

Serpents and Dragons 3

We sharp, savvy 21st century Christians might scoff at the dragons, sea monsters, and serpents in the Bible. That's just for those superstitious primitive people.

But Leviathan is more important than we think.

Christianity in our modern era has often equated sin and evil with personal, moral failing. But Leviathan assures us evil is much deeper. It includes, but goes far beyond our individual susceptibility to temptation.

Leviathan represents what we today would call systemic evil. Paul uses different terminology – rulers and authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. But he too is talking about evil that's bigger than any one person's choices.

We have a very different understanding of the cosmos than the ancients did. But honestly, ancient cosmology gives us some useful images as a starting point. The ancients believed that heaven was somewhere above us. They believed that all the powers on earth, good and evil, were ruled by a parallel power in the heavens.

Obviously, we know now that the up/down thing doesn't really work.

With our telescopes we've seen way, way into space and while the views are indeed heavenly, we have not found the throne room of God or the divine council. So, whatever these powers are, they don't rule from outer space.

And anyway, we might be uncomfortable with the notion that evil comes from someplace outside people. We want to avoid letting people off the hook for the immoral or unethical choices they make. The old comedian's "the devil made me do it" just doesn't fly for most of us.

But at the same time, we look at the most horrific massive scale evil and conclude that it's hard to argue against a force that makes people do things they otherwise would not.

Naziism, one of our go to evils, succeeded because ordinary people were somehow persuaded that ridding their country of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and disabled people was OK. People who would never shoot a child in a wheelchair backed a regime that killed thousands of them.

That's Leviathan. It's more than the evil of one man. Hitler has been dead for 80 years. Most of the architects and enforcers of the Holocaust are dead. And yet Naziism lives on. That's Leviathan.

Racism is an example in our country. We ended chattel slavery. The Civil Rights Act and Voting rights act among other acts were supposed to eliminate Jim Crow.

The vast majority of people would say...at least somewhat rightly...that they are not racist. And yet there is still a vast inequality by almost every measure between white people and black and brown people. Racism is bigger than the individual choices of any one person.

That's Leviathan. What the myth of Leviathan taps into is a different dimension of reality that lives alongside us. It's a dimension that we can't see, but we can certainly see its effects. Leviathan lurking in the depths of the sea is as good an image as any for that dimension.

Now, we do still want to hold people accountable. Like Adam and Eve, the serpent knows our weak spots. The serpent knows how to get to us...how to play on our individual insecurities. But we have a choice. There were and still are plenty of people who resisted Naziism and racism. We can choose not to yield to the serpent.

But we need to recognize that a deeper force is there and remarkably deceptive. When our view of evil is completely seated in human individual choices, when we fail to see the spiritual Leviathan underneath a person's actions, we make that person evil – we demonize people.

Paul didn't use dragon imagery. Apparently by the first century, dragons were out of vogue, although old Leviathan pops up again in Revelation. We'll deal with that in the last of this series.

Paul's take on this is that earthly rulers – the systems and authorities put in place to govern life – can be corrupted by this cosmic force of evil he calls the devil.

Walter Wink wrote a trilogy in the 80s that takes Paul's images and brings them into something that makes more sense for the modern era. He talks about the angel, or the spirit of an institution...a corporation...a nation...a church.

Oppressive systems...corporations, governments, and so on, seem to have a spirit of their own. For example, corporations have sometimes been responsible for tremendous evil even if the individual people who work there don't otherwise seem evil.

This brings us to something called spiritual warfare. Our faith tradition has been pretty avoidant of spiritual warfare. The supernatural edge to it is hard to buy. So what mostly happens in traditions like ours is that fighting evil all comes down to humans fighting against other humans. Fighting evil becomes only political. For some that's a fight for social justice...a fight against the authorities of unjust systems. For some it's law and order. Sometimes it means going to war.

Spiritual warfare in the more charismatic traditions means praying against the devil. It means exorcisms. It means something entirely supernatural. That's very real in the Bible. A huge part of Jesus' ministry was casting out demons.

But, also throughout the Bible, failure to show allegiance to God and political oppression and violence go hand in hand.

Systemic and structural evil has both a sociopolitical and spiritual aspect. When we reduce our call to resist evil to only the spiritual, we ignore our call to live in the kingdom of God.

But without the spiritual aspect, without Leviathan, resisting evil can become an exercise in blaming and dehumanizing other people. Ultimately, in the absence of Leviathan, other people become the enemy. Philosopher Frederick Nietzsche said, when fighting monsters, take care that you do not become one.

Last week we asked the question...is the devil in us? Outside of us? The answer is both. We are not off the hook when we give in to evil...when we get complacent and don't even recognize evil until it's too late. We can too easily ignore our own captivity by dark forces.

But understanding the power of the force of evil makes it possible for us to resist in the midst of those times when chaos has rushed back in and gained a foothold. It helps us recognize the true enemy.

And that enemy – Leviathan - is the one God conquers. If we attribute evil entirely to individual choices, then God has no room to defeat evil without destroying humanity.

In the Job passage, first of all we're given the most detailed description of Leviathan in scripture.

Job is a complex book, and we can't really unpack it all here. But Job is dealt one catastrophe after another. In the end, he challenges God. He challenges God's design, and he challenges the justice of God.

God's response takes Job through God's power in creation. God tells Job that he can not possibly judge God's justice because he has only a tiny glimpse of the cosmic picture.

But this passage tells us that God is more powerful than Leviathan. However powerful the forces of evil may seem, however frightening and powerful Leviathan is, God is stronger.

The prophet Isaiah says the same thing. Isaiah wrote before and during the exile. God's people see threat all around them. They see the nations rising against them. Violence and bloodshed, captivity...one catastrophe after another.

But behind those nations...behind those who threaten Israel's existence, is that old nemesis Leviathan. The dark force of evil.

Isaiah sets us up for what many deep-down want – the violent end to Leviathan. The violent end to evil. Revelation imagines a great battle.

One popular interpretation of that giant battle is that God will destroy a good chunk of humanity in the process of defeating the dragon. But that's precisely what we learn God will not do.

Satan failed with Jesus in the wilderness. At the cross, Satan invites Jesus once again to yield to the temptation of earthly power... to defeat Rome with violence. To fight back.

But that's not how Leviathan gets defeated. The image of a dragon-slayer dying on a cross is shocking.

But Jesus shows us that violence cannot defeat evil. In the end, only love can.