I realized this week, as I listened to people calling into radio shows with their real-life ghost stories, that my research for this sermon was going to cost me some sleep. Holy cow. There’s some spooky stuff out there! Don’t worry—I am not going to retell any of those really scary stories today. At least, not from the pulpit.

This morning, I’m more interested in why we would ever want to hear and retell scary stories, and in particular, why as a species (if not as individuals) we humans are so enthralled by monsters…. Big monsters, small ones, terrifying ones, and even friendly ones. They come in many forms.

We go to the movies to see them: movies about giant, unstoppable sharks, aliens, or supernatural clowns. In Jordan Peele’s movie Us, the monsters are dopplegangers of ourselves, destroyed by the difference between lives that are privileged and those of the underclasses.

Peele is good at turning cultural studies into horror. In his movie Get Out the scary thing is hidden racism, which the characters who are people of color sense and are unnerved by, but the film’s white liberals pretend does not exist—until those white liberals turn into racist monsters.

Linking monsters to culture is a time-honored tradition. According to monster theory, monsters reflect the fears of their times. They change across eras and places as fears change. [Monster theory. Yes, there’s such a thing as monster theory! College students, it’s not too late to change your major, maybe you want a dual major in monster theory and political science—I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of potential there].

Zombies are another example. Several years ago, I preached about The Walking Dead, a zombie show that was a big hit. In it the zombies cause a breakdown of society, a kind of apocalypse. Many other apocalyptic horror and sci fi movies, books, and shows have been written in the last few decades. As real life environmental and political crises grow in intensity, our collective imagination is drawn toward the kinds of monsters that lead to a radical disruption of human living.

The word monster comes from the latin monere, meaning to reveal or warn. The same root is found in the word “demonstrate.” Monsters exist to show us something, and we are drawn to them because they reveal or warn about something that is relevant.

Stephen Asma is a professor of philosophy, science, and religion at Columbia College in Chicago. He is also considered an authority on the history and philosophy of monsters. If you google his image, sometimes looks like a young Vincent Price, with the moustache. I think we need to invite him to Albuquerque; he seems fun. Anyway, Asma suggests that
imagining monsters allows us to imagine how we would meet our foes or how we would deal with those things that scare us so much.

One thing humans are scared of, and this is timeless, is the unknown. So monsters are often a hybrid—they don’t fit into one category. They are dead but undead. They are human and not. They may be—like minotaurs—combinations of different animals. They are undefinable, and this is one of their essential characteristics.

Humans are also scared of being helpless. So monsters are often excessive—they may be very big, very strong, and/or very fast. Think King Kong. When we call something monstrous, we usually mean large in size.

Monsters are also often excessive in the sense of being or seeming unstoppable. Stephen Asma says you can’t bribe them, or reason with them, a monster is something you cannot ameliorate.

Sometimes we call very violent people monsters—their behavior is so abhorrent as to seem inhuman, and when this term is used, it also tends to have that terrifying connotation of unstoppability. They cannot be reasoned with.

In the Babylonian creation myth the Enuma Elish, which we think is about 4000 years old, Tiamat—the mother of creation—represents the formless chaos from which life and the cosmos emerged. She is depicted as a monster, and she rages and roars.

She set up vipers and dragons, and [monsters],
And hurricanes, and raging hounds, and scorpion-men,
And mighty tempests, and fish-men, and rams...
Her commands were mighty, none could resist them;iii

That’s pretty monster-y.
Most of the story is about the other gods’ effort to conquer the chaotic, raging monster Tiamat from which all being emerged. It’s this story of coming from nothingness, and being afraid of returning to nothingness. The nothingness is depicted as ferocious in the eyes of humankind, who love life.

There are monsters in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. There is leviathan in the book of Job, a creature unlike any other:iv Leviathan’s snorting throws out flashes of light;
its eyes are like the rays of dawn.
Flames stream from its mouth;
sparks of fire shoot out...

It is invincible and unstoppable. Arrows and swords cannot hurt it. Before that, the same scripture mentions behemoth, another monstrous creature.v We now use the word “behemoth” to refer to something extraordinarily large.
Here’s one more example from the Hebrew scriptures, which I really like because it is sooo descriptive. It’s from Ezekiel 10, in which the scripture speaks of Cherubim. Cherubim. Cherubs. Cute babies with wings, right? Wrong. That’s from art. Here’s what the scripture says (quote):

Their entire bodies, including their backs, their hands and their wings, were completely full of eyes, as were their four wheels. I heard the wheels being called “the whirling wheels.” Each of the cherubim had four faces: One face was that of a cherub, the second the face of a human being, the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.

