

For many days, I have been avoiding my television. Perhaps it is wrong, but there is a part of me that doesn't want to remember the experience of ten years ago today. Or rather, I don't want to see those images again.

I remember the images from the first time too well. I don't need to describe them. If you saw them, you remember. But more than images, perhaps you remember the feelings?

I remember we needed to be together. I was serving the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis in those days, and we quickly brought together a service of worship with the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation for that same evening. The huge church was filled. Indeed many churches were filled in those days.

I remember we were afraid.

I remember the deep sense of uneasiness. "What is next," we wondered?

"What if something worse happens?" We barely dared to consider the possibilities.

"Will my family and I be safe?"

And for far too many a new existence began, one marked with this question, "when will the hurting stop?"

Our world seemed changed, it seemed we now occupied a world not unlike that described by Matthew in his telling of the story of the birth of Jesus. Right into the middle of a story about hope, Matthew included this passage we heard this morning, a story about destruction and pain.

It is a hard story, one that we safely dodge during the Christmas season by putting it on the Sunday when everyone takes a cut after attending worship on Christmas Eve. We side-step it to avoid its pain.

But events such as we experienced ten years ago today remind us that pain is real.

Sometimes destruction does come.

At times, just as we wondered ten years ago today, as we have wondered many times since then, the question arises, is there nothing we do can guarantee that into our lives pain will not come? I find myself reminded of that old Stephen Foster song, “Tis a sigh that is wafted across the troubled wave, Tis a wail that is heard upon the shore, Tis a dirge that is murmured around the lowly grave, Oh hard times come again no more.”

I remember that slowly, slowly as a country we began to try to pull ourselves from darkness and fear into light. We heard about and celebrated heroism. We gathered in sanctuaries of many different descriptions to remind ourselves we aren’t alone.

A number of years ago I encountered a rather gallows humor cartoon. It is a picture of a very satisfied looking dragon surrounded by the scattered accoutrements of a knight. The caption beneath read, “no matter how hard you work, no matter how right you are, sometimes the dragon wins.

There are days when I can appreciate the black humor of this – with great relish, frankly, but there are other times when I cannot. Sometimes the dragon wins and it doesn’t matter – you’re inconvenienced, a bit put off, nothing more, but there is a harder reality to face, and it is this: sometimes the dragon wins, and nothing in the world is going to make it all right. So it seemed that day.

Interestingly, in the fantasy world of apocalyptic that is *Revelation*, the dragon represents the forces of evil and chaos that threaten the very unraveling of creation. The dragons work their way through the phantasmagoric landscape as the clear agents of evil. While there isn’t a secret decoder ring that can assign clearly delineated meaning to every

character in *Revelation*, this much is clear: based on the dragons' behavior, they represent the enemy of goodness and peace.

In that sense I want to pull them out of their narrative and allow them to be for us today representative of exactly what Saint John intended them to represent: evil, chaos, death and ruin. And we hardly need to be reminded that there are still dragons among us. And sometimes, no matter how hard you work, no matter how right you are, the dragon wins. There are plenty of times that the dragons have won.

Look at your television set. You'll see it.

I've never liked the story we read from Matthew, but it isn't because I can't make sense of it. It is because in a very real sense it is too easy to make sense of it.

It's too easy to make sense of it – or rather, to dismiss it as just the new reality we all faced. Soon enough we began to analyze whose fault it was. As we reacted to what we encountered, as we sought to learn to live with 9/11, we began to react differently from one another.

Perhaps we reacted by living in fear of the dragons. Perhaps fear causes us to retreat behind gates and walls. Perhaps fear prevents us from letting anyone without security clearance into our lives. Perhaps we live in fear that the dragons will win.

Or perhaps today we live with the reality that dragons have already won – perhaps we have sustained some trauma, some wound that will haunt us all our lives. Perhaps we live in the reality that the dragon has already won and there is nothing we can do about it and nothing will fix it.

But now that I think of it, it doesn't have to be that cataclysmic to be just as real.

Don't we learn the lesson over and over again that life can be hard?

What about the bitterness of a marriage ended? What about a job you love lost? What about a miscarriage or a birth defect? Have the dragons won – maybe at least a little bit? Thus it is that we find ourselves at every stage faced with a reality that reminds us that we need a vision of redemption. We need to know that life is more than ambiguity and the possibility of pain. We need to remember that we are the recipients of a bequest of hope. I love the way Tom Long puts it, “Although the course of human affairs seems to be scribbled at random, another story, this one a confident narrative of grace and redemption, is being firmly written by the hidden hand of God.”¹

That is how we learn to move from darkness to light. We learn to be reminded of the hope that is born into the world when it seems its darkest.

Long suggests that though the surface story of Matthew is one of suffering and hardship where the dragons are poised to win yet again, that God is in control of bringing about an alternative ending, where grace and mercy are the ultimate victors.

But we’re not there yet. That is the part where we come in. If we move too quickly toward the triumphal finish, we will miss the point. The point is that Jesus *was* born into a world where suffering is real. Jesus was born into a world where diabolical despots dictated the terms of existence for their subjects, and seemed to choose at will who lived and who died. The Lord of the Universe, without whom not one thing came into being, in John’s words, was born into the created order subject to the vagaries of nutrition, politics, and for those of us who know the rest of the story, mob mentality, could be and would be the ultimate deciders of who lived and died.

