Zombies sure are changing. When did they get so fast? In a zombie movie on television last week I was surprised to see zombies crashing through doors and running people down to try and eat them alive. I was in high school still when the definitive zombie movie – George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* came out, in 1968. Zombies then were lurching, lumbering, dull, slow-witted creatures. But zombies have been evolving for years now, and that in itself is interesting. It seems they are becoming what we need them to be.

Zombies are everywhere these days – movies, books by the hundreds, all over the internet, a Ziggy cartoon in the newspaper last week and a recent episode of *Castle*. Beyond the U.S., there have been zombie movies in Australia, Britain, China, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Japan, Korea, Norway, Mexico. There are works of fiction, “How to” manuals on surviving a zombie invasion, zombie lit for kids, revisionist Victorian literature (Pride and Prejudice and Zombies), video games like Resident Evil, zombie performance art on campuses, and even a Zombie-Preparedness manual from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta (which shows that of all the government agencies, the CDC understands communication and how to get popular attention so they can educate people on the CDC’s real purposes). There is even zombie Haiku –

Falling down the stairs OR Blood is really warm.
Wasn’t too bad or painful. It’s like drinking hot chocolate,
Told a lot less time. But with more screaming.

Outdoor Life magazine even ran an article on the right weapon for combating zombies, telling hunters what aficionados of the genre already know: “The only way to take ‘em out is with a Head Shot.”

There has been in popular culture a recent obsession with vampires, most recently in the teen soap-operas of the *Twilight* series. Vampires are exotic, beautiful and live forever, and are attractive in that way. Nobody wants to be a zombie, yet the zombie has staying power and is continuing to grow as a symbol. What is going on, that for more than 40 years, zombies have been part of our cultural narrative? It might be good for the church to better understand the phenomenon, and to ask what it means for us. So this is the first of a 3-part series on the most recent incarnation of the zombie theme – the invasion by a mindless horde bent on destroying everything. Today we’ll talk about the origin and development of the zombie myth, and our anxious society. Next week we’ll examine what it means to be human. The week before Pentecost we’ll think about why the genre has raised the specter of the collapse of civilization and life itself. As always, each week we will ask “Where is the good news? Where is the gospel in all this?”
The zombie is just one of a number of creatures that inhabit our stories, books and film, that are called “Undead” – they are supposed to be dead, but aren’t acting like it, precisely because they are acting at all. They are reanimated, and are spirits not at rest. That would include not only zombies, but vampires, ghosts, mummies, shades and revenants of any kind. Raising of the dead is deep in human lore, all the way back to Gilgamesh. Almost every culture has some version of the phenomenon of the dead returning to life. Liminal figures – between life and death.

The zombie as we know it has its origins in Haiti, in Caribbean folklore. Ethnobotanist David Wade says the word “zombie” is Creole for “spirit”, and traces it back to an Angolan Kimbundu word, “Nzumbe”. Meaning “ghost.”iv Originally it carried the connotation of enslavement. The zombie master used drugs or potions, combined with magic, to enslave his victims, so they mindlessly, unknowingly, did his bidding. The zombie was a creation of Haitian Voodoo. Later, it came to be thought that the power of the Voodoo master could raise the dead and send them into the fields to do manual labor in place of the regular workers. The original fear of zombies was not that you might be eaten by one, but that you might become one. The government of Haiti still has laws on the books making illegal the zombification of individuals.

It seems likely that the original Zombie lore was commentary on or anxiety about race, colonialism and slavery. Zombies jumped from Haiti to the US and (outside of New Orleans) first began to appear in our stories on radio, in the 1930’s and 1940’s – the Living Dead (as they were called) showed up on such shows as The Shadow, Lights Out, and Inner Sanctum. They have taken different forms: the Robot-Zombie of The Stepford Wives, the zombie as psychological victim in The Manchurian Candidate, the zombie inhabited by undefined “other” in Stephen King’s novel, Cell. The zombie has become, in Kyle Bishop’s words, a “floating signifier,” collecting other meanings that attach to it. v

In its current incarnation, the zombie is an American creation, which went straight from folklore to film with no book in between. The genre has been defined by the zombie films of George Romero – Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead. His was the lurching mindless creature that existed to feed on human flesh, especially brains. By Romero’s first film, in 1968, the zombie had taken on the allegories about racism and Vietnam. That film featured an African-American hero. Where the original zombie movies from the 30’s and 40’s were about hypnotism or scientific experiments, the classic motif has now become the invasion of our world by “cannibalistic, contagious and animated corpses.” Bishop writes: “The most telling barometer of our age is not to be found in the romanticized undead protagonist of the vampire melodramas...or with the nihilistic sadists of the latest Saw movie, but in the unstoppable hordes of the zombie invasion.”vi So it is interesting there was a huge spike in zombie movies after 9/11, when Al Qaeda became an essentially faceless enemy to us. Also interesting that it has not abated, unless you take into account the viral epidemics that come our way, be it Swine flu, avian flu or AIDS. There are plenty of candidates for an unstoppable horde; threats keep appearing quickly. Is that why our movies have fast zombies these days?

