

[1 **Monsters**] Why talk about Monsters, especially at Church? When we come to church, aren't we supposed to talk about Jesus and God's love and... well you know *good* stuff? Monsters are evil and we shouldn't spend our time talking about them. Right?

Well, obviously, wrong.

Monster stories exist in every culture - even though we know they're not real. There's no such thing as vampires and werewolves and zombies. And yet culture after culture tells these stories. Why? Why do we love monster stories?

Social scientists tell us that monster stories are really about *us*. Every culture has habits and behaviors we're not proud of. Behaviors the very fabric of our culture encourages even though we know it's wrong. And since we're human beings, we don't like to admit we have these toxic habits. We don't like to admit we're part of the problem.

So rather than be honest about our shortcomings, we turn them into monsters. Our me-first culture becomes a fascination with vampires, who live on the blood of the innocents. The ease with which we feel outrage, our inability to contain our vices, becomes stories about people unable to control their transformation into terrible monsters like wolves or hulks.

Monsters are more than just scary stories to tell in the dark. Monsters are windows into our deepest fears about *ourselves*. If we're willing to face the monsters we've created, we can face the scary truth of our darkest selves and find hope and healing for ourselves and our culture.

Monsters aren't nearly as scary in the light of truth.

[2 **Zombies**] So let's talk about Zombies. Zombies originated in Caribbean voodoo culture as more-or-less mind-control. A voodoo priest sort of killed the brain of a person, rendering them a mindless servant who would do anything - even kill - for the priest.

But those aren't the zombies we think of today, the zombies of *The Walking Dead* or *Z-Nation* or *iZombie*. We owe those zombies to George A. Romero, who released *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. Romero's zombies are dead bodies come back to life. Stripped of any mental faculties, zombies are humans reduced to our most basic instincts.

Exactly what that instinct *is* is what makes the zombie such a fascinating monster. If a Zombie is a human reduced to our animal instincts, we could reasonably ask why zombies aren't sex machines. After all, we've sexualized vampires and werewolves. Why not zombies?

No... all a zombie does is *eat*. Why? Why do zombie stories focus on our desire to consume? It's no accident that Romero told his zombie story in the late 60s, as American culture was beginning to weary of the blind consumerism that followed WWII. If your recent US history is a little spotty, WWII was good for the US economy. [3 **US Rising Arrow graph**] The late 1940s and 50s were characterized by rampant economic prosperity. The 50s saw the rise of the suburbs,

of two cars in every driveway, of washing machines and microwaves and televisions in every home.

By the late 60s, the US was mired in its second war in Southeast Asia abroad and the Civil Rights movement at home. We'd begun to realize that getting everything we wanted didn't solve every problem (and didn't solve any of the BIG problems). We'd begun to realize that "getting everything we wanted" didn't even actually apply to everyone even in our own country.

We had a deep anxiety about our consumerism. And in response to that anxiety, Romero told us a story about humans reduced to a basic instinct: consume.

[4 **Zombies = Consume**] Zombies represent our fear of our tendency to consume. We're aware that we live in an ad-saturated culture - on social media, billboards, TV, magazines, product placement in films. Everywhere we turn, we're told we NEED this thing.

And we're afraid of that craving. Even as we buy, we're aware we have much more than we need. We're aware we've never bought anything that actually satisfied.

Is it any surprise that Zombie stories really started to surge again after the 2008 economic crash?

We're deeply suspicious of our cravings because we've seen that, unchecked, they lead to destruction.

So some surprising good news for us today: our cravings are good.

That's it. Our cravings are good.

Okay there's more to it than that, but if we boil today's message down to its essentials, we're going to see that because humans bear God's image, it actually is possible to trust our desires, to follow our loves toward life, healing, wholeness

Sounds too good to be true, whether you follow Jesus or not. Zombies aren't a uniquely Christian monster - quite the opposite. At the heart of our fear of zombies is a conviction that humans are most basically animals. That we are fundamentally craving machines with deadly desires, that we've evolved to fight and claw and scratch to get what we want.

[7 **Brain vs. Heart**] We're afraid of our desires. We're afraid that *wanting* is fundamentally dangerous, that we need to keep our loves in check with reason. Our minds rule our hearts... that's the mark of civilization. But the flip side of that is the fear that civilization is a lie, a thin façade we place over our animal natures to keep our primal instincts in check. That's why the scariest part of every zombie story quits being zombies pretty early on - the real monsters in zombie stories are *other people*. People who, because there's no longer a "civilization" to keep them in check, give into their base instincts and become predators. Tyrants.

Is that true? That humans are just smart animals, that our reason, our civilization, our progress, achievements and advancements are ultimately empty pursuits because if you take it all away we're just monsters underneath?

[5 **Humans vs Animals**] Well, yes and no. It's true that if we're looking to progress to overcome our animal urges, we're hopeless. We can't rewrite our DNA. We *are* animals and no amount of advancement will ever change that. But are we *just* animals? Do we truly live in a world where nature is red in tooth and claw, where the fundamental law of the universe is kill or be killed?

