# UNTIL THE DRAGON COMES

TEXT: Luke 12:13-21; Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 8, 2023*

We live in an age of complex and overlapping threats. Monsters, we might call them. Any one of them could fundamentally change life as we know it, as Covid did in 2020 or 9/11 did in 2001. But having more than one occurring at the same time has the capacity to shut down all the gifts God has given us to address them as we cower in fear of the very real harm each threat represents.

In every age, society, and culture, one of the coping mechanisms for dealing with existential threats has been the creation of a lore of monsters, which includes not just advice on how to avoid or survive encountering them but also ways in which they can be successfully overcome.

While the monsters created by any given culture have some differing characteristics, including whether the threats they represent are real or imagined, there are some basics that monsters all share: They are an existential threat to human beings. We can see that today just in the way we use "monster" as an adjective. A storm is just a storm that might even be fun to watch from your front porch. But a "monster" storm is a different beast. Monster storms are a threat to life.

The stories of monsters are the stories of our most basic fears and desires, sometimes projected out onto others, sometimes turned in upon ourselves, and sometimes created out of whole cloth in a legendary or fictional creature. Monsters are always huge, showing how small we feel in comparison to the monster's power.

Although the specific monsters change according to the threats perceived in any one time or place, the concept of monsters is universal. That includes in the church. The church has always grappled with monsters, from gargoyles on medieval cathedrals, to the monsters described in the Bible, to the early church fathers debating whether God pre-ordained the severe deformities in humans and animals that their age labeled as "monstrous."

So, as we look at the monsters of our age across these next weeks, whether those monsters are real, imagined, or projected—our most important question will be what guidance our Christian faith gives us when confronting them.

As we kick this off this morning, I want to set the broader context of our human condition. More specifically, the context of our faith condition, as imperfect mortals, trying to live a life that's true to the teachings of Jesus in a world that seems bent on doing the exact opposite; a life that has a different kind of meaning than our culture would generally label as "the good life."

The choir anthem this morning, which comes from the score of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, will lay out the hope for how the difficult life of faith might play out as it squares against life's darkest moments. It begins, "May it be an evening star shines down upon you. May it be, when darkness falls, your heart will be true. You walk a lonely road. Oh, how far you are from home." And so, we travel that lonely road to 6th century Scandinavia where Beowulf, a local hero of a people in what is now southern Sweden, receives a call for help from the Danish king.

What is rotten in the state of Denmark is Grendel, an ogre who can't stand the music, feasting, and joy of the king's lively hall. Once the torches are extinguished for the night, Grendel comes into the hall and makes his own feast out of the king's guests. The nightly, gruesome demise of your guests at the hands of a monster can do a number on a king's polling numbers and he is in need of a hero to vanquish Grendel. Beowulf, young and strong and already a proven hero to his own people, heads to Denmark to help the Danish king and his people.

Beowulf dispatches Grendel with his bare hands. But, almost immediately, Grendel's mother, who is an even more menacing monster than her son, shows up to take revenge. Beowulf has an epic chase to her lair at the bottom of a lake before he kills her with a sword that he finds in her den.

Those are the opening plot points of an ancient Anglo-Saxon poem titled *Beowulf*, after the story's hero. And here I would like to bring one of my favorite literary critics into the conversation, the Oxford don, devout Christian, creator of the Elvish language, and Lord of the Rings author, J.R.R. Tolkien.

The title for this morning's sermon, "Until the Dragon Comes," comes from the last line of a 1936 lecture by Tolkien about *Beowulf* the poem. The subtitle of the lecture is, "The Monsters and the Critics," and Tolkien's purpose was to take on the many literary critics of *Beowulf* who panned the poem because, as Tolkien sums up their critiques, "its weakness lies in placing the unimportant things at the centre and the important on the outer edges."

For both literary critics and those who have since made movies from the poem, the "important things" are the hero Beowulf's battles with monsters. I've told you about two battles, with Grendel and his mother, but there is one more.

