

The Serpent in the Garden

Last week we focused on the sea and the monsters who live there as the place of danger...chaos. In the first creation story, a wind from God blew over those primal, deep, roiling waters of chaos and brought creation into being. God put boundaries on the sea - boundaries on chaos. Leviathan, the great sea dragon, had its place in creation. But it too had boundaries.

This story introduces us to the serpent as God's opponent. The rest of the Old Testament never connects the serpent to the devil. And really neither does the New Testament.

But it's hard to talk about the serpent without making that connection. Over time, the serpent has come to represent Satan to most people.

The devil, or Satan, is sort of problematic in our day and age. A survey done by the Barna Group in 2015 found that most Christians don't believe in any kind of literal devil. And for the ones who do, it's usually in terms of demon possession and exorcisms.

The world of the Bible was a deeply enchanted world. On the other hand, we live in a very scientific, dis-enchanted world. As a whole, our culture is very suspicious of the supernatural, even when we're talking about spirituality.

But, in the words of author Richard Beck, whose book helped me shape this series, if Jesus took Satan seriously, maybe we should too.

So, the serpent in the garden. This is the first of a number of serpents and dragons who represent the forces of opposition to God and God's purpose. The serpent is an adversary of God. Which by the way is literally what Satan means...adversary.

That's what I want to look at today. It may not seem that the serpent in the garden and Ezekiel's dragon have anything in common. But let's see what we can find.

First, if the serpent is a symbol of opposition to God's purpose, we probably need to make sure we're pretty clear what God's purpose is. At creation, it's to till and keep the garden. To protect it, nurture it so that it will grow and feed all the creatures.

Humans were created in God's image to rule over creation in the way God would. Humans were in fact created to rule over the serpent, in God's name. God enlisted humans to help in the taming of chaos. And to be fruitful and multiply. Their job is no less than being God's partners in continuing to create a beautiful world.

But being God's partner means trusting that you've got your part to do...and that it's not God's. The serpent didn't actually stop Adam and Eve from doing their job.

What the serpent did do was tempt them with the chance to take God's role too. To make them feel like what God had given them might not be enough. To instill just enough anxiety and mistrust, that for the sake of gaining God's power, they sold out.

Their lust to be what only God was supposed to be impacted all of creation. Chaos returned. God would still work to bring creation forward, but it would be a bumpy and often tragic road.

Now let's look at Ezekiel's dragon. Ezekiel was born into a family of priests. That was to be his calling as well. But before he could assume his role, Babylon invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem and the first wave of deportations to Babylon happened. Ezekiel was one of those first exiles. He was living enslaved in a village in Babylon when he began receiving visions from God. There are lots of visions and symbols and allegories in Ezekiel.

This image of a dragon in the Nile River isn't even the weirdest.

Between that first wave of deportations and the final fall of Jerusalem, the remaining rulers in Jerusalem desperately sought a way to get out from under the Babylonian threat. Making an alliance with Egypt and relying on Egypt's power to save them was a leading contender.

This dragon in the Nile River is a symbol of Egypt's might. But again, it is a dragon. A serpent. Is it working against God's purpose too? Like the serpent in the Garden?

Well, what is God's purpose here? If we go deep enough, it's the same as it was for Adam and Eve. But the failure of Adam and Eve has compounded layer upon layer in the people of Israel. They have failed to trust God, failed to be faithful to God, and their idolatry has oozed out into violence and greed and failure to care for the weak and poor. The exile was the consequence of that. Chaos returned.

As difficult as it might be for us, God's purpose was being accomplished in the exile. It was to be a purifying fire for Israel...to bring them through to be what God intended.

But for those despairing people, it was really, really hard to trust God. So they hope to latch on to a different savior – they want to cling to Egypt's power. It really does go back to the same thing the serpent tempted Adam and Eve with – they wanted the power to take control of their future...to take on the role that only God was supposed to have.

Pharaoh – and his dragon – in some ways represent the same temptation the serpent laid before Adam and Eve. The dragon imagery in this scene is meant to reveal the wrong turn trusting Egypt will be for Judah.

They think Egypt can save them...that powerful Pharaoh can save them. Ezekiel's vision unmask Pharaoh as the dragon, lurking in the Nile.

But through Ezekiel's prophecy, God promises the dragon...that dragon of temptation that lures God's people to seek their own power – to seek God's role – will lose. The dragon will be destroyed.

A quote from GK Chesterton is about fairy tales, but it applies to these dragons of biblical myth equally well – he said they are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten. In the end, God, not the dragon, will win.

Next we come to the gospel reading. Neither the dragon, nor any other serpent, will appear again until Revelation. We'll talk about that one the last Sunday of this series.

So Jesus doesn't encounter a serpent. But he encounters the Satan...the adversary. We read Mark's short version, but from Matthew and Luke we know that Satan tempted Jesus with pretty much the same thing as Adam and Eve...the chance to take God's power...to take God's role...to rule the entire world, not God's way, but the way of the adversary. Jesus could have it all, if only he sold out to the devil.

But Jesus did not take the bait. Jesus succeeded where Adam and Eve failed.

The dragon isn't ready to give up. But the beginning of the dragon's defeat begins here.

So what are we to make of these serpents and dragons in our time? Is the serpent still prowling? We may have a less enchanted worldview than the ancients, but I think we can still see how profoundly true the story of the serpent in the garden is.

We face it every time our best intentions to be faithful to God are thwarted by fear and anxiety. Like those first people, we too are called to be partners in continuing to create God's world – to work to contain chaos.

But we are also created with the ability to think for ourselves. With that ability comes the possibility of choosing to oppose God. The serpent knows our weak spots. But where does this serpent live? Is it some external force that leads us astray? Or is the serpent in us? The surprising answer is probably both. We'll spend more time exploring that as the series moves forward.

Today's stories give us a glimpse of how it all ends. With Ezekiel, we can see the temptation to trust a power other than God unmasked – that temptation turns out to be the dragon.

We can imagine the powers of evil as that dragon, hauled out of the river by God and flung into the wilderness to be devoured.

And we can see that in Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness, those powers of temptation and evil began to be undone.