

John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible...except the book of Revelation. He didn't want to touch that weird book at the end of the Bible that's so full of strange images of beasts and dragons and scrolls and Babylon that it reads like fairy-tale. Smart move on his part.. The book of Revelation is not a fairy tale, but like a fairy-tale it can point us to deeper truths that lay hidden. The gospel is so deep its truth often doesn't make sense. So we can't divorce the truth from the story. But we lose something when we don't pay attention to this story because it's about hope. And hope is something we need. Jaques Ellul wrote that the church "doesn't need a theology of Hope, we need hope."¹

In his final address as the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Thomas Gillespie shared a brief anecdote to the graduating class.² In the workroom of his office, on the wall, above the coffee maker, hangs a framed piece of artwork. It was a gift for his many years of service as the minister of a Burlingame Presbyterian Church, in Northern California. A medieval castle appears in the distant background. A dragon lies slouched on its back in the foreground, up against a tree. The dragon is using a lance as a toothpick as one would do after a light snack, and scattered all around are pieces of a knight's armor – breastplate, helmet, shield, the entire kit. Beneath this scene a caption reads:

No matter how hard you work,
No matter how right you are,
Sometimes the dragon wins.

That bit of wisdom is useful for anyone in the church, perhaps particularly so for ministers. It is why we have had two dragon passages this morning. In the Bible, of course, dragons have always functioned as one of the many symbols of evil. Symbols are curious things – in his book, the *Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur distinguishes a symbol from a sign or a myth.³ He argues that a myth is identified by its narrative character: it tells a story, often a true story about human failings and their relationship to the divine. By contrast signs and

¹ Jaques Ellul, *Apocalypse* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

² Thomas Gillespie, *Princeton Theological Seminary Commencement Address*, May 15, 2004

³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 15-19, 348

symbols are terms – they both refer to things beyond themselves, but there’s a difference. Symbols are ambiguous and pregnant with meaning. They give us something to think about – to reflect on.

Why, you may ask, have I chosen to think about dragons? The reason is simple – we, every single one of us, are involved in Christian ministry. And in this ministry we will encounter hostility at every turn. St. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Ephesians:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood,
but against the principalities, and the powers,
against the world rulers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (6:12)

The dragons we face aren’t imaginary, metaphysical beings. Evil almost always takes the form of human beings and infiltrates human institutions. In our Old Testament Reading, Ezekiel saw the form of the dragon in the kingdom of Egypt, in the person of the Pharaoh and in his policies. As a prophet he was commanded to speak against the Dragon – a task that came at significant risk. The prophets of the Lord often found themselves in hiding, locked up, or killed. Turns out that false prophets are the only ones that people will listen to gladly.

That is why the people of God must keep their ears open. I suspect it is also why St. Paul continues his letter to the Ephesians with an exhortation to “take the whole armor of God” (6:13). To withstand the dragons of the world and defend the gospel of peace we will certainly need to be equipped with truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. Yet, as ready as we may be – somewhere, the caption will still read:

No matter how hard you work,
No matter how right you are,
Sometimes the dragon wins.

In other words, no matter how nice we are, no matter how hard we work to improve relationships with those outside of the church, or with those in and across the community, no matter how hard we strive to eradicate poverty or how much we yearn for a peaceful resolution to the world’s ills – the world is not waiting with baited breath to hear your prophetic voice. The way of the gospel is always an up-hill battle.

When Christopher Columbus sailed to the Indies in search of *Il Mundo Nuevo*, his flat earth maps depicted the ocean falling off into a seemingly endless abyss. In the empty spaces that followed the end of the discovered world were written the words “Beyond this point, there be dragons”. The message is the same for those who wish to pick up their cross – beyond the walls of this Sanctuary, there be dragons.

You know the troubles we face.

Mainline Denominations are continuing to contract...

Oil Spill in the Gulf threatens wildlife, jobs...

10,000 – 15,000 women and girls trafficked from Nepal to India in sex trade...

More than 2/3 of world population live in countries with severe restrictions on religious freedom...

Anxiety about the economy taking its toll on US teens...

The point is – sometimes the dragon wins.

