Taming the Dragon

Genesis 1:1-10; 4:1-10; Isaiah 51:7-11

Centre College Baccalaureate—5/22/05

Well, the moment you’ve waited for has finally arrived! That’s right—the sixth installment of the Star Wars epic has arrived at your local movie theater. Finally, we’ll find out how Anakin Skywalker went over to the dark side. And in the process, as with all good mythic storytelling, we’ll find ourselves pondering moral choices in a world populated with monsters and dragons.

Dragons and beasts appear throughout this sermon too, because this common mythic imagery might help us interpret the significance of the historic events of your college years.

My reflections begin in Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula where I spent my first semester leading a study abroad program. In the fall of 2001, I was in Merida preparing to greet my students, as you were moving into your dorms. So we didn’t meet during your first semester at Centre.

But there’s a profound memory we all share from those early weeks in your college career. I was at a little seaside restaurant on the Caribbean coast with 23 Centre students just beginning their second week in Mexico. We’d fallen asleep the night before to the soothing sound of waves lapping on a moonlit beach. Our conversations at breakfast were about snorkeling, and touring ancient Mayan ruins.

One by one, faces began to turn toward the TV above the counter. Within minutes, we were sitting in stunned silence as we watched a jet commandeered by Saudi terrorists slam into the second tower at the World Trade Center; and then the Pentagon. As it dawned on us that our beloved nation was under attack, we knew that nothing would ever be the same.

You were here in Danville—your second week of college—sitting in that same, numb shock, recognizing that same terrible truth.

You are the first graduates whose entire college careers have proceeded under the shadow of that monstrous act. You know that you enter a fearful world, where monsters lurk in the dark corners of our social experience.

Now, your senior year has reminded you that the monstrous comes in many forms. Just after Christmas, we again found ourselves glued to our televisions, watching nature’s fury wreak unparalleled destruction in south Asia.

The tsunami’s waters devoured coastal villages whole, chewing up entire populations—men, women, and children swept away in a watery chaos so total, so random, so violent that we shuddered and cried for the sheer magnitude of innocent suffering.

200,000 human beings perished; seven countries still drenched in agony.

We can scarcely grasp the enormity of it—and we speak in metaphors:

“The sea rose up like a monster.”

Last spring, my second semester abroad was in England, and I was fascinated by one image that appeared everywhere, including the stained glass artwork in the great cathedrals I visited. It’s the story of St. George, the patron saint of England.

You’ve heard the legend of St. George and the dragon. The dragon was a menace that terrorized the countryside, poisoning people with its breath; breathing flames that scorched the innocent; prowling as a constant threat to the peace and security of the land.
The people tried to appease the dragon with offerings of sheep—or even human sacrifices. But even this wouldn’t satisfy the dragon. Finally, the king’s daughter was chosen, and she faced her cruel fate dressed as a bride.

But George attacked the dragon, pierced it with his lance, and led it captive so all could see that it had been tamed. St. George would accept no reward but the assurance that the people would support one another and show compassion to the poor. This was the key to taming the monster that lurked among them: Take care of one another. No dragon would ever overwhelm them again.

Taming the dragon. Students in REL 110 are surprised by how often dragon imagery recurs throughout the Hebrew Bible. It shows up first in Genesis.

You see, the Hebrew creation narratives were influenced by an early Mesopotamian mythology with which the Hebrews were certainly familiar. Recall that in the story of the ancestors, Abraham and Sarah first came from Mesopotamia. Any migrant from Mesopotamia would have known these stories.

For example, the Babylonian story of creation portrays a deity who slays a Dragon named Tiamat. The Dragon is portrayed as a sea creature—the symbol of Chaos—and the act of creation is a triumph of Order over Chaos. The body parts of the slain dragon become the various components of the universe.

Although the Hebrews’ theology was different, they adopted this imagery, so common to their time, in the beginning of Genesis. The first chapter of Genesis also portrays the triumph of Order over Chaos—Watery Chaos: the primordial Dragon.

In the English version, when you see words like “the waters” or “the deep”—the original Hebrew nouns are often related to earlier Babylonian words for the Dragon of Watery Chaos.

Consider verse two:

“The earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (Gen. 1:2, NIV). These are images of watery chaos.

So in the Hebrew worldview, before God spoke the cosmic order into existence, there was something there; something terrible and menacing—and Chaos was its name.

The rest of this chapter pictures God overcoming Chaos by speaking Order into existence. A look at Genesis 1 reveals that it’s one of the most carefully designed literary units in the Bible, with a structure artfully crafted in order to reinforce its message—that the Divine Creator puts Chaos in its place by creating Order.