These are messengers of God. Historically, our ideas about God and our ideas about monsters have been very much connected.

For a secular example, consider the story of Frankenstein by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. She wrote it in 1818, when she was a new mother, and just 18 years old. It is credited with being the first sci fi novel, as well as a horror story.

It’s written as a story within a story. If you’ve never read the actual book, but have only seen the movies and references that spun off from it, you might be surprised at how much nuance and insight it contains—both about the time in which it was written, and about the human condition, and about the time in which we find ourselves today.

The story starts on a ship in the artic sea, from the point of view of Robert Walton, a man who has left his life in Europe behind to go in search of a north passage through the Arctic ice. He wants to be a famous discoverer. He is chasing this dream even though there is a very real possibility it will cost him his life.

He and the ship’s crew are navigating a bunch of icebergs, when in the distance they spot an enormous figure—humanlike, only extraordinarily tall-- driving a sled across the ice. They don’t believe they are anywhere near land, so this really startles them. And then a few hours later, another figure—a regular sized man—also appears before their eyes. This man is scrawny and nearly frozen. He and his sled are not moving, but are stuck on a small chunk of ice, floating in the sea. It has broken off from the rest, and is shrinking. He is at the brink of death. So Walton rescues him, bringing him on board. When the man hears about Walton’s mission, he begs him to listen first to his story. It is a cautionary tale about the relentless pursuit of greatness and fame. The man is named Victor Frankenstein.

We forget that Frankenstein was not the “monster” portrayed by the actor Boris Karloff in the 1931 movie. The greenish, square headed one styled with bolts in his neck. That image became the main one associated with the name in our modern imagination of this story. In the book, Frankenstein is actually the man, western literature’s first “mad scientist.” He is from Geneva. The timing for this story is in Mary Shelley’s time, so sometime around the early 1800’s.
In real life, this was the age of the Enlightenment in Europe. Science had just gotten legs under it. Have you ever seen that evolution bumper sticker that is like a fish, but with legs? Science was like that. It was evolving. It was growing into a serious discipline, and it was changing the way people thought about the natural world, humans, religion, god... everything. Scientists were discovering new things all the time about how bodies and plants and the world work. With that came a sense of power—the idea that if we could understand it, we could steer it, control it. A people whose creation story taught that they were made in the image of God, tasted the possibility that they could be like God in their knowledge and power. Many of the old religious myths were headed out the window—they were increasingly considered superstitious, ignorant, and outdated.

In Shelley’s novel, Victor Frankenstein is caught up in the power and imagination of that time. Trying to escape his grief over the death of his mother, and obsessed with discovering the ultimate question—how matter becomes alive—Frankenstein travels to Germany and shuts himself off from all friends and loved ones, shuts himself off from the natural world outside, and holes up in a laboratory. There he conducts grisly experiments, one after the other, until at last he figures it out: how to spark life. He decides to make a creature of his own.

He wants to create a new species that will, basically, worship him as its creator. He wants it to be magnificent. Better than a human. He forms it from an assemblage of parts he collects. Muscle, skin, bone. Selecting the most beautiful parts, he makes a man-like creature that is over eight feet tall. It is built for extraordinary strength and speed. But the moment the creature comes to life and opens its eyes, Frankenstein is horrified. He sees that his creation is not beautiful at all, but appears unnatural and terrifying. He flees from it, and while he is away, the creature disappears.

The creature is never given a name in the story. He is referred to as creature, demon, fiend, wretch, ogre, and monster. I like “creature,” because it sounds a little gentler. We are all creatures, after all. And, you know, he doesn’t start out as a bad guy.

After he leaves the lab, the creature quickly realizes that not just his creator, but all people are scared of him, so he hides out in the woods. He subsists on berries and acorns. He learns to use fire to stay warm. He comes across a cottage with a French family inside, and learns to speak by eavesdropping on them. He observes how sweet they are to each other, despite toiling very hard and being very poor. With affection, he begins chopping firewood for them at night and secretly leaving it by their door. He knows if they see him they will become frightened, so he remains hidden.

By watching them to read as he spies through the windows, he also learns to read. He happens upon a copy of Paradise Lost, the epic poem about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, written by John Milton. That poem is already 150 years old when this story takes place, but the creature is fascinated by it, by the notion of an origin story. He begins to wonder about his own origins, and why, unlike Adam and Eve and all of their descendants, here is no one else like him. “What am I? Where did I come from?” he asks. Soon he finds Victor Frankenstein’s journal pages, in the pocket of a garment he had taken with him from
the lab. He hadn’t realized what they were at first, because he couldn’t read. But now he understands.

