

Feb 4 2024 – Bonni-Belle Pickard
Online service – of Sea Monsters and the Chinese Year of the
Dragon

Before the world began – StF 101

All Creatures of our God and king – StF 99

Earth's creator (Everyday God), Everyday God – StF 45

In the darkness of the still night (StF 109) (Creator God)

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

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Benediction --

The Lord Bless you and keep you

January is often a tough month!
We enter it wishing each other 'Happy New Year!'
 with great anticipation for changes for the better,
And then people die, and winter storms rage, and wars continue,
 and matters we had left in abeyance during December
 come back to haunt us, unresolved.

I saw a poem recently by Brian Bilston that said,
 "Thirty days hath September, April, June and November.
 Unless a leap year is its fate, February has twenty-eight.
 All the rest hath three days more, excepting January,
 Which hath six thousand, one hundred and eighty-four."

Now that we've survived January and are into February,
 We wonder if things are going to get any better...
The February calendar reminds us that Lent is just around the corner –
 and though that might be a season we don't particularly look forward to –
 with its heritage of 'giving up' and self-examination,
the word 'Lent' comes from the old English word for 'lengthen'
 which refers to the fact that the hours of sunlight increase
 which we usually understand as good news!

Interestingly, I've been learning more over recent years
 That February is also the time of year for Chinese – or Lunar – New Year.
You'll be aware that each Chinese year is assigned to an animal in a 12-year cycle.
 Later this week, the Chinese calendar enters the Year of the Dragon –
When I looked at the lectionary readings for today,
 I noticed some interesting parallels with dragons and danger and blessings...
So, in part as an antidote to the winter woes
 And as a nod to the Chinese influence in our circuit,
Today's service is going to be 'playful' as we use our creative imaginations
 To 'play' with images of dragons from Chinese tradition
 And our own scripture readings.
Hopefully something of today's service will bring a smile to you
 And help you remember that the God we serve is a loving and playful God!
We'll begin with a favourite hymn from many childhoods: All things bright and beautiful

‘All things bright and beautiful – the Lord God made them all...’
Even dragons? Did God make them bright and beautiful as well?
In part, the answer to that question lies in how we understand ‘dragons’ –
Are they the dangerous creatures from the deep who spit fire
And crush everything in their path with their ferocious might?
In the Western imagination, ‘dragons’ are most like dinosaurs –
A word that literally means a terrible, fearsome, monstrous lizard...
In that sense, they correspond with a creature from the Old Testament scriptures
Called Leviathan – a sea monster that apparently attacked at will
And caused tremendous and malicious damage.

Job 41:1-26

‘Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook, or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook?
Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you?
Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant for ever?
Will you play with it as with a bird, or will you put it on a leash for your girls?
Will traders bargain over it? Will they divide it up among the merchants?
Can you fill its skin with harpoons, or its head with fishing-spears?
Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again!
Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;
were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?

‘I will not keep silence concerning its limbs,
or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame.
Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat of mail?
Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
Its back is made of shields in rows,
shut up closely as with a seal.
One is so near to another that no air can come between them.
They are joined one to another; they clasp each other and cannot be separated.
Its sneezes flash forth light, and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.
From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out.
Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.
Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth.
In its neck abides strength, and terror dances before it.
The folds of its flesh cling together; it is firmly cast and immovable.
Its heart is as hard as stone, as hard as the lower millstone.
When it raises itself up the gods are afraid;
at the crashing they are beside themselves.
Though the sword reaches it, it does not avail,
nor does the spear, the dart, or the javelin.

Terrifying indeed!

That's one image of a dragon – and that's the one many of us would assume –
But I'm told that Chinese dragons are different:

Chinese dragons are also seen as powerful, as noble and pioneering creatures
Who have power over water and weather.

But they also bring good luck.

In ancient Chinese agricultural societies, where wind and rain were important,
The dragon was seen as controlling rain and thunder

In that respect, the dragon was more powerful than the emperor!

These Chinese dragons lived in the bottom of lakes and rivers
And in the cloudy skies.

In an ancient Chinese legend, the dragon fought and defeated 9 other creatures –
And then took on some of their features for its own:

The eyes of a shrimp (prawn),

The antlers of a deer,

The mouth of a bull,

The head of a dog

The whiskers of a catfish

The roar of a lion

The body of a snake

The scales of a fish

The eyes of a hawk

These are all powerful features, which, in the Chinese understanding,
make the dragon a powerful and benevolent creature.