1) There are seven days—each paragraph set apart with repeated refrains in a richly patterned prose.
*Each begins with, “And God said.”
*Each repeats: “And God saw that it was good.”
*Each day ends with the refrain, “And there was evening and there was morning, (another) day.”

The intentional sense of Order is impossible to miss.

2) But there’s another layer of complexity below the surface. The structure includes two three-day sets—the first set (days 1-3) introduces created spaces, and the second set (days 4-6) introduces the inhabitants of these spaces. For example, the land animals created on the sixth day inhabit the dry land set aside on the third.

It’s an amazing symmetry!
3) And it gets more complex. At a deeper level, each paragraph contains structured pairs of opposites—darkness/light, heaven/earth, male/female.

It’s an intricate, multi-layered literary creation. We marvel, as we do when we observe the perfect pattern of a snowflake, the double helix structure of DNA, the interconnectedness of a forest ecosystem.

Textually, the chapter’s units, refrains, parallels, and pairs speak to us on a level beyond words of something that is beautiful in its symmetry, and dependable in its complex patterns. There is great comfort in this picture of the cosmos. We live in a stable, ordered world. The Creator subdues Chaos.

The Genesis account again echoes the old Babylonian imagery when God orders things precisely so that Chaos—“the waters,” “the deep”—is kept at bay:

(Verses 9-10, NIV) “Let the waters under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear... God called the dry ground ‘LAND,’ and the gathered waters God called ‘SEAS’.”

So, the waters of Chaos are still there, like dragons lurking below the surface of the deep, reluctantly occupying an appointed place in an uneasy coexistence with the Order that has subdued them.

Or has it? As Timothy Beal says, in his book, Religion and its Monsters, in the cosmogonic narratives of all these ancient peoples—Egyptian, Babylonian, Canaanite, and Hebrew—there exists an “endless … tension between order and chaos, orientation and disorientation, foundation and abyss” (18).

Our struggles with chaos monsters represent our need for a sensible and secure cosmic order, and for social orders that are stable and just as well.

And religion serves as a locus for negotiating between order and chaos (30).

In other words, when we come face to face with this tension—with this reality about our existence—we are on sacred ground; we encounter The Mystery, and we find ourselves asking profound questions of meaning—questions we pursue with awe and wonder, but also fear and trembling.

Genesis continues with a word about our place in this drama. In chapter two, humans are told “to care for” the garden we’ve been given (2:15).

We become God’s partners as agents of harmony—keeping Chaos at bay in both the created order and the social life of our communities.

Later, the story of Moses parting the Red Sea evokes the same motif—“the chaotic waters” are parted and restrained so liberation can proceed; so a community of emancipated slaves can move—on dry land—toward a just and harmonious social structure; a new Order.

But before that, Genesis shows us an uglier side of this story:

The Dragon of Watery Chaos re-emerges with fury in the story of the Great Flood. Always there just below the surface, it breaks through the boundaries set for it; bubbling up from below, pouring down from overhead, seeping into the corners of our lives.

For a time, Chaos reigns supreme, and we see its fury. This Monster devours everything.
We understand this more fully when we return to Genesis 4, where the human part of this drama has taken a disturbing turn.

The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? ... If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; its hunger is for you, but you must master it.” (4: 6-7)

Here, too, something is lurking at the door—crouching, ready to devour us. Here it’s called “sin” but it’s portrayed as a monster, a dragon just outside the house, a beast ready to pounce—not unlike rising floodwaters lapping at the edges of your existence. Chaos!

The story continues:
Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.”
And while they were there, Cain attacked his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:8-9)

Here is Cain’s tragic question—an excuse, really. The question is a denial of human responsibility. This is the dangerous spirit of Cain. His question reveals a profound alienation that already exists: “I am not responsible.”

And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (4:10)

Recall that something was lurking at humanity’s door. What opens the floodgate? What allows Chaos to overflow its appointed boundaries to overwhelm us? At least here, one thing that releases the dragon from its lair, unleashing its fury, is the spirit of Cain; the question of Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

What do these passages mean for us in this sacred space between order and chaos?
Yes, Chaos will be a part of our existence. And, because we cannot control it, the one thing we can do, as St. George said, is to take care of one another. Be responsible for one another. Restrain the forces of Chaos by creating harmonious and caring communities.

On the personal level, that means that when Chaos rears its head, as it will inevitably do, we must rally to protect its victims from being devoured or drowned.
We are to be one another’s security; our brother’s/sister’s keepers.
If we ask Cain’s question, the dragon has won.