We forget that Frankenstein’s monster, was “a French-speaking, poetry-reading, autodidact” who subsisted on acorns but there he is.\textsuperscript{vi} (An autodidact is someone who is self-taught). He’s a gentle fellow. The problem is, he is desperately, desperately lonely. All he can think of is how much he longs for another being to look upon him with affection and care.

But no one will. When at last he musters up his courage to present himself to the cottagers he has so tenderly watched and cared for, they respond with violence, and in fear they abandon their cottage forever.

Now the gentle creature becomes angry. He is angry that he has been created for nothing but a life of loneliness and suffering. He decides to find Victor Frankenstein and hold him accountable. He demands that Frankenstein make him a mate, so that he is not alone anymore. It is the least he can do, having made a creature so lonely and rejected by others.

The rest of the story is a struggle, between the creator and his creature. The creature makes his case in the most eloquent terms. He describes his heartache and longing. He tells his creator he means no one any harm, that his only goal is to love and be loved. But Victor Frankenstein responds almost entirely out of fear of the creature and shame for what he has created. He worries about his reputation. He curses the creature.

The more callousness Frankenstein and others exhibit, the angrier the creature becomes. He threatens and kills Frankenstein’s loved ones, trying to force Frankenstein to make him a companion. Frankenstein vows to get revenge... and the two beings chase revenge literally to the ends of the earth, with the creature taunting Frankenstein to keep him in a state of perpetual state of wrathful misery, and the compassionless Frankenstein taking the bait.

That is how they wind up sledding across the ice, miles and miles away from land, community, and any last shred of hope.

Should I have issued a spoiler alert? I don’t think we do that for 200-year-old stories. Anyway, I’ve left many wonderful parts out for the sake of time, and I do commend it to you. There’s a reason this story is still around today.

This monster story has all the classic qualities of a good one. It reflects the concerns of its era. Mary Shelley observed the movement away from emotional and spiritual wisdom, and toward reason and logic. Her story of an inventor who is out of touch with his feelings (grief) and creates another being with no regard at all for its feelings, is a cautionary one. Victor Frankenstein is spiritually and emotionally empty. He lacks humility, and would make himself like a god. This monster warns and reveals the pitfalls of relying on a kind of knowledge that is divorced from the complementary insights of wisdom and feeling.
It also contains universal, timeless themes: our fear of being powerless, of being rejected and lonely, and of our lives being made unendurable by things that are out of our control. In fact, throughout the story it is the monster who by far experiences more of the things that frighten all of us. And as Victor Frankenstein’s callousness and self-absorption are revealed, we begin to wonder if he is the real monster of the story. He initiates terrible suffering for the creature he creates, he abandons it, and when it finds him, he cannot be reasoned with, but only makes the creature’s suffering worse; which in turn leads more bad things to happen.

Finally, although the Enlightenment seems like a long time ago, in fact we are at a time in human history that is likely to be looked back on as still closely connected to that era. We have discovered many things, but not everything. And most concerning, we have still not managed to effectively pair logic, science, and technology with other kinds of wisdom – at least, not often enough.

We birthed the internet, without preparing for how it could become a boundaryless field for the worst tendencies of humans.

We harnessed the earth’s natural resources, without planning for the impact our actions would have on the web of all existence upon which our own lives depend.

We are now on the cusp of an era in which artificial intelligence and genetic engineering are the norm. The author of a book called Frankenstein: The First 200 Years, Christopher Frayling writes, “The real creation myth of modern times...is no longer Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” In the age of stem cells, genetic engineering, cloning ... and cryogenic attempts at resurrection, the “real creation myth is 'Frankenstein.’”

This is not to say these things are bad, but that in every era, we would do well to listen to the monsters. They have important messages for us.

In fact, we should think of them as friends.

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1 The term “monster theory” is the title of a book on the subject edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. It is also referenced by Lisa Grumbach in “Frankenstein’s Monster and the Modern Amida: Monster Theory, Buddhist Modernism, and Conceptions of Amida Buddha.” Surprisingly, I don’t see many other references to it out there. It should totally be a bigger thing, right?
2 See authors NK Jemison and Octavia Butler for some great, unconventional sci-fi examples.
3 Here’s one translation: https://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm
4 Job 41
5 Job 40
7 Qtd. in Lescaze.