

Serpents and Dragons, Oh My!

How many of you think there are dragons in the Bible? The answer is yes. How many times would you guess a dragon shows up in the Bible? Guesses? It's 21. And that's not counting the Apocrypha – those extra books between the old and new testament in some Bibles. That has a whole story called Bel and the Dragon.

Then there's Leviathan, a sea creature whose description in Job of a fire-breathing serpent sure sounds like some sort of dragon. Leviathan shows up 7 times, including in the Psalm we read. Sea monster also shows up and is probably the same thing.

Then of course there's the serpent. We always think snake, at least when we read the Genesis 3 story about Adam and Eve and the serpent. A snake is a serpent and if we take out the category of mythical serpents, that's the only kind of serpent we know. Serpent shows up 35 times.

There are a whole host of other mythical creatures in scripture – the behemoth, a large creature that nobody can identify. There are creatures that sound like unicorns, mermaids and mermen, and maybe even a werewolf.

And then there's the Nephilim...a strange group of probably rebellious spiritual beings who got the daughters of God's people pregnant with sons who would be very violent.

That and the ensuing horrific violence seems to be the inciting event for the great flood and a creation do-over with Noah's family.

For many scholars, these creatures are mythical. The further back in the mists of time these early Bible stories go, the more mythical they are.

That causes all sorts of issues for people who do not believe that mythology is an important genre of the Bible. There are countless writings that try to prove that these strange creatures truly existed, or to explain them in some way. The short earth creation folks have sometimes proposed that Leviathan was a dinosaur.

But people who misunderstand myth wildly underestimate the power of myth to shape people.

Since we're going to dive into what I'm calling mythical creatures, we need to say a word about myth. In our time myth has come to mean something that isn't true. We live in a time when truth has to equal fact.

But myths can be true in a way that has little to do with fact. These strange creatures may or may not have factually existed. What matters is what they represent, particularly in relationship to God and God's creation. And that reveals a truth far deeper...a truth that resonates in our souls way more than facts ever can.

The ancient world was awash in mythology. Some of the Bible is likely a direct challenge to the myths of other nations...nations whose gods were not the relational God the people of Israel knew. I believe that's what this whole creation story is.

So, when I use the word mythology, I'm not saying I don't think the Bible is true. In fact, I'm saying it's true in a way that goes far beyond what our analytical fact-based minds can grasp.

And truth be told, this exploration of dragons and serpents will raise some questions we simply may not be able to answer...questions about the existence of evil.

So, let's start at the beginning. Verse 2. You may remember when the word translated here as chaos was translated as formless and void. In Hebrew it's *tohu v' vohu*. It's a rhyme...a part of the poetry of Genesis 1 in its original Hebrew.

There has been lots of scholarly debate over what is the best translation. However it's translated, *tohu v' vohu* was a place where nothing could really exist, least of all life. It was a place of non-being.

And then, a wind from God blew over the waters of the deep.

For the ancient people, the sea represented that chaos. It represented danger. The sea represented that place that was formless and void...a place of non-being.

It represented the ever-present threat of return to non-being. A place of desolation...danger...death.

And the great sea monster ruled the deep. Leviathan.

When God was creating the heavens and the earth, the sea – the deep waters of unbeing – didn't cease to exist. Instead, God put boundaries on it.

When we think about the monsters – like the dragons, sea monsters, and serpents - we might wonder why they are even a part of creation. As we'll learn over the next few weeks, these monsters represent all that which is opposed to God. And yet, they are still God's creatures.

God doesn't eliminate them, at least not for now. God puts boundaries on the monsters, just as with the sea. Danger appears to be woven into God's good creation...woven by God. It

forces us to ask the question, is danger only opposed to God, or is it an essential part of creation?

Is the risk of non-being part of the beauty of being? I suspect it is. Because not only did God create the frightening sea monster – Leviathan – our Psalm tells us that God delights in Leviathan.

God created Leviathan to play in the sea. The sea and Leviathan represent powerful forces. Symbolically through most of scripture they oppose God.

They are powerful, frightening. But they are still part of the creation God called good.

But they have limits. God gathered the sea and put boundaries around it so it would not destroy all of creation. Even now, there is always a tension between the land and the sea. The sea can inundate coastal land and wipe out life there. The sea can swallow a boat, crew and all. The sea can erode rock into tiny grains of sand. But it has limits. God has placed a limit on chaos.

And the sea monster may have been a frightening image for humans. But still, our Psalm tells us about Leviathan's playful antics in the sea and an image of God watching with delight comes to mind.

Let's turn now to the gospel story. There are no dragons or serpents or any other beasts in the New Testament until we get to Revelation.

But the sea is a part of the New Testament stories. And the sea still represents a place of danger and chaos. This story about Jesus taming the sea shows us who Jesus is – that he has the same power as God the creator...that Jesus has power over creation. Jesus has power over the threat of non-being the sea represents.

But again, Jesus didn't eliminate the potential for danger. He didn't eliminate the sea or the risk for storms. He limited it. Calmed it. He got the disciples through it.

As we go through this series, the dragon will increasingly be seen primarily as the embodiment of evil and the forces that oppose God.

But we'll also be reminded that somehow, the threat of chaos...of danger...of non-being...is built into creation. And honestly, the threat of non-being makes us cherish all the more the gift of being.

We know that from our own lives. Our deepest primal fears may not take the shape of dragons and sea monsters, but we still have them. Fears of desolation and grief. Fears of isolation and being unloved. Fears of violence. Fears of sickness. Fears of shattering loss. Fears of death.

Our faith in Jesus doesn't eliminate the reality of those things happening. It doesn't eliminate the risk of returning to some form of non-being. But Jesus does limit it. He sticks with us, even when it seems like he's sleeping on the job. And he gets us through it.

In the end, we will learn that God, not chaos wins. Because we know the ultimate chaos...the ultimate non-being...is death. And in Christ, even that doesn't win.