On a social-political level, it means that we must challenge any institution, leader, or power that aligns itself with the ways of the Dragon, justifying monstrosities with the language of order and security. Arrayed against ever-new incarnations of the monsters from which they presume to defend us, the authorities of this world too often unleash Chaos. The powers themselves can become the Dragon in all its awesome destructiveness.
So we must stand in relationships of healing as the “keepers” of brothers and sisters who might be devoured in the process.
For if we ask Cain’s question, the dragon has won.
Even in the “so-called” Centre bubble, all of us have been aware that monsters of “the deep” lurk just below the surface—
*sometimes in the form of unspeakably tough personal tragedies—Prescott Hoffman, Ian Crump, Jack Thompson, heartbreaking losses in some of your own families;
*sometimes through our experience of some of the worst public outrages in our history.

In fact, our times require us to confront the Dragon of Chaos in its many public manifestations as well. What does it look like today? Let me mention three of its most savage faces.

1) As always, the Dragon appears with the beastly visage of POVERTY. *One sixth of the world’s population lives on less than a dollar a day.*
   It is the great scandal of our time that this misery exists in the face of an unparalleled luxury, unimaginable to most of the planet’s people.

   Poverty, of course, was the real story of the tsunami.
   The generous outpouring of aid was inspiring. But effective, long-term responses will require us to examine why fishers in Sri Lanka and India, or service workers in Thailand’s beach resorts, or coffee pickers in Indonesia, lived in such deplorably inferior conditions that whole ramshackle villages were simply washed away.
   You see, the Chaos Dragon, in the grotesque form of POVERTY, had been doing its abominable work for years when those waves hit.
   *Am I my brother’s keeper?*
   If we ask Cain’s question, this dragon wins.

2) This dragon has given birth to progeny with a countenance so ghastly we prefer not to look. For even as the world remembers the heroic liberation of the Nazi death camps 60 years ago, a monster by the name of GENOCIDE mocks the refrain “Never Again” as it prowls unabated in the deserts of Sudan.
   *“Listen Cain! Your brother’s blood cries out from the ground”*

   AM I my sister’s keeper?
   If we ask Cain’s question, these Dragons have won.

3) For us, it was TERRORISM—sudden, indiscriminate and brutal—that peeled back the assuring veneer of our secure routines to reveal the precarious nature of existence. And as we engage this enemy, we may find that this beast, too, is one of POVERTY’S blood relatives.

In all of these forms, the Dragon of Chaos is still there—and we know it. And we fear it.

It is worth considering this new awareness as you graduate. How easy it is to go overboard trying to create some sure bulwark against the threat of Chaos. In our culture, the symptoms of this self-protective impulse are obvious—a relentless quest for wealth, security, and ordered comfort; elaborate security systems and defenses…

Even though many of you will put your Centre education to work waiting on tables for the next few months, you will naturally move toward building lives that are secure and comfortable.
But the temptation will be to “go over to the dark side”—to be seduced by the self-absorbed individualism that represents one strand within our culture.

So the question that confronts us, in this sacred space between order and chaos, is how to respond in ways consistent with the call to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

This is your charge.

It will require all the tools your Centre education has given you.

But education is just part of your dragon-fighting armory.

It will also require a commitment to the well-being of the communities of which you are a part. This commitment to the common good is the countervailing strand in our culture—so evident in the aftermath of 9/11 and the tsunami.

At Centre, you have been armed for the task of confronting dragons with the capacity and the confidence to ask the critical questions. What’s even more important is that you have developed the skills, the political will, and the compassion to make a difference. You see, one pathology that allows these monsters to roam the land is the belief that we cannot make a difference.

We can! We must.

There are abundant examples of people fighting the dragons of our time, armed with the conviction that “we can make a difference.”

I think of Jody Williams, a student of International Relations and Spanish, whose relief work in Central America during the 80s brought her face to face with the monstrous destructiveness of landmines. She founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines in 1992, which grew to 1000 chapters in 60 countries. In 1997, after five years of tireless work against all odds, they achieved the goal of an international treaty banning landmines. [I.R./Spanish major…]

Or Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan biologist who launched the Green Belt Movement—a grassroots network of women who have planted 20 million trees to conserve fragile African ecosystems and to assist rural villages with sustainable development, while also boldly confronting African dictators, and lobbying international banks for debt relief. Last year, this dragon-slayer won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Closer to home, a vice president at Hilliard and Lyons in Louisville was troubled by the steady increase of homelessness in our state’s largest city. In 1986 he saw a worker remove a tray of green beans from a restaurant serving line, and learned that the food would be thrown away. That encounter led Stan Curtis to establish “Kentucky Harvest” with the simple idea that volunteers would pick up food from local restaurants, and transport it to soup kitchens and shelters. That idea grew into a nationwide volunteer movement that has redistributed millions of pounds of food—food that would have been wasted.

