

James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Once Upon a Time

For those of us who read fairy tales, the words “Once Upon a Time” take us into a different way of being and seeing. For in fairy tales, we know that our inner lives are twice as important as how people view us. In fairy tales, our beliefs determine what happens in the end as well as along the way.

We might also remember that fairy tales follow a common story line. The protagonist is drawn into a dangerous situation, out of which he or she needs to find a way when there seems to be no way. The protagonist, however, perseveres, acting out of core values to reach a specific goal in the face of antagonists - forces or persons working against them.

A story that comes to mind is Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Wild Swans”. It goes like this: Once upon a time, a king and queen ruled a kingdom far far away. They had 11 sons and a daughter, Elisa, the youngest. They were very happy. Then tragedy struck. The queen died and the king in his grief, married a wicked witch who turned him against his children. She then changed the princes into wild

swans. For some reason however, her magic did not work on 15-year-old Elisa, whose brothers then rescued her by flying her to a distant kingdom. Though they turned back into human form each night when the sun went down, at sunrise they again became swans.

Now as princess Elisa was good and true, the fairies took pity on her in this foreign land. For they could see into her heart and found only goodness there. Out of sympathy, they told her how to break the spell. “If you knit a shirt for each brother from the nettles in the graveyard while keeping a vow of silence, the spell will be broken. If, however, you speak one word before all the nettle shirts are finished and on their shoulders, your brothers will die.” Elisa made up her mind. She would save her brothers regardless of the cost to herself. It was time to begin. Though nettles’ thorns burned and stung and her fingers bled, Elisa began her work in silence.

Now as often happens in fairy tales, people notice goodness and beauty. The Prince of this foreign land saw Elisa and immediately fell in love with her. Though she refused to speak, he moved her to the castle and planned to marry her. But the Archbishop was suspicious. Why was she knitting nettle shirts if she was not a witch? And he convinced the people and king of this, waiting for confirmation. When Elisa discovered she needed one more bundle of nettles to finish the last shirt, she went into the graveyard under cover of darkness one night to gather them. The Archbishop’s spy followed her. He witnessed her among the evil things and concluded that she must be one of them. The people believed him and demanded her execution. Though the Prince knew Elisa was true, he was powerless to save her. Thrown into the dungeon with the ten completed shirts, she continued to knit the last one in silence.

The next morning her jailers loaded her in a cart, and took her through the crowd into the square. There a single wooden pole stood vertical within a circle of dry branches. Elisa knit faster still as she was almost done. Almost.... On seeing all her shirts, the crowd called, “Burn them with her!” as the executioner readied the fire. It was looking bad for Elisa.

Yet as often happens in fairy tales, her faithful suffering was rewarded. For at that moment, her 11 brothers flew in as swans, landing around her to protect her. Elisa quickly threw a shirt over each, the youngest maintaining the wing of a swan with one sleeve unfinished. All eleven became men again, forever.

Overcome with exhaustion, Elisa faints and her oldest brother, now human again, tells her tale of faithfulness. The people and King repent. Elisa and her prince are married and live happily ever after. For this is not a tale of revenge against those who wrong them, but one of faithfully living within the confines of suffering love, which transforms heart and life as fairy tales often reveal.

In the same vein, Frederich Buechner writes, “It is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle where often it is hard to be sure who belongs to which side because appearances are endlessly deceptive. Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his or her true name.... That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.” (Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale).

In like manner, Mary lives happily in Nazareth. When she is betrothed at 13 to a man named Joseph whom she barely knows, her parents caution her to wait for what marriage brings. Yet like in fairy tales, deeper forces are at work. The head messenger of God appears to Mary saying, “Don’t be afraid” and then invites her to consent to birthing the Son of God. She IS given a choice. She can refuse. And like many a fairy tale’s heroine, Mary’s “Yes” resounds with courage and full knowledge of the consequences - in her case a possible stoning for infidelity - at the least a ruined reputation. Though Mary’s “happily ever after” includes standing at the foot of Jesus’ cross, the happy ending of Resurrection made it all worthwhile.

Yes, the difference between fairy tales and the Gospel is the Gospel is true. Jesus shows us how to live, die and be reborn many times before our death. Like fairy tale protagonists, we too are called to live out core values like selfless love in seemingly impossible situations, trusting God for hope and the courage to persevere - finding companionship and joy along the way. Like Mary, we are to “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”