Once Upon a Time: How the Gospel is like a Fairytale

Is it just me, or does our Gospel story today also remind you of Little Red Riding Hood? You know the story, of the little granddaughter that went to visit her grandma in the woods, but the grandma was intercepted and eaten by a wolf before little red riding hood could get there. And then their iconic exchange that followed:

“Grandmother, what big ears you have!”
“What big eyes you have!”

Do you hear the similarity?
As Jesus and his disciple leave the temple, his disciple remarks to him:
“My…what large stones you have;”
“What large buildings!”¹

I’m not the first to hear some resonance between our Gospel stories and fairytales. Frederick Buechner explored this in his book, *Telling the Truth.* He said the Gospel “is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It’s a world where terrible things happen, and wonderful things too. A world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos.”²

Before I go any further, I want to make perfectly clear that I don’t think the Gospel is a fairy tale. Scripture contains the words and stories of God, compiled and passed on through the ages. It’s full of truths – literal and spiritual truths. Yet there are parallels between fairy tales and our Gospels.

Like how when we read the Bible and fairy tales, our sense of time changes. When someone says, “once upon a time,” we know they’re talking about “a time beyond time, or a different kind of time altogether from the kind the clock measures.”³ The same thing happens to our sense of time when we read the stories from Scripture: We enter into an ancient story, and yet find ourselves experiencing it still today. Like Buechner wrote in his book, we realize that the Gospel story “not only happened once upon a time, but has kept on happening ever since, and is happening still.”⁴

Maybe you’re thinking you’re too old for such fanciful things, You’ve grown out of fairy tales.

¹ Inspired by a conversation with a colleague Rev. Lindsay Hills on our Young Clergy Women preaching Facebook group.
² Buechner, Frederick. *Telling the Truth*, page 81.
³ Buechner, page 73.
⁴ Ibid, 81.
But over and over again, Jesus reminds us to be like children.\textsuperscript{5}
Receiving the stories of our faith with awe and wonder.
And the magic of stories, is that they allow us to engage with topics we could never hope to
tackle in normal “adult” conversations.
We’re released from our intellectual hideouts, and we find ourselves “telling facts about our
inner and outer world that feel either too obvious for modern people, or too truthful.”\textsuperscript{6}

The stories of our faith are wild, holy, and true things.
They move us into topics and themes we might otherwise want to avoid.
Like the Gospel for today…
“My, what large buildings and what large stones,” we hear our fellow disciple say.
And as we tumble into a “once upon a time” world,
We find ourselves face to face with the deepest fears we hold today:
That the buildings and systems we’ve so painstakingly created, will crash down around us,
That our national instability will reach the point of collapse.
That nation will rage against nation,
And there will be no joyful armistice.
That after the famines and fires and natural disasters,
There in fact won’t be enough left for everyone.

And then we hear the story of our sister Hannah.
A woman who’s not only “deeply troubled” by her struggles with fertility,
But also, she’s a victim of bullying by her husband’s other wife, Penninah,
And misunderstood by her priest Eli.

I can hardly imagine trying to bring up even one of those topics and questions,
And yet our stories of apocalypses and miraculous births take us right there.
We find the truths of the past resonating with our experiences today.
And if we stay with the pain and fear of these stories long enough,
We find that they move us along.

Because the thing about stories is that they don’t stay in those desolate places forever.
Gospel and fairy tale stories both include a turning point within them.
When the huntsmen comes to save the day for Little Red Riding Hood,
When sleeping beauty wakes up,
And the ultimate turning point, when Jesus rises from the earth in his Resurrection.

There comes a turning point,
When the birthpangs begin (Mark 13:8),
And a new thing is born.
It’s a turn that catches our breath,
And causes our hearts to beat faster.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{5} See Matthew 18:1-5, among others
\textsuperscript{6} Ashlee Willis blog: https://ashleewillisauthor.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/the-fairy-tale-gospel/
\textsuperscript{7} J.R.R. Tolkien get at this in his essay on the power of fairy tales. See a blog about it here:
http://templetonhonorscollege.com/blog/2017/03/13/fairy-tales
It’s the turn of events we hear in Hannah’s story today,
When she goes from whispering her prayers to God,
To singing a song of worlds turned upside down by love and justice,
Where the mighty have fallen, and the poor are being raised up.
It gets at what G.K. Chesterton called the “deepest truth about fairy tales,
Which is not that dragons exist, but that they can be beaten.”

That’s what the Gospel gives us today.
The gift to receive core truths again with the curiosity and imagination of children.
It gives us the chance to name our deepest doubts and questions,
About family relationships,
Infertility and childbearing,
Resource scarcity,
Institutional collapse,
Natural disasters.

And yet the stories of our faith give us the chance to tell again of the turn towards goodness that will come.
This is the turn on which all our Christian hope rests.
It’s a truth that affirms that good will conquer evil,
And “in the long run everybody,
good and evil alike,
will be known by her true name.”
The Gospel is too honest to tell us that we’ll all live happily ever after,
But inspite of it, we know that “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

We have a fabulous story to tell as Christians,
A story that leads people into the truest and most vulnerable of places,
And then takes us to a place of hope.
It’s a story with the power to save us.

So may we dive deeply into the stories of our faith,
“Learning them, marking them, and inwardly digesting them,”
telling them again in the wildest and holiest of ways,
Believing with all the faith of a child,
That indeed it really could be true. Amen.

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8 https://ashleewillisauthor.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/the-fairy-tale-gospel/
9 Thanks to Rev. Carol Ferguson who helped think through these ideas in our Young Clergy Women International Preaching Facebook group
10 Buechner, 81.
11 See more here: http://templetonhonorscollege.com/blog/2017/03/13/fairy-tales
12 Book of Common Prayer, page 236, Collect for Proper 28: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.
13 Buechner, 91.