And the stranger says to me, "I was

just telling Emma that I had made this shawl for somebody else, and I didn't know who. But, clearly, it is meant for you."

I protest, because, seriously, the time, the cost of the supplies alone, but she takes it off her shoulders and puts it on mine and says, "Nope, it belongs with you. It even matches your outfit today."

And so, that is the story of how I was gifted a handknit, beaded, lace shawl by a complete stranger in a public bathroom. I came back to my seat afterwards, and Nico gave me this confused look, because I was obviously not wearing this shawl when I left him, and I simply said, "Anything can happen in the bathroom, Nico."

Now, I call this my writing shawl, and I wear it whenever I am trying to get into that writing frame of mind, especially when my stories are venturing into those liminal spaces where magic happens. I think of it like a talisman or piece of enchanted armor gifted to the adventurer by their mentor to keep them safe on their journey and help channel their power. Some of you may recognize this as a common element in the hero's journey or the monomyth as popularized by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Is anyone familiar? Fun fact: it was being able to discuss this concept fluently on our first date that got my now husband a second date. Do with that what you will.

So, for those who are not familiar, the monomyth or hero's journey is an archetypal plot structure that shows up in many, many stories throughout history and in many different cultures. Once you know the structure, you will start seeing it everywhere; in folklore, literature, film, and even in sacred texts. There are many versions of it in the Bible, it's in Homer's *Odyssey*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, a lot of Disney movies, basically all of the *Spiderman* films, and so on. Archetypal images and stories are important because they tell us a lot about how we, as a society, see and interpret the world. They are powerful stories that instruct and inspire us. However, as a footnote here, I would like to point out that this monomyth comprises the majority of stories only so long as they are told by members of the normalized dominant society. It could be argued that it is an inherently masculine story structure that places all the glory in adventure, battle, conquest, the hunt, etc. As soon as members of marginalized communities such as women, queer and trans folx, BIPOC, etc. start telling stories, the narrative plot structures get a lot more...well...liminal. And the power in that rocking of the literary boat has power precisely because it deviates from the familiar. But with any art form it is handy to learn the "rules," so you know how and when to break them.

To help you follow along with this, I have provided a diagram on the front of your bulletins. As much as I would LOVE to get into this whole thing with you, in the interest of time and simplicity, we're only going to focus on this first bit that leads up to crossing the threshold. Maybe we can cover other bits if Sarah ever asks me to preach again. So this is like, act 1, and it's known as the Call To Adventure. We meet the character in the course of their regular lives, and then something happens that upsets the status quo. This is either information that arrives or something happens that leads the main character to seek advice from the local "wise

person.” The person who provides this advice or information is called the herald. This person often goes on to serve as a mentor or companion along the way, and they are often the most delightfully eccentric person in the story. I love a good herald. Examples would be Gandalf, or Hagrid, or Moana’s grandmother, who I want to be when I grow up. In Star Wars, it’s either Obi-Wan Kenobi or R2-D2 depending on interpretation, the White Rabbit, the ghost of Jacob Marley, The Oracle from the Matrix, Weird Barbie, The Mrs. Ws (Whatsit, Which, and Who) in A Wrinkle in Time, and of course, the burning bush, and John the Baptist. There are lots of others in the Bible, but I wasn’t going to make Jane/Andrea read you the entire book. Did you notice the description of John the Baptist in the scripture she just read? He’s out here dressed in camel hair and leather, eating locusts and honey, yelling his doomsday prophesies and literally beckoning people out into the wilderness. He’s really leaning into that outsider vibe. And that’s by design. The herald is the messenger from the liminal space, touched with some kind of otherworldliness. They represent upheaval and knowledge and are the catalyst for change. They invite the would-be-hero to leave behind their known world and go do something extraordinary.

And usually, the hero refuses. Or at least expresses doubts. “I’m sorry, God, did you say you want ME to lead your people out of Egypt? I think you’ve got the wrong dude. No seriously, I’m really bad at public speaking, and Pharaoh kinda already wants me dead. So, maybe you reached the wrong bush?” But then, either the herald is very persuasive, often giving the adventurer some sort of blessing or enchanted object, or something happens to force the issue, and off our adventurer goes into the “special world” of the story.

But as I mentioned, often in urban fantasy and when the stories are told by members of more marginalized groups, this structure can get all kinds of flipped around or even dropped completely. Because we’re so used to hearing the hero’s journey, this can sometimes make the reader or viewer very uncomfortable. And this tells us something important, too. There’s more than one kind of story—more than one version of reality. As I mentioned before, sometimes the special world of the story comes to the protagonist. Sometimes, we learn that the liminal space was right under our noses all along.