You see, there are those who discover a problem and say, “What a shame” and there are those who respond, “What can I do?” And what a difference these people make!

Your years at Centre give evidence that you have understood this truth, as you have built Habitat homes, donated blood, and tutored underprivileged children. You’ve taught English to migrants, served at homeless shelters, and related to local kids as big brothers and big sisters.
You’ve raised money for St. Jude and Ronald McDonald House, and you’ve written letters about AIDS in Africa, and sweatshops in Nicaragua.

It’s an impressive list!

[And let us pause in gratitude for perhaps the greatest humanitarian act of all—the fact that, in his four years at Centre, Mike McGee never once ran the flame…]

You have been your brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

We challenge you to continue that pattern as you go from here.

And because so many of you have traveled overseas in the course of your studies, you know that in this globalizing world, we must enlarge the definition of brother and sister.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

The homeless woman living on the streets is my sister.
The campesino in Nicaragua who picks my coffee beans is my brother.
The girl driven from her home in Sudan is my daughter.
The Arab youth with no hope for the future is my son.

If we choose to turn inward and focus solely on our own interests, there is a monster lurking at the door. “The waters” of Chaos will devour us.

And since we’ve learned that Chaos rears its ugly head in ways we could not have expected, we now know the choices that lie before us:

There can be no giving in to fear, sealing ourselves off and defending our interests with self-protective layers of security…

There can be no tolerance of poverty in our midst, no silence about torture or genocide, no satisfaction with the splendor of our cathedrals while homeless brothers and sisters sleep outside the church door.

No, what we can do is stand together, as brothers and sisters, knowing that Chaos is a reality we must live with—yes, part of the structure of our existence—but it will never ultimately win, and it will not now reign, when we reach out and keep one another in our care. When we are community, we may even find ourselves walking through parted waters on dry and secure land.

Class of 2005. We’re proud of you. Now, armed with compassion, go from here with courage. You have dragons to slay.

Rick Axtell
Associate Professor of Religion and College Chaplain
Centre College 5/22/05

Notes:
For further study:

RECURRING IMAGERY OF CHAOS AS THE WATERY DEEP—
often portrayed mythically as a primordial dragon or sea monster, sometimes named “Leviathan” or “Rahab” or “Yam” (parallel Canaanite and Hebrew names for the Babylonian Chaos Dragon, Tiamat, or the Ugaritic sea monsters Yamm [“sea”] or Litan, etc.):

*Genesis 1:1, 1: 9-10—“the waters” are separated; Chaos is overcome by Order.
*Genesis 7:11-24—The Flood: the Waters of Chaos reassert their dominance.
*Exodus 14: 21-30—The parting of the Red Sea: the waters are held at bay for the purpose of liberating slaves. Oppression is Chaos; God works to defeat it.
*Job 3:8; 26:10-13; Job 38: 4-11, 16-18—God set “the waters” within their boundaries (but the dragon still exists)...
*Job 9: 13-19—Is God toying with Job, treating him as he treated Rahab the dragon?
*Job 41: 1-34—the Bible’s clearest description of the fierce primordial dragon, still in combat with God.
*Isaiah 27: 1—One day the Dragon of Watery Chaos (Leviathan) will be conquered for good.
*Isaiah 51: 7-11—God conquered the Dragon of Watery Chaos (Rahab), set the waters in their boundaries, and parted the waters when the Hebrews needed liberation. (Explicit reference to Exodus, using this imagery)
*Jeremiah 51: 34—Nebuchadnezzar, the military conqueror, has devoured Jerusalem as a sea monster swallows its prey. God will requite, and destroy Babylon.
*Ezekiel 29: 2-5—The oppressive military power, Egypt, is compared to the great primordial sea Dragon with whom God does battle.
*Jonah 1: 11-17—Jonah is swallowed up in Chaos; “the deep” (2:3-5)...
*Revelation 13: 1-4—a “beast,” given authority by the Dragon (now Satan), rises out of the sea for final combat with God.

Recall that in our English version, when we see words like “the waters” or “the deep”—the original Hebrew words are often related to earlier Babylonian words for the Dragon of Watery Chaos from ancient mythic imagery. For example, Genesis 1:2: “The earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (NIV)

THE LAYERED TEXTUAL STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 1—Order out of Chaos:
1) 7 days—each with 3 repeated refrains
2) Two sets of three days each with parallels:
   Context/setting Characters/inhabitants
   Day 1. Light 4. Sun, moon, stars
   2. Sea, “heavens” 5. Sea creatures, birds
   3. Dry land 6. Land animals, humans
3) Recurring pairs of opposites
4) In the midst of this ordered prose, the insertion of POETRY (1:27)! (HUMANITY)