After those youthful acts of heroism, Beowulf returns home and becomes king over his people, where he enjoys a fifty-year reign of peace. However, in his advanced age, Beowulf learns that someone in his court had been stupid enough to steal a golden cup from a dragon's hoard.

If you're not versed in the dragon lore of the West, this is a big no-no. Dragons like their stuff, even though the dragons got their hoards of gold from stealing themselves. Some contemporary examples of this might come to mind. But, in any case, the fire-breathing dragon comes to exact revenge on Beowulf and his people for the theft of the cup.

Knowing that he will likely die in the attempt, Beowulf goes out one last time to fight the monster. He is not only quite old at this point, but he has been abandoned by all but one of his retainers. Between the two of them they manage to kill the dragon, but not before Beowulf is mortally wounded. Beowulf dies and is buried. And that's the end of Beowulf, both man and poem.

The critics Tolkien is addressing, believe Beowulf's heroic battles with Grendel and his mother at the beginning and with the dragon at the end are the important things and object to the fact that all that action takes up only a couple hundred lines of the 3,182 lines in the poem. The vast middle of the poem is celebrating the 50-year reign of Beowulf over his peaceful kingdom with his minstrels singing his praises. A waste of space, said the critics. The time should have been spent on the monsters. The important things.

Tolkien's counterpoint is that the "important thing" in the poem is exactly that middle, because that middle is where most of life happens, both for Beowulf and for us. As John Lennon sang in "Beautiful Boy," "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." Tolkien would add that life is what happens, "until the dragon comes."

As Tolkien describes the poem's theme in his lecture, he says, "It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; it stands amid but above the petty wars of princes, and surpasses the dates and limits of historical periods, however important. At the beginning, and during its process, and most of all at the end, we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world."

Of the monsters in the poem he says, "Nowhere does a dragon come in so precisely where he should. … Triumph over the lesser and more nearly human is cancelled by defeat before the older and more elemental….The placing of the dragon is inevitable: a man can but die upon his death-day."

In the church, that's the whole point of Ash Wednesday, and is the context for our lives. Dust we are and to dust we shall return, whether by the sudden, fiery breath of the dragon or by the slow grinding of earth. While Tolkien's lecture doesn't address it, I think that's also the theme addressed by both of our Scripture lessons this morning.

The book of Ecclesiastes is believed to represent the teaching of King Solomon, who was considered the wisest of Israel's kings. Most of Ecclesiastes is written as if by Solomon's hand.

Although we best remember Ecclesiastes from the poem in chapter three that begins, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven," most of the book has the kind of nihilistic mood you heard this morning. King Solomon is expressing what many of the world's rich and famous come to realize. I have it all, and yet, in the end it will all be gone. So what if I'm wise? A fool will come along and undo whatever my wisdom has achieved. Solomon asks, "How can the wise die just like fools?" And yet, here we are. We live our lives until the dragon comes. That is the human condition.

Solomon returns again and again to the phrase, "This is vanity." The Hebrew word translated as "vanity" in Ecclesiastes is the word for vapor, like a breath. It's not the more spiritually-oriented word, *ruach*, which means wind, breath, or spirit. This word is *hebel*, which is the transitory vapor of an actual human breath.

Breathing just once isn't going to cut it. If you want to keep on living, you have to keep on breathing. The *hebel*, the vapor-breath, is only good for the now. You can't save it for later. When Ecclesiastes says something is "vanity," it's emphasizing that whatever it is doesn't last—it's fleeting. You have it only until the dragon comes.

While most of Ecclesiastes makes that same point, I chose the particular part that Kim read because of verse 24, where Solomon decides that since all is vanity, "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil."