I feel like I don’t need to go into a whole Once upon a time in the Midwestern utopia of Minneapolis narrative for you all to understand that the last few years here have read like an urban fantasy novel. This threat called COVID came in from outside and threw us all into “Unprecedented Times” which is really just a tidy euphemism for The Woods. Between the lockdown and the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests, it suddenly became glaringly obvious that there have been two Minneapolis all along. One that tops all the right national listings like best place to raise a family, highest level of education, best healthcare, etc. etc., and one that tops all the wrong national listings, like biggest racial gaps in access to education, affordable housing, police protection. Welcome to Minneapolis Below.

Meanwhile, the COVID isolation brought another ongoing issue into rather harsh focus. It turns out our children and young adults are the most anxious, depressed, loneliest generation ever, statistically speaking. And it’s really no surprise given all the anxiety, hopelessness, and isolation they have been steeping in for their whole lives. This generation has never lived in the pre-9/11

world. Has never lived in the pre-Columbine world. Has no concept of a government that is willing to find common ground for the good of the whole. They've spent their entire lives living in the sting of a ripped-off band-aid exposing old, old wounds festering like a cut from a Nazgul blade. And on top of that, their world is literally burning, and not just from the protests. The entire environment is under threat from climate change driven by a society too focused on greed and convenience to stop it. And they're living in front of screens that just spew the bad news at them like a fire hose.

I mentioned earlier that I have a particular affinity to Young Adult fiction, and there's a really great reason for that. I LOVE a coming of age story, and the core of a coming of age story is the moment when a young person decides who they want to be. Are they going to refuse the call, or are they going to stand up and do something? Adolescence is one big liminal space, fraught with trials and dangers, but also full of possibility. It's a crossroads—a place of great power—what are they going to choose?

Mayflower, the woods came to us. And yes, we are coming out the other side of the pandemic, but all the brokenness that it revealed to us is still here. In fact, I have heard several people recently talking about how they are only just now starting to process and heal from the trauma of the last few years. One friend said, "It's like my body got me through the emergency, but it was keeping receipts, and now the bill is due."

We are at a crossroads. And it's dangerous and uncertain here. AND this is where the magic can happen.

I encourage you to embrace this liminal space as an opportunity to decide who you want to be. Are you the person who refuses the call, or are you the one who steps out on that road, not knowing where it will lead, but only that you have to *do something*.

And I want to draw your attention to the fact that a church—this church—is also a liminal space. Think of the ancient tradition of claiming sanctuary—the idea that if you are in a church, you are outside the reach of the law. Look around you. We have water here in our baptismal font, recalling the herald, John the Baptist who called people out into the wilderness to be baptized and initiated into a new way of life. We have an eternal flame that burns but is not consumed, much like the burning bush Moses encountered in the wilderness, where he spoke to God and was called to free his people. We have a columbarium, and if you don't think graveyards are liminal spaces, I have news for you. Have you ever noticed how much a cross looks like a crossroads? In fact, as I understand it, the pre-Christian people of Ireland used the cross to symbolize an intersection—the meeting of the mundane and the divine. We have intentionally created a space that exists at that same crossroads. Take off your shoes, my friends, you are standing on holy ground. THIS, right here, is where magic can happen.

And that's why the Faith Formation programs are focusing on courageous connection this year. We are intentionally venturing into the woods to meet our children, youth, and families where they are. We're here to offer them tools, skills, and allies for the long journey. We are here to be

mentors. To be sure, life can be so very scary, but it can also be so very magical, and I, for one, cannot wait to see what our young people do as they venture out into the world. Growth, magic, redemption—these things do not happen in our comfort zones where we are safe and protected and walled off from all the stories that are happening around us. We have to be brave and willing to step outside ourselves to connect with the world, to heal and be healed. We are called to enter the innermost cave and face the monsters there. This is our story, and the ending is not yet written. In fact, we're just getting started.

My friends, I am your herald, and this is your call to adventure. Are you coming with me into the woods? Amen

**Benediction:**

**“Beloved Is Where We Begin”**

If you would enter into the wilderness,  
do not begin without a blessing.  
Do not leave without hearing who you are:  
Beloved, named by the One  
who has traveled this path before you.  
Do not go without letting it echo in your ears,  
and if you find it is hard  
to let it into your heart, do not despair.  
That is what this journey is for.  
I cannot promise this blessing will free you  
from danger, from fear, from hunger or thirst,  
from the scorching of sun or the fall of the night.  
But I can tell you that on this path there will be help.  
I can tell you that on this way there will be rest.  
I can tell you that you will know the strange graces  
that come to our aid only on a road such as this,  
that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength,  
that come alongside us for no other cause  
than to lean themselves toward our ear  
and with their curious insistence whisper our name:

Beloved  
Beloved  
Beloved

-Jan Richardson, from *Circle of Grace*