In our mass-media culture, themes repeating to this degree always mean something. It is in our movies, our music, even video games, that the anxiety of the culture is expressed. As Nina Auerbach wrote, “Every age embraces the vampire it needs.”vii We seem now to need zombies. George Romero’s movie zombies were always evolving symbols.
Romero’s second film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), has human survivors of a zombie outbreak taking refuge in a shopping mall, where they stay because it contains all they need. Zombies in the mall lurched routinely about because “it was a place important to them,” and by the end of the film you are hard pressed to describe the difference between the zombies and the humans. Romero satirized consumerism and the shallowness of our lives, with the ultimate consumers of course – zombies. Zombie writer Simon Pegg says the Zombie represents a number of our deeper insecurities, “the fear that deep down we may be little more than animals concerned only with appetite.” Romero’s fourth film in the series, *Land of the Dead* (2005), of a zombie assault on Pittsburgh, drew praise from film critic Roger Ebert for satirizing a world spinning out of control. Another review said of *Land*, “The undead are in many ways indistinguishable from the living poor: they are hungry, unruly and unattractive, and no one wants to become one of them.”

What do they mean, zombies? Speculation runs from as simple as fear of our own death to imagining they are distortions of our own selves as mindless and powerless in a cyber world run by uncontrolled technology. It could be economic threat – we talk now about zombie banks and zombie corporations, those who need constant government bailouts in order to operate. Many people in America have indeed faced an economic apocalypse. One writer even thinks zombies are about “the unstoppable global spread of Starbucks.” Columnist Chuck Klosterman asks, “What if people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day to day existence feels? That would explain why so many people watched that first episode of the Walking Dead. They knew they would be able to relate to it.”

Every zombie war is one of attrition, he notes, like reading and deleting 400 emails every Monday morning.

Zombies give us a way to work through our anxieties in a safe way. But a couple of things are alarming. In the evolution of the zombie meme, the condition is now contagious, and the struggle with zombies becomes a fight for our very survival. And a zombie is not a thing you can reason with or make peace with. Drezner points out that “Natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanoes do not possess ‘agency’ as we understand the concept: neither do disease vectors or melting glaciers.” What heartless and mindless forces in this world have us for a target?

There was a bit of a long introduction, but I think it brings us now to the gospel. Where can there be good news in such a world as we seem to be imagining, threatened with an apocalypse perhaps of our own making?

The obvious text we have to deal with is Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, and perhaps the starting point is his sister Martha’s anxiety. She was the realist, and was worried about the smell, if they open the tomb. In her conversation with Jesus, she conceived of only a future resurrection – as probably most of us do. Hers is a good question – what kind of life will Lazarus have? She might have asked, will he have reanimation or resurrection? And as it turns out, the promise is not just afterlife, but life now, IF we see Lazarus as representative of all those Jesus loves. It is not resuscitation of a corpse – zombie-life that holds nothing but deleting 400 emails every Monday – but is life now, back from the grave. Such a life that was dangerous to the powers that be; it was because of Lazarus that the Sanhedrin resolved to capture and kill Jesus. Lazarus obeyed the command to
“Come out” while he was still dead. If anything, he got un-zombied by the Lord of life himself, and in that is our every hope for our lives.

Columbia Seminary professor Paul Johnson wrote last month about the tradition of “dreamtime” among the Aboriginal people of Australia, a connection to a mythical place from which everything in existence has its origins, and how human beings are believed to be able to access that place… “One must cross the wilderness and be willing to move into the margins, toward the thick darkness where God may be found… to bring back a powerful word that might spark the dreaming of others and call them to restoration.”

Paul wrote something similar to the Thessalonians, that even when it seemed so, they were not in darkness, but were children of light, never destined for wrath, but for salvation. Asleep or awake we are in God’s care, even when the world appears to be beyond control, even when the forces that affect daily existence are remote and inhuman. The reason we can have such hope (for any good Calvinist) is that salvation is in God’s hands, not in human action. Don’t be anxious in the face of zombies. The nice thing about zombies is that they are generally slow and easy to kill. And I think you do it by returning again and again to that which gives life, and gives life depth and purpose. The first line of our Brief Statement of Faith says, “In life and in death we belong to God.” And we might add even in our Undeath, we belong to God. In our funeral service, we stand at the edge of the grave and say to death, say to hell, say to non-existence, “You do not get the last word; we belong to God.”

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1 Grahame-Smith, Seth. Pride and Prejudice and Zombies, Quirk Productions, Philadelphia, 2009
6 ibid, p. 10, 12.
8 Kirkman, Robert, citing Pegg, in Miles Behind Us, Image Comics, Orange, CA, 2004
11 Klosterman, Chuck. “My Zombie, My Self: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead”, NY Times 12-3-10