Those verses ring for me because Jesus appears to step up to consider that same issue in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12. The rich fool is speaking here in verse 19: "And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

I don't know for sure that Jesus was thinking about King Solomon's almost identical words in Ecclesiastes there, but Jesus mentions Solomon a mere eight verses later, when he says of the lilies of the field that "even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

There are other parallels to Solomon, too. King Solomon was known for three things: his wisdom, his vast wealth, and his building projects. The most famous of the latter was the Temple in Jerusalem, but he also built extravagant palaces, storage facilities, and projects of many kinds across Israel.

Jesus, as a rabbi, would have been well-acquainted with both King Solomon and the book of Ecclesiastes; and it seems hard to believe that he could talk about a rich man who focused on building ever-bigger barns to hold his stuff, and whose attitude is almost a direct quote from Ecclesiastes, without thinking of King Solomon. If so, that adds some punch when Jesus follows that quote from the wise King Solomon with verse 20: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Last fall we looked at this section of Luke and how the parable of the rich fool helps to set the context for Jesus' teaching to his disciples in the passage that follows, often referred to as "the lilies of the field." The point of those next verses is that disciples of Jesus should not hoard wealth but rely on God's provision like the rest of the natural world does—the ravens, the lilies, and the grasses of the field.

The parable of the rich fool and the passage about the lilies of the field go together. Jesus even points out that the grass is alive today and tomorrow thrown in the oven, but God cares for it all the same. In other words, yes, it is all vanity—it is all vapor. The wise and the fool, the rich and the poor, meet the same end on the day the dragon comes. "The things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The *Beowulf* poet, Tolkien, Solomon, and Jesus all agree that, in this life, we are all waiting for the inevitable day that the dragon comes. Hero, king, commoner, ravens, lilies, grass—we will all be consumed by the same fiery breath. It is, in many ways, the ultimate monster. And, like the critics of *Beowulf* that Tolkien confronted, many think that makes the vast middle of our lives of little consequence—good only for grasping and consuming as much as we can, whether it's information or things, and act like those are important—or at least fun. Eat, drink, and be merry.

Jesus teaches that such efforts are foolish. That's not what the wise do when they know a dragon is on the way. The Beowulf poet, Beowulf himself, and Jesus all celebrated living a life of giving to others. "Sell your possessions, and give alms," says Jesus in Luke 12. "Strive for God's kingdom and the rest will be given to you." Beowulf the hero began by risking his life to save the Danish kingdom, and then went home to provide peace for his own lands. His people celebrated that gift for almost 3,000 lines of poetry.

When the dragon came, even though he knew it would end his life, Beowulf went out to defeat it. He gave his life to save his kingdom, with only one of his men willing to go with him. By the time Frodo got to the fires of Mt. Doom to save Middle Earth, only Sam was still with him. By the time the nails were driven into Jesus' hands and feet, John was the only one of his twelve disciples who remained, as the world grew dark and eclipsed the sun.

Monsters are the things that go bump in the night. They are the threat that we feel in the dark. The offering of Christian faith is that it is in that very dark where the promise lies. It is in letting go that we gain all things. It is in the dark earth that the seed sprouts. It is from the dark tomb that the light breaks forth.

But we find ourselves afraid. How do we live our lives in the shadow of what will come? Is it all just vanity, a chasing after wind? Should we just eat, drink, and be merry until the fire rains down upon us? How do we find our purpose and our courage when the road is lonely and we are far from home?

The choir anthem this morning has an answer. The refrain states the threat in Elvish and then offers a hopeful response in English. *Mornië utúlië*—the darkness comes. "Believe and you will find your way." *Mornië alantië*—the darkness falls! "The promise lives within you now."

"The kingdom of God is within you," said Jesus. All the wisdom, all the riches, all the power—those things are vanity—a vapor easily blown away. Only fools grasp and try to store them. But the promise, the kingdom, lies within us.

The anthem prays that, when the darkness falls, it will find in us a true heart, which will propel our journey on to light the day, so that when the night is overcome, we may rise to find the sun. The promise lives within you…within us…now. Amen.