This is Jesus' good news: that we are not just animals, that we are in fact more than animals and when it comes to desires, that makes all the difference. If you were here last week when we talked about werewolves, you'll remember we found this good news in Genesis 2, in the second creation story.

When painting a picture of human origins, this creation story imagines God as a master sculptor, forming humanity out of the clay. In this story, animals are also shaped from the ground, echoing what we all know - humans and animals are made from the same stuff (we share over 98% of our DNA with some species!). But according to Genesis 2, what sets animals and humans apart is that God gives humans alone, of every aspect of creation, the Spirit of life. God breathes Spirit into our animal bodies, making us more than animals. We occupy a special place in the creation order - we are the bridge between heaven and Earth. We are clay like animals and Spirit like God. We are *between*.

Which means our desires are not only animal desires. Our cravings are more than material. The Spirit within us wants as well.

But this is where Christian skepticism kicks in. Because shortly after the good creation of Genesis 2, we get what we now call The Fall in Genesis 3. From the get-go, our cravings get us in trouble. We want to be like God (really what we want is to take God's place) and Genesis 3 frames this as a story of *consuming* - we eat forbidden fruit and so are cut off from eternal life.

Many Christians point to this story as proof our desires aren't trustworthy. They say, See? We're all sinners and that means our desires are untrustworthy.

Again, there's something to this. We have all *experienced* desires that are bent, warped. We've all wanted things that we know are bad for us (or that turn out to be bad for us). Particularly when we consider the way of God and how often our desires get in the way of being joyful (because we're frustrated) or peaceful (because we're frightened) or patient or kind or generous (because we're selfish). Our desires are most certainly suspect.

[6 **Image Bearer**] And yet according to the Scriptures, we are not *fundamentally* sinners. We are fundamentally persons created in God's image.

This matters: that humans are not first and foremost broken, fallen, miserable, ugly. First and foremost we bear the image of the God who created us and loves us. Which is why, when it comes to our desires, the Bible can make some pretty startling claims. Like the one we find in Psalm 37:

**Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. -- Psalm 37:4**

Take delight in God and God will give you the desires of your heart. This verse freaks zombies out. Because we're *afraid* of our desires. We've been taught by both the culture and the Church to mistrust what we want. And yet here the Scriptures claim that God wants to *give us* the desires of our hearts?

We can be forgiven for our incredulity. This is *exactly* what we're afraid of - that God *will* give us the desires of our hearts.

So how can the Psalm say this?

If our Christian story is: you're bad, try hard and be good, we'll always fail. We'll distrust our desires.

[6 Image Bearer] But if our story is: you bear the image of God. And by participating in God's life, you become whole again - including your desires - then the Psalm begins to make more sense.

And this *is* the Christian story. When we begin to participate in life with God, God transforms us. God forms us into the persons we were created to be, persons who bear God's image wholly, desires and all.

If you were here the first week, when Tommy investigated vampires, you'll remember he read from 2 Corinthians 5: **If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old is gone, the new is here! -- 2 Corinthians 5:17**

Jesus gives us new life. As we continue to participate in God's life, we learn to trust our desires again because our desires - like the rest of us, have been made new. This is what we refer to as Spiritual Formation - ever the master sculptor, God reforms our broken, warped desires into beautiful, trustworthy loves that guide us toward life.

If you have a bible, turn with me to Philippians 2. This is a letter Paul wrote to the Church in Phillipi. Paul is writing from a Roman prison, and a good chunk of his letter is spent encouraging the Philippian Christians not to despair - either over his imprisonment or their own struggles. He encourages them to trust God's faithfulness, that the same God who gave them new life will continue to nurture their new life.

This section we'll read together is Paul at his pastoral best, encouraging the Philippians not just to hang in there, but to thrive in this new life with God. Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Paul tells them to have the same mind as Jesus. He means that God is transforming *everything* about us, including how we think. What we want.

It's not that we have to think better thoughts, or try really hard to keep our desires in check. It's that in Jesus, our minds and hearts have *both* been made new. We become a whole new person.

We could pump the brakes here for a moment. Because this sounds like voodoo zombies - God wants to take your braaaaaaaains, render you under mind-control. And that's certainly how many people view religion. Once you hop on the Jesus bus, you check your brain, open your wallet and do whatever the voodoo priest (I mean pastor!) says.

But let's look at how Paul describes the "mindset of Christ Jesus" and ask whether this sounds like brainwashed zombies:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. --  
Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV)

Jesus is the God who abandoned heaven to live among us, to serve us, to die for us. And it is this very humiliation and suffering that makes him worthy to be the ruler of the whole universe.

Paul says, if we want to have life, this is the mindset we need to have. It has nothing to do with blind obedience - nothing about being a mindless zombie.

Rather, Paul calls us to a life of living for others, of using what we have for the good of those around us - we're imitating Jesus.

But how does that impact our desires? The Psalmist told us that if we delight ourselves in the LORD, God will give us the desires of our hearts. And here, Paul calls us to think like Jesus, so that the way Jesus thinks becomes the way we think.