That’s the surface story. That is the story in which we often live our lives.

¹ Long, Thomas. Matthew. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997. P21

And frankly, its not much of a vision of redemption. When we encounter forces that push and pull us from the vision of redemption that God has given us, it is as if the story of the dragon seeking to steal the newborn is lived over and over and over again.

Sometimes it seems the dragon wins.

When Rachel is weeping for her children, there is so very little for us to say, and yet there is everything to say. If the church is mute on this point, we have lost our way. When the dragons win, sometimes all we can do is cry together, as indeed we did. But in a sense, that says everything. When we are called to sit and lament and wail together, we are called to do it together – and that togetherness, that community - is countercultural to all that Herod represents; to all that was done to us ten years ago today. That communal lament, the crying together for Rachel's children, is itself a testimony to the other – the other that represents God's way, the other that represents God's entry into our lives in the dangerous, almost disastrous birth into humankind where God himself deigns to be in community with us – Immanuel – God with us, it says so little, and yet, it says everything that matters: God doesn't abandon us to the dragons. It is the work of the church to declare that long after every Herod is dead and gone and can threaten no one any more, God is still with us. Then and now – and even to the end of the age.

The dragons in *Revelation* represent the chaos, evil and disorder that are not God's way for us. They are the stuff of terrifying dystopic fantasy – they are what we can imagine in the absence of God. They are hellish and terrifying and poised to win. In the twelfth chapter of Revelation, the dragon waits to devour the newborn son of God, waiting as the mother is giving birth, and just as it seems the dragon will win again, the child is spirited away, and the dragon, angry at being cheated of his victory, unleashes a torrent of evil on

the world. And remember there is no secret decoder ring for reading Revelation – apocalyptic is a style of writing that I like to call theological burlesque – everything is exaggerated to make the point – and the point is that at the end of the story, the dragon loses.

At the end of the story, the dragons lose. There is that amazing image of chapter 21 that tells us what God wills for us instead – a world where God is with us – a world where our tears are dried by God’s own hand, where there is a new heaven and a new earth, and yes, the sea is no more, the sea that is the dwelling place of the monsters and uncertainty and chaos, is no more. It is life as God intended it. It’s Genesis one all over again, it is Easter morning, it is resurrection and redemption and life.

It is so other-worldly that it doesn’t even resonate with us except maybe once in a while. But it is what God wants.

The dragons don’t have to win. I suppose that in a way, is the message of Matthew 2, that the dragons don’t have to win, that like the wise men, we can go home by another way, like Joseph, we can resist the evil, like Mary we can say, let it be for me as you have said. There is another way.

That other way, the way where the dragons are defeated is the way of the cross, ironically enough. In God’s grand story, redemption is what awaits us. When God calls us, the church, to sit in community and to cry with the victims and to shout down the tyrants, and to remember that long after Herod is dead, God’s Word will still be standing. When God calls us to care enough for the cares of the world to take them into our own body, to bear the death of Jesus on our bodies so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our flesh, then God calls us to embrace the way of the cross. And if we do so, as Jesus did so, it

may lead us to a cross as it lead him to his. And the dragons may appear win again. But the good news of the Gospel – the good news of Matthew 2, and Matthew 28 and Revelation 21 is that God's reign will not be stopped.

God will reign, not the dragon of chaos, or the dragon of disease, or the dragon of poverty. God will reign, not the dragon of tyranny or isolation and abandonment, or even the dragon of the cross because God is with us. God is with us, and that is the Gospel again today.

This would all be rhetoric if God wasn't with us.

But God is, and God calls us to be with each other in the name of Jesus Christ. There wouldn't be much of a point to the church or the ministry that we do on Christ's behalf if God is not with us, calling us to be with each other. God is in this with us, therefore we can be in this with each other.

Because it is the dragon of separation that makes the other dragons real. It is the dragon of separation that gives all the other dragons their power. When we isolate ourselves from others, when we turn, each to our own way, when we allow fear and anxiety to close our eyes and ears, we succumb to a dragon that allows the dragons of poverty and disease and loneliness and addiction to have the power to win. But when we gather around that table, when we hear Christ's call to communion, then Immanuel, God with us, ends the reign of that dragon, and gives us the power to fight all the other dragons.

Ah, it seems so much the stuff of fantasy to speak of the church's calling in terms of dragons and battles, to dare to dream that God has another way, even the way of the cross to lead us to resurrection, doesn't it?

Doesn't it?

But what if the church's calling isn't a fantasy? What if it is more real than the dystopic world that we saw and can even find today? What if Matthew is right, and we can only see the surface, but God sees the whole picture? Is that so hard to believe? What if this *isn't* as good as it gets?

Which one is the fantasy, God's reality of grace or the dragons' dying grip of evil?

Every once in a while it seems that we get a whiff of the heavenly banquet that awaits us.

Every once in a while it seems that we hear the strains of that new song the psalmist sings.

Every once in a while it seems that we catch a glimpse of a new creation, where God is with us.

Which one is the fantasy?

God is with us and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. God is with us, and so we can start working together for that new heaven and that new earth today.

And if we do, then we need fear no dragons.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.