

Gazing behind the Curtain
Ecclesiastes 4:13-16; James 3:13-4:3
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I. Introduction

In the classic 1939 movie *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a little girl from Kansas is carried away by a cyclone and lands in the magical land of Oz. But more specifically, her house comes to rest in a particular country of Oz called Munchkinland, and even more specifically, on top of the despotic ruler of Munchkinland, the Wicked Witch of the East. In L. Frank Baum's book, the Good Witch of the North tells Dorothy, "The Wicked Witch of the East ... has held all the Munchkins in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day. Now they are all set free, and are grateful to you for the favor."

And everything about the scene supports that story. The Good Witch of the North is lovely and gracious, dressed in white, with a tiara. The Munchkins are exuberant and grateful. In the movie, the Wicked Witch of the West – sister to the Witch whom Dorothy has killed – dressed in black cloak and pointy hat, appears in a fiery ball to threaten Dorothy and everyone else. Everything fits the story.

Almost. As you watch, you might be tempted to ask yourself, "Why is it that their land is so beautiful and fruitful? Why is it that the Munchkins are so happy and unafraid (in the movie they appear almost immediately -- and giggling)? How is it that their years of bondage and slavery have left so little mark on them or their country? Why is it that this wicked despot has no castle? This doesn't appear to be a land held in the cruel slavery of an oppressive ruler. And that state of affairs can't help but lead one to wonder, was the Witch of the East quite as wicked as she's made out to be?"

There is a deep and widespread anti-authoritarianism that runs throughout the book of The Wizard of Oz, a theme that is somewhat less pronounced in the movie, but that gets picked up with a vengeance in the 1995 prequel, Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West. We're spending the month of January looking at the faith lessons that we learn from The Wizard of Oz, the book and the movie, as well as the more contemporary book Wicked, and the musical *Wicked* that grew out of that. In both the original book and *Wicked*, we are encouraged to look behind the appearances of our structures of power to see the flawed humans behind it, and develop the ability to make independent judgments based on the deeper wisdom that our faith offers.

II. Curtains, curtains everywhere

Now L. Frank Baum was a conspiracy theorist, but throughout The Wizard of Oz there are hints that something is going on below the surface; that there are hidden truths waiting to be revealed. Something is not *quite right* in Oz, there are deceptions that we need to uncover. The story won't *quite* let us accept things at face value.

For example, Dorothy and her friends are trying to make their way to the Emerald City, which is presented as a city rich in power and culture. Its ruler is the benevolent Wizard, who will make all their wishes come true. But when they get to the Emerald City, the friends have glasses locked on their heads with the excuse that "the brightness and glory of the Emerald City would blind" them. While they are inside the city wearing the glasses, everything appears green. But once they get outside and take the glasses off Dorothy notices that the dress she had been wearing was no longer green, but white.

And the Wizard himself is not quite what they had expected. In the movie, the Wizard is sort of a charming bumbler. When Dorothy says, "You're a bad man," he responds, "No, I'm a good man; I'm just a bad Wizard." But in the book, it's a little less clear. He only sees Dorothy because she has on the magical slippers, which the Wizard recognizes as a powerful tool. In the book, a few pages after the Wizard has commanded the friends to kill the Wicked Witch of the West, the reader finds out that there has been a war between the Wizard and the Witch of the West; and the Witch has won, driving the Wizard "out of the land of the West." So the Wizard it turns out is neither good nor wonderful, nor generous or kind. He is, in fact, struggling to maintain his position while he seeks to reverse a military loss.

Again, in the book and play *Wicked*, these themes are made more explicit. *Wicked* tells the back story to the Wizard of Oz, in which Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, and the Wicked Witch of the West (whose name is Elphaba) are in school together as young women. When they, like we, begin to discover that there's a dark underside to life in Oz, they also go to the Wizard, only to discover that he is at the heart of it. When Elphaba confronts him with his immoral behavior, he objects to the word "immoral." She responds:

"If not *immoral*, then what word can I use to imply *wrong*?" said Elphaba.

"Try *mysterious*," responds the Wizard, "and then relax a little. The thing is, it is not for a girl, or a student, or a citizen to assess what is wrong. This is the job of leaders and why we exist."

Gregory Maguire wrote the novel Wicked, and he says that he began it while living in London, when the British were preparing to join the US in the first Iraq war in 1990. Maguire says he "became riveted by how the British press vilified Saddam Hussein to

galvanize public opinion in support of the war.” And in that situation, he was fascinated at his own ability to get swept up in the propaganda around the war, and began to wonder what motivated someone like Saddam.

This looking at the villain of the piece is exactly what the leaders of the “good” side never want to happen. In his classic text, Desire, Deceit, and the Novel, French philosopher and literary critic Rene Girard argues that “myths are the stories that get told by winners to deliberately conceal the losers’ story.” If we begin to imagine ourselves inside the minds of the witches and monsters of fairy tales, our perspective on their story changes and we find it harder to vilify them and work wholeheartedly for their destruction.

III. Looking Behind the Curtain

Like L. Frank Baum, Scripture encourages us to bring a healthy dose of skepticism when we listen to our human leaders telling us what we need to do. Whether it’s King David sending Uriah the Hittite to the front lines of the battle, so that Uriah is sure to be killed and David can marry his widow Bathsheba, or it’s the Pharisees and Sadducees conspiring to have Jesus executed, Scripture often tells the story of those who are being vilified by the power structures.

And it’s not that the power structures are evil in and of themselves either, they are simply the reflections of a flawed and fallen humanity. So our question from Dorothy is how do we look behind the curtain to get a sense of the agendas being thrust upon us. When we hear a relentless drumbeat for war, as Gregory Maguire did, inspiring him to write Wicked; when we hear accusations thrown back and forth about the health care debate; when we hear strident voices raised around the issue of same sex marriage; in debates where everyone appears to have an agenda, how do we attune our ears for truth?

Our lesson from the Book of James gives us some helpful guidance that I want to share this morning. James starts off by saying that “where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” And then he goes on to contrast that with the “wisdom from above,” which has several characteristics we need to pay attention to:

- It is “peaceable and gentle,” James says. In other words, God’s wisdom is always going to tend to gently draw people and communities together. Whenever we hear language that divides us, that causes us to fear one another, we need to bring our skeptic’s ear to that. The name Satan, as you may know, was originally a title -- שָׂטָן -- meaning “the accuser.” This should give us some insight into evil: it thrives on enflaming conflict. Whenever strife is being fostered, there is some agenda at work
- “Wisdom from on high,” James tells us, is always “willing to yield.” The message here, I think, is that God’s primary purpose for us is to live in joyful love with one another, so that the relationship is more important than being right. God’s

wisdom is going to lead us to compromise for the sake of continuing to be in dialogue. It's going to encourage us to bring a gentle humility to our conversations, acknowledging that we may not *always* be right.

- Lastly, God's wisdom is going to be, in James' words, "full of mercy and good fruits." Whenever we hear language around punishment and retribution, language that talks about people "getting what they deserve," we should have a red flag go up in our heads. That's not to say that accountability and repercussions for one's action are not important, but God's default is mercy and forgiveness.

IV. Conclusion

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," booms the fearful voice of the Wizard as Toto exposes him as the fraud that he is. Frank Baum understood that we want to have authority figures that we can believe in and follow; and he was well aware that a deep voice and an authoritative presence – or a white dress and tiara – can make whatever words they speak sound like truth. He, and the writers of Scripture, call us to always look behind the curtain at their motivations and agenda before we take those words at face value.

Our commitment, as people of faith, is to the truth, God's truth, and as the Gospel of John tells us, that "truth will set [us] free."

Amen.