[8 Zombie + Spirit = Human] If we allow God to transform us, to renew our minds, our desires, our selves, then we begin to want the things God wants - justice, mercy, wholeness. We align ourselves with the God of the Universe and our work becomes God's work. We want what God wants and - much like when your children learn to share, so you are happy to give them toys to share - God gives us the desires of our hearts.

In other words, as we become formed into pictures of Jesus, we can trust our desires because God is renewing our desires. We're not first and foremost wicked sinners who can't be trusted. We are first and foremost God's precious children, created in God's image, called to cultivate God's world as God's partners, and when we follow Jesus, God *restores* us to this original design, desires and all.

Which means we can trust our desires. They can lead us towards life.

But how? What does that actually look like? How do I know if my desire for my kids to flourish is good, or if it's overprotective and helicopter parenting? How do I know if my desire to be loved is healthy or if I'm looking for love in all the wrong places? What about my desire for food? Am I enjoying the fruit of creation as a blessing from God, or am I gluttonous?

How do we know how to trust our desires? As we've seen throughout this series, the answer is found in participating in the life of God. If we truly are more than just animals, if what makes us human is God's Spirit enlivening us, then the Spiritual practices that lead us to remain in the Spirit shape our desires.

[8 Zombie + Spirit = Human] In other words, when we give ourselves to the Spirit, the Spirit shapes our desires. The Spirit restores us to our most human selves, heals our minds, brings us back to life. The Spirit breathes life into our shambling, sinful selves that we may once more have the same mind as Jesus, a fully human mind, with beautiful, trustworthy desires that lead us toward life.

God called me to be a pastor when I was a teenager (before that, I desperately wanted to be a physicist). Once I accepted God's call to the pastorate, I would dream about my life down the road, and I would see myself on a stage, talking to a bunch of people - pretty normal for a pastor.

But I could tell that desire deep down was for *fame*. The deadly sin I'm most familiar with is pride - I have a pretty healthy opinion of myself. So often when I thought of myself as a pastor, what I thought about was being famous. I thought about myself.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that's wrong. That whatever I felt God was calling me to, it wasn't putting myself on a pedestal.

I saw this desire inside myself that I recognized as sinful. Deadly. Bad.

And yet I had this undeniable call on my life.

That conflict created a lot of guilt and anxiety over the years. I felt a *call* to lead, but I was afraid of leading because I *wanted* to lead. I was afraid the very fact that I wanted it meant I probably shouldn't have it.

But I continued to do one right thing at a time. I studied religion at college. I took a job as a part-time youth pastor, under a senior pastor who invested a lot in me as a young leader. I began learning how to lead groups of people.

And I began to learn more about how Jesus leads - exactly what we saw in Philippians 2: when Jesus has a position of influence, he uses it to help other people. I began to practice that in my own leadership, and I found as I continued to grow in my faith, my desire for fame faded. In its place, my love for the people I led grew.

As I continued to trust God, my selfish ambition was transformed into a love for people. And that had nothing to do with the fact that I'm a pastor - we're not the only ones who have ambition.

**[9 Spiritual Practices]** How do we learn to trust our desires? By continuing to grow in our faith. By continuing to allow the Spirit to transform our minds to Jesus' mind. Spiritual practices like reading Scripture, daily prayer, fasting, giving, keeping a Sabbath create space in our lives for the Spirit to make us more loving, more joyful, more peaceful and patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle and self-controlled.

Friends, this is how we can trust our desires: if we remain in the Spirit, allow God to continually bring us to life. We are not fundamentally animals with dangerous cravings we must control with reason and discipline. God has breathed into us the Spirit of life, calling us not dogs but beloved children.

We are not fundamentally sinful creatures with fallen, twisted cravings. God has rescued and restored us and giving us the same mind that is in Jesus himself.

Friends, as we trust the Spirit to form us, we can trust our desires. We can follow our loves because they don't *reduce* us to mindless craving machines. Rather, they *restore* us. They lead us to discern how God is calling us to bring about his will here on earth as it is in heaven.

How will you make room for the Spirit to form your desires this week? How will you follow your desires toward life?

### **Communion SetUp**

[Communion Slide] We begin by approaching the communion table. This table reminds us of the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. He gave them bread and wine as his body and blood, given for our rescue and restoration.

If we want to know Jesus' mind, if we want to see what a beautiful, fully human life looks like, Paul reminds us in Philippians, that it looks like Jesus' journey to the cross. We approach his table today as a people who desire above all wholeness. We bring all the desires we have that we're suspicious of. We bring them to Jesus' table this morning that he might restore them.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you want to live in the life of the Spirit, if you want to learn to trust your desires as the path toward life and love, then you're welcome to begin your journey here at Jesus' table.

### **Examen**

1. What desires in the last week have led me to love God and other people?
2. What desires in the last week have led me to love myself first?
3. How in the next week will I be tempted to put myself first?
4. How in the next week can I follow my desires toward life?