And persons born in the Year of the Dragon are considered to have good luck,
Wisdom, power, and prosperity.

So, we have two different understandings of what a dragon symbolises:

Is it a destructive and dangerous creature,

Or a powerful but benevolent creature?

We could argue at this point that 'dragons' aren't real –

That both versions are figments of our imaginations –

But both versions are based on human observation of the world around us –

And even if there aren't actual 'dragons' of either kind

What they represent for us is important.

In that regard, let's take a moment to reflect – through song –

That everything around us is God's creation –

And we humans continue to observe and wonder

And in so doing, explore the mind of God.

[O Lord, our Lord...]

There is still another image of Leviathan in the Bible –
a delightful image in Psalm 104 which speaks of Leviathan as God’s ‘pet monster’
Hear these words, adapted from the Message translation:
*A bit of ancient poetry – not meant to be ‘scientifically’ correct –
But observing with wonder what God has done!*

PSALM 104:1a, 10-25

God, my God, how great you are!

You started the springs and rivers,
Set them flowing among the hills.
All the wild animals now drink their fill,
Wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Along the riverbanks, the birds build nests,
Ravens make their voices heard.
You water the mountains from your heavenly cisterns:
Earth is supplied with plenty of water.
You make grass grow for the livestock,
Hay for the animals that plough the ground...

What a wildly wonderful world you’ve made, God!

You made it all with Wisdom at your side,
Made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.
Ooh, look! – the deep, wide sea,
Brimming with fish past counting,
Sardines and sharks and salmon.
Ships plough those water,
And Leviathan, your pet dragon, romps in them.
All the creatures look expectantly to you
To give them their meals on time.
You come, and they gather around;
You open your hand and they eat from it.
If you turned your back, they’d die in a minute –
Take back your Spirit and they die,
Revert to original mud:
Send out your Spirit and they spring to life –
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

The glory of God – let it last forever!
Let God enjoy God’s creation!
Let me sing to God all my life long,
Sing hymns to my God as long as I live.
O my soul, bless God!

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What we have here is an understanding of God as in control of all the monsters we fear –
Seeing things from God’s perspective reminds us that what seems huge to us
Is actually more like a plaything for God.
It reminds us that though we are actually quite small,
We serve a God who is bigger than all we can imagine.

That brings us to one of the lectionary readings for today: Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God?'
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

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Here we have an affirmation of the Creator God as a force for good, for love –
Somewhat like the Chinese dragon –
And yet, our God is the Creator – not the created –

The early Judea-Christian concepts of Creation as Good were very unusual –
Usually the myths were of original evil that needed to be controlled –
Appeased – so that they wouldn't cause harm.
But that meant that humans were constantly fearful
In the sense that they were always looking out to see how best to appease
The monsters that loomed and sought to harm them.

Much of that misunderstanding still lurks in the psyche of the society –
A woman from the community contacted me several times recently
Asking me to pray specifically (very specifically!) for things to happen –
Things that she thought would be helpful to her particular case.
At one point she was asking – demanding! – that I pray that, on a particular day,
A particular person that she was going to call
Would answer their phone and agree to her request.
That request involved finding a suitable dating partner for her.
She said she knew that, since I was a minister, I was a 'praying person',
So my prayers – and therefore, her request – would be granted.

I listened to her request and then responded that I thought we had very different ideas
Of what prayer was about –
I understand prayer as opening ourselves up honestly to God
Expressing our needs and our shortcomings
And asking for God's help –
But that 'asking' also involved listening carefully to what God was saying in return –
Perhaps God had work for us to do in a particular area
Perhaps God had plans for us that hadn't previously occurred to us.
Perhaps the plans that we had made – and were asking God to bless –
Were not plans that would ultimately work for our benefit –
Or within the goodness of what God intended for us.
In essence, prayer is about opening ourselves up to God,
Not about forcing God to do what we want.
It's not a case of *making* God bless us – or of convincing God to do good for us.
It's a case of understanding that God is Goodness itself –
So prayer becomes our way of interacting with Goodness
And of allowing God to guide us into all that is Good and Right and True.