So what can we do when that happens? Cut our losses and run? Curse the darkness from the inside of our candle-lit cathedrals? No – because here’s the inside scoop: the dragon does not always win. Sometimes the dragon is slain. Sometimes nations do put down their weapons of war. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, “for everything there is a season.” Teachers sometimes witness their toughest pupils have their horizons expanded. Social-workers sometimes witness families who are able to learn to love. Ministers, and we all are ministers, witness lives radically transformed by the power of the Spirit.

Jill and I both like foreign films. One of my favorite directors is Ingmar Bergman, and there’s one film in his prolific output that stands out above all others. *The Seventh Seal* tells the story of a medieval knight who returns to his homeland after the Crusades, only to find that it has been decimated by the plague. To his dismay, he discovers that Death has come for him too. In order to buy time he challenges Death to a chess match, and he is allowed to continue his life as long as he has not lost the match, despite the fact that he knows what the eventual outcome will be. It is a life facing despair, but will he consent? The knight's faith is war-weathered, and this theme is stressed in one of the greatest scenes in the film: he gives confession to a priest about his confusion over God’s silence and tells

the priest how he challenged death to a game of chess, revealing his strategy. In a twist of irony, he discovers that the "priest" is actually Death. Near the film's conclusion the game reaches its inevitable check-mate, but the disquieted knight realizes that although he has lost the match there is still one more move to be had – that of choosing faith rather than despair. In the end he embraces Death, but it is a Death which he recognizes has been swallowed up in victory.

The film's title comes from the book of Revelation, and, unsurprisingly we see this same theme pronounced in St. John's vision from exile. His vision is of that king and the knight – the one who is seated on the great white throne and the lamb who is slain – and they indeed have one final and decisive move. And when that move comes, the dragon is slain...forever. I am tempted to think that that is the whole point of the book of Revelation – that though things may look bad, though the powers and principalities of this world are strong indeed, God will triumph in the end.

So much of our lives these days are about staying one step ahead. I read an article recently about the similarities between the generation that is coming of age in this recession and the generation that came of age during the depression. The article was called, "Generation OMG" and was essentially claiming that our kids are being gob-smacked by anxiety. They are seeing how their anxious parents and other adults are reacting to current conditions and are being shaped in a significant way by notions that life is really pretty insecure.

Neuroscience tells us that the brain shuts down when it is ruled by anxiety – we literally cannot grow or take risks because we cling to what we know best. In short, we start to circle the wagons.

If that's true of us as individuals, what happens when the Church begins to get a bit anxious? I want to suggest that we read the book of Revelation. Apocalyptic is the church's answer to anxiety because it is about hope. The difference between hope and facile optimism is that hope allows us to stare down our anxieties. Because we know how the story is going to end, we are freed from having to keep score.

I don't know what you thought, but I thought this year's NCAA Tournament Final was one of the most exciting basketball games I've ever seen. It came down to the wire – Duke won by two points and were nearly eclipsed by a half-court three-pointer at the end. The last five minutes of the game were tense – you could see it in Coach K's face – you could see it on the bench and among the players – there was anxiety everywhere. I wonder how Kyle Singler – the tournament MVP – would have played the game if he knew from the beginning how it was going to turn out? Where would that tension have gone? True, there may have been lapses of memory. But when you know how the story is going to end, you don't have to spend your life trying to rack up points. You just get to play.

That is God's story – and we are a part of God's unfolding drama – our lives and our stories become the players and usher the plot along. And though the story often has some dark and harrowing moments, and while it may seem that things are closing in on us, we can rest in the confidence that Jesus Christ has already claimed the victory. What would our lives look like if we lived like we preached? What if we stopped saying that Jesus will win and started living like Jesus has already won? Hope allows us to live out our faith in ways that are bold and risky. Hope lets our faith look more like playing.

There is an artwork that probably still resides with Tom and Barbara in Princeton, and beneath it is the caption:

No matter how hard you try.
No matter how right you are.
Sometimes the dragon wins.

That is certainly a true statement. But it is only true some of the time. When the story God is telling ends, the dragon will be slain forever. May we live into that story.

In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – one God. Amen