

Last Epiphany Year B - February 14, 2021

[2 Kings 2:1-12](#) | [2 Corinthians 4:3-6](#) | [Mark 9:2-9](#) | [Psalm 50:1-6](#)

Title: Happy Ever After / For Now

*God be in our waking, and in our sleeping. God be in our listening, and in our speaking. God be in our laughing, and in our weeping. But most of all, be in our loving.*  
*Amen.*

Over the past year, I have read (or listened to) approximately 200 books, cover to cover. Thank you COVID-19. This is the kind of accomplishment I never could have dreamed of, say, five years ago, when I was in school and reading was work. And of course it sounds ridiculously impressive, until you hear the most important aspect of this fun fact about myself - which is that 95% of the books that I read were romance novels. If I were to have kept a comprehensive list of these books, you would discover such excellent titles as: *Lord of Scoundrels*, *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman*, and (one of my personal favorites) *The Rogue Not Taken*. I think my relationship to romance novels is best described by a bumper sticker that one of my friends bought me, featuring a cartoon rendition of one of those stereotypical, bodice-ripping covers with the caption: "romance novels: they're actually really good stories!!" I have to admit that romance novels are not for everyone - and not every romance novel is for me. There are plenty of romance novels that are superficial, outdated, and maybe a little toxic. But when you look at the best examples of the genre, I've found romance novels to be some of the most liberating, feminist, queer, diversity-affirming books I have ever read.

What makes a romance novel, a *romance novel*, you might ask. It's not simply the fact that it's a book about love - in fact, that is a common misunderstanding of this highly underappreciated art form. Love is always present in romance novels, of course. But the defining characteristic that makes romance novels distinctive from all other books is the presence of this one feature: a *happy ever after*.

Now is the point in my sermon where you may groan, or roll your eyes. Somehow, the idea of a *happy ever after* rings hollow in our cultural context. It sounds superficial. It makes us think of rainbows and butterflies and Disney. It's as if we feel like fine art can't end happily. It's as if we feel like we don't deserve a *happy ever after*. Nevertheless the *happy ever after* is, for me, part of the genius of romance novels. We know, more or less how they will end. But there is enjoyment in the twists and turns, the moments of conflict and resolution. My favorite romance novels are ones in which the characters grapple with trauma, misunderstanding, loss, and systemic ugliness. And there is a deep satisfaction in seeing characters go through all of this, and arrive at a happy ending, nevertheless. This past year, more than any other year in my life, I have needed to believe that *happy ever afters* are possible.

Now there is one caveat to this *happy ever after* rule. Some of my favorite romance authors have argued that the *happy ever after*, or HEA as it is abbreviated, is not an accurate description for the ending of their books. Instead, they suggest a different acronym: HFN, *happy for now*. These authors note that the ending of a romance novel is not an ultimate ending. The characters' lives are not finished. There will inevitably be more conflicts, more crises, more hills to climb in the future.

One of the authors that brings this idea home, for me, is Alyssa Cole. Cole is a Black romance author who is one of my favorite writers of all time. In her *Loyal League* series Cole somehow manages to write the most satisfying historical romances set against the backdrop of the Civil War. Cole's heroes and heroines are former slaves; spies serving the Union; mixed race children of plantation owners struggling to understand their identity and place in the world. Cole's books remind me how important it is that everyone gets a chance at a happy ending. And yet, Cole's books also push the boundary of what *happy ever after*, or *happy for now*, means.

In the author's note for the final book in the series, *An Unconditional Freedom*, Cole writes about how hard it was to finish writing this book in 2018. She shares: "As I was writing this book, it seemed that every other day brought a new story about a Black man or woman being killed by police. As I was writing this book, opening social media meant seeing the casual cruelty of the current government's policies. As I was writing this book, I couldn't help but succumb to sadness and defeat because what promise could I make a character like Daniel about America, knowing that in 2018 it had reverted back to everything he feared? How could I give him a happy ending in a country that was so set against him having one?"

Cole stays true to the romance genre, and shows how a *happy ever after* - or a *happy for now* - is itself an act of resistance. Writing about her character, she concludes this:

"Daniel's happily ever after didn't mean that America had to be that perfect Union as I was writing the story. It is in the possibility of perfection, in finding a community of like-minded people who share similar goals and work toward them, together. I wish that things were different. I wish the injustices chronicled in the *Loyal League* series were truly in the past. But

wishing only gets us so far. I hope that by the time this is published, America is moving in a better direction.”

Cole’s reflections on what *happy ever after* means has been one of the most spiritually insightful things that I have read all year. In this year when I have so actively sought out *happy ever afters*, Cole reminds me that we are always works in progress: individually, in our relationships, and as a collective - whether that collective is our faith community, or our city, or our nation. There is no such thing as a *happy ever after* - but we are still blessed with many *happy for nows*. And those moments - those little mountain tops - can sustain us. Plus the idea of some better future on the horizon - a *happy ever after* - that can sustain us too.

Of course, I am thinking of all of these things in the context of our gospel passage today: the transfiguration story as told in the Gospel of Mark. In that story Jesus takes some of his disciples to a mountaintop and suddenly they have a bright, dazzling vision of Elijah, and Moses, and Jesus all talking together. “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here;” Peter says, “let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter says this, as if it were possible to bottle up this transcendent experience forever. As if it were possible to stay in the *happy for now* moment, and never leave it. With the gift of hindsight, we know that this is not the end of the story. This is only about half way through the Gospel of Mark, and there is so much yet to come: triumph, trial, crucifixion, resurrection. And even the resurrection is not a resolution! It is a *happy for now*; a beginning. A stepping stone on the journey towards the kingdom that God was building through Jesus Christ. A stepping stone on the journey towards the kingdom that God is building through each one of us.

The transfiguration story reveals two important things in regards to our faith as Christians. First, as much as we might want to stay in the warm and fuzzy reality of *happy for now*, our faith calls us to descend down the mountain - back into the messy, complicated reality of human experience. When the vision of Moses and Elijah disappears, the disciples are left with Jesus. Jesus doesn't settle for the illusion of *happy ever after*. Instead, Jesus goes back down the mountain - because he has work to do; and we have work to do as well.

Second, while we can't stay on the mountaintop forever, the story of the transfiguration shows us that we, as human beings, need the idea of a *happy ever after* more than we realize. The vision on the mountaintop provides something that will sustain the disciples in their ministry to come; an ideal to work towards. The transfiguration shows us that there is nothing necessarily silly, or selfish about a *happy ever after*. Rather, it is our ability to imagine a better future that enables us to work towards that goal. As Christians, we believe that a *happy ever after* is possible. Though in church-speak, we don't call it that. We call it the *kingdom of God*.

In a few moments we will be invited to split out into breakout groups. It's a time to let these words settle in; to listen, and share, and reflect. During that time, I invite you to talk about what *happy ever after* you are dreaming of today - whether it is six months from now or a year from now, or ten years from now. What does *happy ever after* mean for you personally? For us collectively? What does it mean for you, as a person of faith?

On this Valentine's Day I wish you an abundance of happiness - in your relationships, in your work, in your rest. I wish you a happiness that extends beyond your personal selves, transfiguring our world into a more just and loving place. And I pray that we would have ears to

hear the gospel in our own time; and eyes to see the world as it might be; and hands and feet to make it so. *Amen.*