[God is love]

We've had several scripture readings in our service today
As we've explored dragons and whether they are good or bad
And what they reveal about what we think about God's goodness
And how we want to be in control –
Even if our own understanding of what is Good and Right and True
Is certainly more limited than God's!

There is another lectionary reading for today which I want to include now.
It comes from Mark's gospel, which is what we are following for this year.
Mark's gospel is known to be quick and breathless in its descriptions
Of Jesus and how he went about his ministry with his early disciples.

In this passage at the end of the first whirlwind chapter of Mark's gospel,
Jesus has encountered John the Baptist at the Jordan,
He has been baptised and tempted in the wilderness.
John was then arrested, and Jesus has gone on to call his first disciples.
He has begun to preach in the temple
And has even begun to heal people with 'unclean spirits.'

In light of our discussion a few moments ago about what 'healing' might look like –
The man with the unclean spirit
had reportedly called out to Jesus as he was preaching:
'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of Israel.'
We can hear something of this universal fear of God's holiness –
Is it something that will come to destroy us?
Can God's holiness -- God's power -- actually be for good rather than destruction?
(Perhaps our western notion of dragons and their power being evil
Suggests that we still think power can only be destructive...)

When Jesus heals the man – commanding the evil spirit to leave him –
People are amazed.
They exclaim: "What is this? A new teaching..."

And then Jesus and his disciples leave the synagogue and go to the home of Simon –
And we have today's reading:

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as Jesus and the disciples left the synagogue,
they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.
Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.
He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.
Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.
And the whole city was gathered around the door.
And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons;
and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark,
he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.
And Simon and his companions hunted for him.
When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'
He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns,
so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.'
And he went throughout Galilee,
proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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That message of goodness: that all that ails us and God's creation can be healed,
Because God is good and wants goodness for each of us.
Our God is not one to be 'feared'
in the sense of having to protect ourselves from harm
But 'feared' in the sense of our having a deep response to the awe-inspiring goodness of God.
As we heard earlier in the Isaiah reading:
"God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless."
Those who rely on God will "renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint."

In the passage we've read from Mark's gospel,
This was the work that Jesus was doing –
Enabling those in distress to be strengthened in goodness
By preaching and by healing –
Addressing individuals in their need
and enabling them to be involved directly in God's goodness, God's holiness.
And Jesus calls us to do the same –
Opening ourselves to God's goodness
and listening hard to how God needs us to respond in our personal life.
Opening ourselves as well to the needs of others
And how we might best respond
So that they, too, are in touch with God's goodness
And healed of all that keeps them from that goodness.

Prayers of Intercession....

God of goodness and power and strength,
We pray today for those who are struggling...
 In body, mind, or spirit...
We pray for those who are fearful
We pray for those who are full of uncertainty.

We pray that those who struggle will feel you near them,
And will know that you are always working for what is good and right and true.

We pray for those who are working with you
 To tackle evil and unrest in whatever situations they find themselves –
For doctors and nurses, for counsellors and social workers, for those who help
 For leaders of governments, for police, for those with power
 That they would use it for good.

We pray for others who are addressing situations in their local communities –
 With friends, even within their families,
Those who are working to address injustice, selfishness,
 To address those bent on ruthless demand of power and control over others.

Strengthen those who dare to work for justice
 For goodness
 For healing of body, mind, spirit, relationships.

We pray for churches in our circuit and beyond
 Who are feeling vulnerable.

We pray that they would recognise their vulnerability
 as an opportunity to rely on your power,
That they and we would consider each situation carefully and prayerfully
 recognising that your kingdom depends not on our strength
 But on your strength, your power, your love.

We lift these prayers up to you, Good and Gracious God,
As we pray together the prayer you've given us:

[Lord's prayer]

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Finally, we come to celebration!

 Every Sunday – indeed, every day! – should be a celebration for us –
 Of how we see God at work for good in and around our daily lives.
And perhaps you'll have the opportunity to celebrate Chinese New Year
 With friends or with our Chinese congregation –
Celebrate the Year of the Dragon – in the midst of stormy weather –
 In the midst of difficult times
 In an understanding that our good God is above all
 And ever willing to work in and through us
 For goodness and prosperity for all God's creation. Amen!

[Come on and celebrate! – StF 44]